

INSPECTION MEMORANDUM

TO: Dr. Alan L. Ginsburg
Planning and Evaluation Service Director
Office of the Under Secretary

FROM: Mary Mitchelson
Assistant Inspector General for Analysis and Inspection Services
Office of Inspector General

SUBJECT: Review of Planning and Evaluation Services' Implementation of the Government Performance and Results Act 1999 Performance Reports and 2001 Plans (A&I 2000-16)

Planning and Evaluation Services (PES) requested the Office of Inspector General (OIG) conduct a review of PES's implementation of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) 1999 Performance Reports and 2001 Plans. You requested that we obtain responses from Department of Education (ED) employees who had worked on creating the current version of GPRA reports and plans. You also requested that we gather information on how program offices are using information from these documents in their programs.

Overall, a majority of interviewees stated that PES did a commendable job implementing GPRA, particularly since this was the first performance report the Department submitted to Congress. The interviewees acknowledged that some problems and challenges associated with the GPRA process existed, but overall their experience was positive.

In general, interviewees commented favorably on PES's assignment of specific representatives to assist individual programs. Program staff suggested that this personal interaction made the process easier to understand. Interviewees also stated that PES representatives who worked with the programs for an extended period of time gained an understanding of the programs which helped communication between PES and the programs.

A few reoccurring suggestions surfaced during our interviews. Interviewees stated that there were too many changes made by PES throughout the GPRA reporting process. Most interviewees suggested that changes made to the process should be kept to a minimum, particularly changes made toward the closing stages of the report preparation. Another common suggestion from interviewees was to adjust the timeframe of the GPRA reporting process. Many interviewees stated that the timeframe was "rushed," particularly toward the end of the process. Some suggested PES attempt to coordinate the GPRA timeframe with that of the budget process since both activities require similar information from programs.

Approach

We developed questions in five broad categories: Background Information, Interaction with PES, Creating the GPRA Reports and Plans (Vol. I/II), Using the Results and Interviewee General Thoughts.

Over the course of two months, we interviewed approximately 30 managers and staff from a variety of program offices within ED headquarters. We selected a majority of the interviewees from a list provided by PES. To achieve a broader representation of programs within the Department, we selected additional interviewees based on the budget size of their programs. (A list of our questions and interviewee comments may be found in the attached tables.)

Results

The following information summarizes our findings, which are broken into the five broad categories mentioned above.

Background Information

Almost half of the interviewees (12/28) have worked for ED for 10 or more years with most spending more than a year in their current positions. The majority of the interviewees did not work on one specific aspect of the GPRA report, but participated in many aspects of the process. Additionally, several interviewees indicated they had read the final draft but focused only on the section dealing with their programs.

Interaction with PES

When questioned about the quality of interaction with PES, the majority of the interviewees responded positively. Interviewees praised PES representatives who worked individually with the various programs. Further, interviewees commended PES representatives for their willingness to learn more about particular programs. Although there were a few complaints about the interaction with PES, the consensus among most interviewees was that PES staff members were approachable and that a collaborative environment existed.

Approximately half of the interviewees had not taken the data-quality training provided by PES. The majority of those individuals who took the training, commented that the training was either too basic or not applicable to them. One individual suggested PES create different levels of training (basic, intermediate, advanced) to ensure that opportunities would be available to those with varying levels of experience. A few interviewees said the training was useful for those who were unfamiliar with the GPRA process.

While PES was generally praised for the quality of interaction with each program, a few improvements were offered. Interviewees commented that PES should allow individual programs more input when developing performance indicators. Another common suggestion was that PES should give programs more time to complete the process in order to create a product of higher quality. An additional suggestion was that PES refrain from changing and updating indicators and goals in the middle of the process which resulted in confusion and frustration. Finally, the consensus among

interviewees is that the GPRA process is evolving and that PES and programs need to continue to work collaboratively to improve the process.

Creating the GPRA Reports and Plans (Volumes I/II)

Our questions for this part of the interview sought information concerning interviewees' thoughts on creating and writing the current version of the GPRA reports and plans. While responses varied by interviewee, a few themes emerged from the responses.

Many positive comments emerged concerning the creation of these documents. A few interviewees stated that the GPRA process was valuable because it empowered their programs to hold grantees more accountable for results. Another interviewee stated that the easiest part of the process was writing the document since a majority of it was written by PES.

Of the 28 people interviewed, half indicated that the individual program indicators were appropriate because they selected them. The interviewees who thought the indicators were inappropriate for their programs generally stated that the indicators were chosen by PES. One interviewee suggested that PES should try harder to involve programs in the process of creating indicators.

Another concern of interviewees was the constant change in format during the creation of the current version of the GPRA reports and plans. This was a difficult obstacle for interviewees because drafts that were near completion needed to be rewritten due to the changes.

A final concern for interviewees was the timeline of the GPRA process. Most interviewees felt rushed to meet the deadline. Some suggested that PES begin the GPRA process earlier in the year to ensure that programs would not be as pressured at the conclusion of the process. Another interviewee suggested that PES coordinate its timeline with Budget Services' timeline. This action would be helpful since both offices require the same information from programs. Moreover, it would be less stressful for interviewees if timelines were better coordinated.

A majority of the interviewees stated that the GPRA process required more than half of their time and effort during the weeks prior to the deadline. During the remainder of the year, however, GPRA responsibilities accounted for a small portion of their daily activities. Half of the interviewees worked with other principal offices when writing the current version of the GPRA reports and plans. Most of these interviewees stated that it was easy to communicate and share information with the other offices.

Using the Results

This portion of our interview measured how effectively the results of GPRA were used in each program office. The majority of interviewees stated that the intent of GPRA was beneficial to the Department's mission. Furthermore, many of our interviewees agreed that GPRA enhanced their particular program's objectives. Some program staff, however, indicated they had already established goal-enhancing objectives.

A number of interviewees acknowledged that it will be difficult to foresee the positive outcomes of GPRA since baseline data is in the development stages.

Many interviewees indicated that GPRA has refocused their views of the objectives established for their programs. Many stated that GPRA places more of an obligation on grantees because it ultimately directs them to link their programs with the GPRA indicators. Therefore, grantees are more accountable since the implementation of GPRA. Additionally, some program offices have created a guidance section to demonstrate to grantees how their programs relate to GPRA. Frequently, interviewees stated their programs had benefited from the GPRA process.

Several interviewees said creating the GPRA reports and plans has been useful for their individual programs. They indicated that the process gives each program office an opportunity to make a case for why its program should be funded and why it represents a good use of taxpayer money. The majority of interviewees stated that GPRA has led to stronger and higher quality performance from their programs. Finally, all interviewees reported that GPRA is an evolving process which should continue to improve.

Interviewee General Thoughts

Approximately one-third of interviewees indicated they read reviews (*e.g.*, congressional or General Accounting Office reports) of ED's plan. The interviewees who did elaborate indicated the reviews failed to provide any new information concerning the GPRA plan. Additionally, they found the reviews unhelpful or confusing.

Almost all interviewees rated the process of creating the current version of the GPRA report and plan as equal to or better than the year before. Only one interviewee indicated that the process was inferior compared to the previous year. Many interviewees realized that PES had a monumental task in compiling data; they understood the process as fluid and evolutionary in nature. Most interviewees maintain a positive outlook for an improved process in the future.

Recommendations for improving the GPRA process within the Department were varied. A number of individuals suggested the Deputy Secretary and the Assistant Secretaries need to do more to emphasize the importance of GPRA. One individual suggested that the Deputy Secretary conduct meetings not only with managers but also with employees closely involved in the process. Another interviewee commented that while GPRA is on "the radar screen" (*i.e.*, visible) more resources are needed to compile accurate data.

Conclusion

Comments and suggestions regarding the GPRA process were wide and varied. Hence, a dominant, reoccurring theme did not emerge. Most interviewees, however, reported that constant changes pertaining to indicator modifications and timelines made the process more difficult to complete. Overall, interviewees stated that even though preparing the GPRA reports and plans is a difficult and frustrating process, PES did a commendable job assembling this year's products. We have no formal recommendations for PES at this time.

Attachment