GAO
Accountability·Integrity·Reliability
Highlights

PROGRAM EVALUATION

OMB's PART Reviews Increased Agencies' Attention to Improving Evidence of Program Results

Why GAO Did This Study

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) designed the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) as a diagnostic tool to draw on program performance and evaluation information for forming conclusions about program benefits and recommending adjustments to improve results. To assess progress in improving the evidence base for PART assessments, GAO was requested to examine (1) agencies' progress in responding to OMB's recommendations to evaluate programs, (2) factors facilitating or impeding agencies' progress, and (3) whether agencies' evaluations appear to be designed to yield the information on program results that OMB expects.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that OMB (1) encourage agencies to discuss evaluation plans with OMB and congressional and other program stakeholders to ensure that their findings will be timely, relevant, credible, and used; (2) discuss a risk-based allocation of evaluation resources with agencies and congressional stakeholders; and (3) continue to improve PART guidance and examiners' training to acknowledge a wide range of appropriate evaluation methods.

OMB agreed that evaluation methodology should be appropriate to the size and nature of a program, and noted they intended to provide additional guidance in this area.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-67.

What GAO Found

GAO examined agency progress on 20 of the 40 evaluations OMB recommended in its PART reviews at four federal agencies: the Department of Energy, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Labor, and Small Business Administration. About half the programs GAO reviewed had completed an evaluation in the 2 years since those PART reviews were published; 4 more were in progress and 3 were still being planned. Program restructuring canceled plans for the remaining 2 evaluations.

Several agencies struggled to identify appropriate outcome measures and credible data sources before they could evaluate program effectiveness. Evaluation typically competed with other program activities for funds, so managers may be reluctant to reallocate funds to evaluation. Some agency officials thought that evaluations should be targeted to areas of policy significance or uncertainty. However, all four agencies indicated that the visibility of an OMB recommendation brought agency management attention—and sometimes funds—to get the evaluations done. Moreover, by coordinating their evaluation activities, agencies met these challenges by leveraging their evaluation expertise and strategically prioritizing their evaluation resources to the studies that they considered most important.

Because the OMB recommendations were fairly general, agencies had flexibility in interpreting the kind of information OMB expected. Some program managers disagreed with OMB on the purpose of their evaluations, their quality, and the usefulness of "independent" evaluations by third parties unfamiliar with their programs. Agency officials concerned about an increased focus on process said that they were more interested in learning how to improve program results than in meeting an OMB checklist. Since a few programs did not discuss their evaluation plans with OMB, it is not certain whether OMB will find their ongoing evaluations useful during the programs' next PART review.

GAO concludes that

- The PART review process stimulated agencies to increase their evaluation capacity and available information on program results.
- Agencies are likely to design evaluations to meet their own needs—that is, in-depth analyses that inform program improvement. If OMB wants evaluations with a broader scope, such as information that helps determine a program's relevance or value, it will need to take steps to shape both evaluation design and execution.
- Because agency evaluation resources tend to be limited, they are most usefully focused on important areas of uncertainty. Regular performance reporting is key to good management, but requiring all federal programs to conduct frequent evaluation studies is likely to result in superficial reviews of little utility and to overwhelm agency evaluation capacity.

United States Government Accountability Office