The Federal Context:
Meeting the Challenge to Plan, Conduct and Use Evaluations in Decision Making

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Evaluation Café
Western Michigan University, April 13, 2016
U.S. Government Accountability Office

- Supports U.S. Congress oversight of federal policies and programs and accountability and transparency of federal government to the American people.

- Approximately 3000 multidisciplinary staff conduct audits, evaluations, and investigations, issuing over 900 + separate products a year—all publically reported at www.gao.gov.
GAO: An independent, non-partisan agency

Applied Research and Methods team

• provide timely and objective support to GAO teams and, where appropriate, write our own GAO reports

• **Center for Design Methods, and Analysis**,  
• **Center for Economics**,  
• **Center for Enhanced Analytics**,  
• **Center for Evaluation Methods and Issues**,  
• **Center for Science, Technology, and Engineering**.
The Center for Evaluation Methods and Issues

- Mission: To further evaluation at GAO and in the federal government
  - Produce reports
  - Consult on GAO reviews of agency evaluations

- Internal and External Professional Networks
  - AEA/EPTF
  - Washington Evaluators
  - Federal Evaluators, founded by Stephanie Shipman (list serve, periodic meetings)
GAO Reports on Building Agency Evaluation Capacity

Stephanie Shipman and Valerie Caracelli, GAO products highlighted in this presentation

**GAO-15-25**: Networking, Hiring, and Involving Program Staff Help Build Capacity

**GAO-13-570**: Strategies to Facilitate Agencies’ Use of Evaluation in Program Management and Policy Making

GAO-11-176 Experienced Agencies Follow a Similar Model for Prioritizing Research
Increased Role Envisioned for Evidence in Decision Making

- GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 changed agency performance management roles, planning and review processes, and reporting. These changes were intended to increase information on and accountability for program performance and results.

- Since 2009, OMB has issued guidance and encouraged agencies to improve their evaluation capacity.
GAO Surveys of Federal Managers

2007 and 2013 nationally representative surveys of federal agency managers found:

• All agencies measure progress on their performance goals, as required, but
• Use of performance information for management and budgeting did not improve for most agencies

Surveyed a stratified random sample of about 4400 supervisors and managers in the 24 CFO agencies about access to and use of evaluations and factors that hinder use
Managers Lacked Recent Evaluations of Their Programs

- Survey found only 37% of managers had access to a recent program evaluation in the past 5 years (on any program, operation or project they were involved in);
- 40% reported they did not know if an evaluation had been conducted; and
- 23% reported that an evaluation had not been completed.

- However, 80 percent of those who had evaluations found them moderately or very useful for improving performance.
Managers with Evaluations Cited Barriers to Use

To a great or very great extent.

• Lack of resources to implement the evaluation findings (33%)

• Resolving differences of opinion among program stakeholders (23%)

• Difficulty distinguishing between the results produced by the program and the results caused by other factors (19 percent),

• Concern that the evaluation did not address issues that are important to decisionmakers (18%)
What are Key Elements of Agency Evaluation Capacity?

• An enabling environment supporting the use of evidence:
  • Credible information; legislation or policies; public interest; leadership commitment

• Organizational resources to support the supply and use of evaluation:
  • Evaluation leader; central office; agenda; policies; staff expertise; collaboration with program stakeholders

• Evaluation results and use in decision making:
  • Evaluation quality; coverage; recommendation follow-up; use in program management, policy making, or budgeting
Agency Capacity to Conduct and Use Evaluation Is Uneven

Enabling Environment: GPRA Modernization Act

Resources: Half the agencies report committing resources to obtain credible, relevant evaluations

Results and Use: Agencies report moderate use of evaluations
How do Mature Agencies Build in Use of their evaluations?

Agencies followed a similar model of Informal evaluation planning policies

Common Types of Criteria Used to Prioritize Proposals
  - Strategic Priorities
  - Program Level Concerns
  - Critical Unanswered Questions
  - Evaluation Feasibility
An Effective Evaluation Agenda: A Building Block for Use

• Having an effective evaluation agenda can provide credible, timely answers to important policy and program management questions

• Early Input on program and congressional stakeholder concerns can help ensure evaluations serve effective management and legislative oversight.
Evaluation Can Play a Key Role in Program Planning, Management, and Oversight

From the literature, program managers and policy makers use evaluation results to:

(1) clarify understanding of how the program does or does not address a problem of interest
(2) Make changes to improve the design or management of an existing program or policy
(3) Support or change resource allocations within or across programs
(4) Share promising practices or lessons learned with service providers or program partners
(5) Improve the quality of program and policy assessment
What are Useful Activities and Resources for Improving Capacity to Conduct Evaluations?

Questions addressed to Performance Improvement officers GAO-15-25 (top 5):

• Hire staff with research and analysis expertise

• Staff participation in conferences or interest groups

• Consult with external experts

• Hold goal leaders accountable for progress on priority goals

• Conduct quarterly progress reviews on priority goals
What are Useful Activities and Resources for Improving Capacity to Use Evaluations?

Top 5:
• Involve program staff in planning and conducting evaluations
• Provide program staff with technical assistance
• Hold goal leaders accountable for progress on priority goals
• Conduct quarterly progress reviews on priority goals
• Peer-to-peer presentations of evaluation methods and findings
What Did We Learn?

“the process by which evaluation influences change is iterative, messy, and complex.”

• Demonstrate leadership support of evaluation for accountability and program improvement

• Build a strong body of evidence

• Engage stakeholders throughout the evaluation process
What Did We Learn?

- Promote information sharing networks and engage program staff in evaluation studies and goal reviews to help build capacity

- Engage congressional staff in evaluation planning to increase their interest in and adoption of recommendations

- Recognize the potential of congressional committees to influence evaluations by consulting on agency strategic goals and evaluation plans and by requesting specific studies
For Further Information

• Note: The opinions expressed represent those of the speaker and should not be construed as the policy or position of the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

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