

## Why GAO Did This Study

Grants are a key tool used by the federal government to achieve a wide variety of national objectives. However, there are no government-wide training standards or requirements for the federal grant workforce. COFAR has reported it plans to develop such standards. GAO was asked to describe how the grant workforce is trained and what challenges and good practices exist. This report (1) describes the federal grant workforce at selected agencies and analyzes the challenge of identifying the workforce government-wide and (2) examines selected good practices agencies use and challenges, if any, in grants training and the potential implications for developing government-wide grants training standards. GAO obtained government-wide information on grants training through a questionnaire to chief learning officers at 22 federal agencies. For in-depth illustrative examples of grants training practices and challenges, GAO selected four agencies—Education, HHS, State, and DOT—based on factors such as total grant obligations and the number and type of grant programs administered. GAO also reviewed documentation and interviewed officials at OMB and OPM.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making recommendations to the Director of OMB regarding the importance of including both types of grants management roles—grants management specialists and program specialists—when developing government-wide grants management competencies and certification standards.

OMB staff concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-13-591](#). For more information, contact Stanley J. Czerwinski at (202) 512-6806 or [czerwinkis@gao.gov](mailto:czerwinkis@gao.gov)

## GRANT WORKFORCE

### Agency Training Practices Should Inform Future Government-wide Efforts

## What GAO Found

Identifying the federal grant workforce presents challenges due to differences in how agencies manage grants and the wide range of job series that make up the grant workforce. Some agencies manage grants by using a combination of program specialists (subject-matter experts) and grants management specialists, while other agencies use program specialists to manage the entire grant process. In the four agencies that GAO focused on for this review—the Departments of Education (Education), Health and Human Services (HHS), State (State), and Transportation (DOT)—agency officials identified over 5,100 employees who were significantly involved in managing grants, spanning more than 50 different occupational job series. Recognizing the need for a classification that would more accurately capture the work of federal employees who manage grants, in 2010 the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) created the “Grants Management Specialist” job series. However, due to the different ways that agencies manage grants, the extent to which agencies have adopted this series varies widely. More than half of the 22 federal grant-making agencies GAO surveyed make limited or no use of the job series. The Council on Financial Assistance Reform (COFAR), established by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in October 2011 to provide recommendations on grants policy and management reforms, has announced plans to develop government-wide grants training standards, but it has not released information on how it plans to define the grant workforce. Defining the grant workforce is an important step in developing an effective government-wide grants training strategy.

Agency officials identified three key practices to develop the grant workforce: (1) competencies, (2) agency-specific training, and (3) certification programs. First, some agencies developed their own competency models in order to better reflect the way they assigned grants management responsibilities. Officials at these agencies told GAO that OPM’s grants management competency model was not directly applicable to employees carrying out the program specialist role in their organizations. For example, rather than apply OPM’s competency model, a component of HHS developed a separate competency model tailored to program specialist employees responsible for managing grants. Second, agencies addressed their grants training needs through courses and other training mechanisms designed to provide knowledge of agency-specific policies and procedures. Officials reported challenges finding grants training that met all the needs of the grant workforce, and responded to this by customizing grants training courses. For example, Education customized commercial courses to include agency-specific policies and procedures and a component of HHS developed its own grants management courses to achieve the same goal. Third, to ensure a minimum level of proficiency in grants management, some agencies established grants management certification programs and tailored the certifications to fit the different roles within the grant workforce. For example, State tailored separate certification programs after recognizing two distinct roles played by its employees who manage grants. These agencies’ experiences have implications for COFAR’s plans to develop government-wide training standards, including creating grants management competencies, delivering training for those competencies, and establishing certification standards.