

Floor Discussion

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Eileen Collins, Alan Rappoport, and Al Tupek, of the National Science Foundation (NSF), presented the first paper. It discussed the impact of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) on statistical agencies. Presenters noted there are opportunities inherent in multiyear plans, annual performance plans, and annual performance reports to improve management and planning practices in government agencies. They caution: one, take a balanced approach, two, provide measures useful to those who will use them, and, three, communicate the results. They also spoke of the practical issue of how to balance the two different tasks of developing long-range strategic goals against short-range performance goals.

Nancy Kirkendall of the Energy Information Administration (EIA) presented the second paper. She discussed how EIA implemented the GPRA with a basic model for measuring organizational performance developed by D.S. Sink and T.C. Tuttle.

The discussant, Myron Straf, of the National Academy of Sciences, spoke of the heightened cynicism in government agencies when it comes to initiatives such as performance measurement. But, he offered, the GPRA provides a positive context for performance measurement in government. What agencies must focus on are outcomes, as opposed to outputs. The public is concerned with the differences government programs make on their lives, i.e., outcomes. When direct outcome measures are not available, we must use intermediate output measures. Another danger is an emphasis on internal indicators that blind us to measuring the external impacts of the agency. In some cases, we need long term measures of future impacts. Often agency impacts do not manifest themselves until years later.

Kenneth Brown (NSF), the session chair, commented it is easy for agencies to become cynical. Agencies must overcome the malaise of cynicism. On the positive side, he noted both agencies conducted customer service improvement surveys to obtain customers' perspectives.

A question from the floor concerned the selection of team members. EIA teams were voluntary with some team members placed by the EIA's quality council.

A comment from the floor raised the issue of agencies needing to avoid focusing at the detailed functional level and missing corporate measurements. N. Kirkendall explained how EIA developed key indicators based on their core business practices and outcomes. She admitted, though, that measuring total gains is difficult.

A. Rappoport mentioned the difficulty of dealing with joint data products. How do we divide measures to show our contribution (data collection, data analysis, publication, etc.) in proportion to the total product?

A question about user conferences arose. Several agencies use these now. Are they to be replaced by surveys and quantitative measures? The floor and dais responded that quantitative measures cannot capture entirely how agencies fulfill their basic missions. The dais reminded session attendees

that the GPRA allows for non-statistical assessments. There is no reason to cease doing what is useful, for example, users' conferences.

An attendee asked about EIA's and NSF's staff and resource investments into the performance measurement work. Those involved admitted it was additional work, and some staff had been involved more than others. Work became time-consuming when baseline data did not exist or when existing data did not fit the indicators agencies developed. This required EIA and NSF to collect new data. EIA applied activity based costing methods to get needed data.

Kenneth Brown brought the session to conclusion by noting the value of conferences, such as the Annual Research Conference, was in providing a forum through which to share information gained from experiences such as developing performance measurements.