

Why GAO Did This Study

To improve federal government performance and accountability, GPRAMA aims to ensure that agencies use performance information in decision making and holds them accountable for achieving results. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has encouraged agencies to strengthen their program evaluations—systematic studies of program performance—and expand their use in management and policy making. This report is one of a series in which GAO, as required by GPRAMA, examines the act's implementation. GAO examined federal agencies' capacity to conduct and use program evaluations and the activities and resources, including some related to GPRAMA, agencies found useful for building that capacity.

GAO reviewed the literature to identify the key components and measures of evaluation capacity. GAO surveyed the PIOs of the 24 federal agencies subject to the Chief Financial Officers Act regarding their organizations' characteristics, expertise, and policies, and their observations on the usefulness of various resources and activities for building evaluation capacity. All 24 responded. GAO also interviewed OMB and Office of Personnel Management (OPM) staff about their capacity-building efforts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making recommendations.

OMB staff provided technical comments on a draft of this report that were incorporated as appropriate. OPM provided no comments.

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PROGRAM EVALUATION

Some Agencies Reported that Networking, Hiring, and Involving Program Staff Help Build Capacity

What GAO Found

In a governmentwide survey of agency Performance Improvement Officers (PIO), GAO found uneven levels of evaluation expertise, organizational support within and outside the organization, and use across the government. The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRAMA) is a key component of the enabling environment for federal evaluation capacity, having established a solid foundation of agency performance reporting and leadership commitment to using evidence in decision making. However, only half the agencies reported congressional interest in or requests for program evaluation studies.

Eleven of the 24 agencies reported committing resources to obtain evaluations by establishing a central office responsible for evaluation of agency programs, operations, or projects, although only half these offices were reported to have a stable source of funding. Seven agencies reported having a high-level official responsible for oversight of evaluation. A quarter of agencies reported having agency-wide policies or guidance concerning key issues in study design, evaluator independence and objectivity, report transparency, or implementing findings. Two-thirds of the agencies reported evaluation coverage of less than half their performance goals. Over a third reported using evaluations to a moderate or greater extent as evidence in support of budget or policy changes or program management. Those agencies with centralized evaluation authority reported greater evaluation coverage and use of the results in decision making.

Since the GPRAMA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA) was passed, 2 to 4 agencies established a central evaluation office or leader. Half the agencies reported increased efforts to improve their evaluation capacity through hiring, training, conference participation, and consulting experts, but 4 to 5 reported declines in hiring and conference participation. About half reported increased use of evaluations as supporting evidence for management and policy decisions.

About a quarter of PIOs were not familiar with their agencies' various capacity-building activities but many of those that did respond rated hiring, professional networking, consulting with experts, reviewing progress on priority goals, and holding goal leaders accountable under GPRAMA most useful for building capacity to conduct evaluations. They rated engaging program staff in evaluation design, conduct, and reporting, and the GPRAMA priority goal review and accountability provisions most useful for building capacity to use evaluation.

Based on our survey results, GAO observes that

- Promoting information sharing in professional networks and engaging program managers and staff in evaluation studies and priority goal reviews offer promise for building capacity in a constrained budget environment.
- Engaging congressional and other stakeholders in evaluation planning might increase their interest in and adoption of evaluation recommendations.
- Congressional committees can communicate their interest in evaluation by consulting with agencies on their strategic plans and priority goals, reviewing agency annual evaluation plans to ensure they address issues that will inform congressional decision making, and requesting evaluations to address specific questions of interest.