
Evolving Grantmaking Methods for Funding Evidence-Based Projects

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This paper examines the evolving expectations of evidence building and evaluation in competitive grant funding, specifically examining the impact of the Government Performance and Results (GPRA) Modernization Act of 2010 and the Foundations of Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act) on the federal grantmaking process. The implementation of these acts, including the publication of agency learning agendas, will continue to strengthen evaluation requirements, capacity, and funding in federal Legislation. They also have changed government operations and increased the emphasis on data gathering and evidence-based programs. As federal agencies build on the precedent set by the GPRA Modernization Act and incorporate the new requirements of the Evidence Act into their operations, evidence building through grant making will likely become a more robust practice. grantmaking.

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INTRODUCTION

Grants are an important tool the federal government uses to achieve national goals and priorities. The federal government spent \$721 billion in Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 on federal grants to fund a variety of programs, services, and research on broad priorities including social services, environmental protection, economic development, and health care (Government Accountability Office 2021(b)). Through federal legislation and practice, the emphasis on government effectiveness is increasing. What methods are federal agencies using to direct grant funds towards effective, evidence-based interventions? This paper examines the evolving expectations of evidence building and evaluation in competitive grant funding, specifically examining the impact of the Government Performance and Results (GPRA) Modernization Act of 2010 and the Foundations of Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act) on the federal grantmaking process. This paper will begin with a brief introduction to federal grants, then will examine the GPRA Modernization Act, the Evidence Act, and the evolving methods of incorporating evidence requirements into grantmaking that have been impacted by this legislation. Finally, this paper will provide examples of several methods used to incorporate program evaluation and evidence-based policy in grantmaking.

OVERVIEW OF FEDERAL GRANTS

In 1977, Congress passed The Federal Grant and Cooperative Agreement Act, which differentiated the roles of contracts, cooperative agreements, and grants as vehicles of federal allocations and outlays (Grants.gov (b)). This legislation dictated that grants and cooperative agreements should be awarded as assistance for the implementation of federal programs and projects, formally distinguishing them from contracts, which are awarded when a federal agency is acquiring property or services (Office of Management and Budget 1978). The Federal Grant and Cooperative Agreement Act further distinguishes grants from cooperative agreements. Cooperative agreements should be used when there is “substantial involvement... between the executive agency, acting for the Federal Government, and the State or local government during the performance of the contemplated activity.” Grant agreements are used when “no substantial involvement is anticipated between the executive agency and the State or local government during performance of the contemplated activity” (95th Congress 1978).

Of the \$4.4 trillion budget in FY 2019, \$1.3 trillion was discretionary, approximately 6.3 percent of GDP (Congressional Budget Office 2020). Of this discretionary funding, federal grants to state and local governments totaled \$721 billion in FY 2019 (Government Accountability Office 2021(b)).¹

Federal grant funding originates with Congress and is appropriated through the federal budget process to federal agencies as discretionary funding. Following appropriation, the executive branch will issue guidance on the implementation of the legislation. This guidance is often, but not exclusively, issued by The Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Finally, federal agencies

¹ The FY 2020 and FY 2021 budget are significantly larger due to COVID-19 related relief spending. It remains to be seen whether these larger budgets will become typical or if the size of the federal budget will eventually decrease to pre-pandemic norms. Therefore, this paper uses FY 2019 to depict the federal budget and level of discretionary grant funding.

develop internal administrative policies and procedures in accordance with the legislation and executive guidance to administer funding through various grants and cooperative agreements with grantees.

Grant funding is allocated to grantees using a formula process based on statistical criteria determined by the authorizing legislation of the funding, or through a competitive process in which a federal agency selects awardees based on certain criteria and eligibility. Federal agencies release notices of funding availability for competitive grants that outline the goals of the program, who is eligible to apply, the amount of funding available through the program, and how application criteria will be evaluated and scored in the competitive award process.

Congressional legislation also impacts the federal grant process. Examples of legislation that have impacted the grants process are the Lobbying Disclosure Act (1995), the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act (2006), and the Data Accountability and Transparency Act (2014) (Grants.gov 2021(b)). As the names suggest, these policies were designed to improve accountability and transparency of federal grant funds by requiring specific reporting and public disclosure. While the legislation discussed in this paper, including the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 and the Evidence Act of 2018, are not grant-specific, they possess elements designed to bolster evidence-based policy and administration throughout the federal government. These two laws, together with the policies designed to improve accountability of federal funds, underscore the emphasis on evidence-building in the federal grants process.

HISTORY OF PROGRAM EVALUATION AND FEDERAL GRANTMAKING

Program evaluation is one method used to ensure programs are evidence-based. Program evaluation is the application of systematic analytical methods to frame and address questions about program operations and results. It can include both performance monitoring and performance measurement and evaluation for the purpose of improving programs and their outcomes.

Program evaluation is a longstanding practice in the public sector, though the focus and purpose has changed over time. Program evaluation in government originated in the early 20th century with educational measurement and testing in school systems. By the 1960s, it evolved with calls for evaluations of the War on Poverty programs (Newcomer 2021). Governmental output measurement practices of the 1960s were supplemented by new requirements to measure non-financial program results set by financial auditors. Through the 1970s and 1980s, government evaluation and measurement practices began to emphasize the measurement of outcomes of government programs rather than just outputs, meaning they prioritized programs that were accomplishing their goals for change, rather than simply meeting the goal of production. In the 1990s, results-based policy focused on government effectiveness and transparency. This was reflected by transparency-oriented legislation that impacted grant governance, including policies like the Lobbying Disclosure Act, the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act, as discussed previously (Grants.gov 2021(b)). Around the 2000s, calls for evidence-based policy, which had been a growing trend in the public and nonprofit nongovernmental sectors, started to become more commonly voiced in government. For example, in the mid-2000s, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) began identifying and disseminating evidence-based behavioral HIV prevention interventions (EBIs) to healthcare providers for the purpose of fighting the HIV

epidemic (Collins and Wilcon 2011). Calls for evidence-based policy gained steam through various OMB guidance that required data and analysis to measure impact and identify areas for program improvements, and further, through the passage of the Congressional Commission on Evidence-Based Policy Act in 2016 and the Evidence Act in 2018.

The purposes of evidence-based policy making are to use program evaluation methods to measure the achievement of desired outcomes, and to build more knowledge about which programs are working well to better inform future program design and decisions (Urban Institute 2016(b)).

EVIDENCE-BASED GRANTMAKING TODAY

The rigor required for evaluation and evidence building is somewhat difficult to incorporate into grantmaking because the agency releases control of program execution to the grantee. While the definition of grants established in 1977 excludes substantial agency involvement, modern grants usually carry requirements for performance monitoring and, at minimum, regular reporting during the award period. For example, the 2006 Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act initiated more robust agency involvement in grant activity by creating a government-wide reporting procedure to track and publish obligated grant funds and awardee reports (Grants.gov 2021(a)). Modern grantees have regular involvement with the funding agency through several possible channels, including annual or semi-annual progress reports, site visits, technical assistance, and compliance audits. However, because grant agreements rely heavily on reporting and compliance, which are more ‘hands-off’ forms of involvement, funding agencies cannot dictate the grantee project activities beyond ensuring they are compliant with the grant agreement. Additionally, the agency cannot guarantee that project outcomes will further the agency’s priorities beyond what is explicitly required in the terms of the grant.

Despite relinquishing program execution functions to grantees, funding agencies seeking to evaluate programs and/or build evidence, either to track progress towards policy goals or compliance with evidence requirements, employ a variety of methods to evaluate and measure grant programs. The GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 and the Evidence Act of 2018 equipped agencies with guidance intended to bolster program evaluation and evidence building in the federal grants processes. The goal of both laws is to continually improve program performance by requiring the application of program evaluation efforts to generate more knowledge, which can be used to continually improve government program delivery.

GPRA MODERNIZATION ACT OF 2010

The Government Performance and Results (GPRA) Modernization Act of 2010 builds on the GPRA of 1993 and was designed to increase efficiency, collaboration, and performance in government (Bureau of Reclamation 2018). Among other things, the GPRA Modernization Act requires the federal agencies to develop cross-agency performance goals and requires OMB to develop long-term, outcome-oriented goals for cross-cutting management improvement areas. In OMB’s 2013 memo entitled “Next Steps in the Evidence and Innovation Agenda,” which issued guidance on the implementation of the GPRA Modernization Act and the president’s government accountability agenda, OMB identified areas in which federal agencies could improve their use of

evidence to improve government performance². The recommendations included using innovative outcome-focused grant design. OMB suggests outcome-focused grant designs “should expand or improve the use of grant program designs that focus federal dollars on effective practices, while also encouraging innovation in service delivery. These include tiered-evidence grants, pay for success initiatives and other pay for performance approaches, performance partnerships allowing blended funding, waiver demonstrations, incentive prizes, competitive incentive funds that encourage the use of evidence-based practices in formula grants, or other strategies to make grant programs more evidence focused” (OMB 2013).

EVIDENCE ACT OF 2018

In January 2019, Congress passed the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act. The Evidence Act “emphasizes collaboration and coordination to advance data and evidence-building functions in the Federal Government by statutorily mandating Federal evidence-building activities, open government data, and confidential information protection and statistical efficiency” (OMB 2019). While the purpose of the GPRA Modernization Act was to focus federal dollars on effective programs, the Evidence Act focuses on increasing the capacity to identify effective programs through evaluation. While these two goals certainly overlap, the emphasis on implementation versus innovation is striking. Section 312 of the Evidence Act includes the mandate to establish an annual evidence-building plan, or learning agenda, at the agency -level for the 24 largest agencies in the U.S. federal government (115th Congress 2019).

LEARNING AGENDAS AND GRANT PROGRAMS

Initial guidance from OMB in 2019 regarding the creation of learning agendas recommends that agencies identify priority questions that will have the biggest impact on agency performance and function, including both short- and long-term questions. OMB also recommended to review agendas annually (OMB 2019). Additional OMB guidance released in 2021 builds on these suggestions, proposing that “agencies should use evidence to support processes like agency operations, grantmaking, human capital management and development, and program administration as well as to support mission strategic areas, like program and service delivery” (OMB 2021). These general instructions allow for considerable flexibility in determining the structure, scope, scale, and format of learning agendas for each agency, but include suggestions on how these actions may impact an agency’s grantmaking processes.

The 2019 OMB guidance on the implementation of the Evidence Act suggests that grantees and grantmaking should be included in the process of developing a learning agenda. This includes stakeholder engagement with federal grant recipients and the inclusion of federal grantmaking performance in creating priority questions for the learning agenda.

² In its Next Steps in the Evidence and Innovation Agenda memo, OMB defines evidence as “evaluation results, performance measures, and other relevant data analytics and research studies, with a preference for high-quality experimental and quasi-experimental studies”. This definition and preference for random control trials as high-quality experimental studies and quasi-experimental studies carries through in future legislative guidance including the Evidence Act of 2018.

Stakeholder engagement is among the only mandated requirements in learning agenda development. “The purpose of stakeholder engagement,” according to the 2019 OMB guidance, “is to make sure that the learning agenda addresses questions that are relevant, salient, and meaningful to those with direct interests in the agency’s functions, and that the learning that results resonate with stakeholders” (OMB 2019). Among the list of OMB-recommended stakeholders in learning agenda development are federal grant recipients. Grantmaking should also be included in priority questions, OMB suggests, as agencies may want to understand the impact on participants of a large-scale grant program and more short-term questions, like “How do grantees implement the program in individual locations?” or “To what extent do program participants achieve the desired intermediate-term program outcomes?” (OMB 2019).

In its guidance published on June 30, 2021, OMB suggests that agencies should build evidence about their grant programs and engage their stakeholder community in evidence gathering as a way to “promote equity and improve the rigor, relevance, and utility of evaluation and other forms of evidence” (OMB 2021). Building on precedence and guidance from the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010, OMB suggests agencies may employ approaches to generating and using data, including using both innovation- and outcomes-focused grant designs, such as tiered evidence and pay-for performance approaches (OMB 2021). Examples of current strategies employed by grant-making agencies for incorporating program evaluation and evidence building into grant funding and award agreements are explored below.

EXAMPLES OF EVIDENCE BUILDING IN GRANT SOLICITATIONS

Many federal agencies include program evaluation and evidence building as a key component in grant programs through a variety of methods. Some agencies tie evaluation and evidence requirements to the key evaluation questions in agency learning agendas. Agencies incorporate evidence building into grant funding through ‘set-asides’ for program evaluation costs in the total grant award, tiered evidence grants, solicitations for specific innovation grants (including evaluation capability as a scoring criterion), and by tying funding to demonstrated program outcomes.

FUNDING EVALUATION THROUGH AWARD SET-ASIDES AND REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

Including funding for evaluation within an allowable award budget is one of the most long-standing and common strategies to increase the use of evaluation in grant programs. Federal calls for an evaluation of the War on Poverty programs in the late 1960s initiated the practice of including evaluation set-asides of 1-3 percent of grant funding for evaluation purposes with a focus on measuring project outputs (Newcomer 2021). Modern grant agreements usually budget far more for evaluation.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provides an example of evaluation set-asides in grant making. HUD is one of the federal agencies that has already developed and publicly published a learning agenda, which HUD calls a “Research Roadmap.” HUD’s 2020 Research Roadmap states that developing annual evaluation plans of key programs is part of the agency’s response to the Evidence Act (HUD Office of Policy Development and

Research 2020). Included in HUD’s 2020 learning agenda are the evaluations of several grant programs, including an evaluation of the Indian Housing Block Grant Competitive Grant Program. Congress appropriated \$100 million through the Consolidated Appropriations Acts for HUD to issue grants to experienced nonprofit organizations, states, local governments, or public housing agencies for safety and functional home modification repairs. According to the 2020 Research Roadmap, HUD will gather evidence to “assess the program’s impact on units built or rehabilitated, the amount of funds leveraged through this program, and the community-level impacts of the resulting units built or rehabilitated” (HUD Office of Policy Development and Research 2020). The FY 2020 Notice of Funding Availability for the Indian Housing Block Grant Program allows up to 20 percent of the grant award for administration and reporting expenses. For this solicitation, awards range in size from \$100,000 to \$5 million (HUD 2020(a)). The reporting requirements include yearly reporting of outputs and measurable outcomes achieved to date, and, upon conclusion of the award period, a comprehensive evaluation of the project effectiveness.

TIERED EVIDENCE GRANTMAKING

Tiered evidence funding is a strong example of how the government has worked in evidence-based funding in grantmaking. In 2014, soon after the OMB issued guidance on the implementation of the GPRA Modernization Act, four federal agencies launched a total of eight tiered evidence grant programs. Under the tiered evidence grants approach, agencies establish tiers of grant funding based on the level of evidence grantees can provide on the effectiveness of their project or models for providing social, educational, health, or other services. Smaller awards are used to test new and innovative service models. Larger awards are granted to programs with strong evidence of performance. By structuring grants in this way, the government intends to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of grant-funded programs by tying the level of funding to the expected program results. The approach is also intended to build grantee capacity to conduct evaluations. To implement tiered evidence grants, agencies add evidence and evaluation requirements throughout the period of performance for the grant-funded project, including conducting independent evaluations of the grantees’ service models and disseminating the evaluation results (Government Accountability Office 2016).

One of the tiered evidence grant programs is the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Teen Pregnancy Prevention (TPP) Program, established in 2010. The program continues to operate and award funding with an annual appropriation of \$101 million (HHS Office of Population Affairs 2021). HHS employs two tiers for this program:

Tier 1: Replicating evidence-based programs; and

Tier 2: Developing new or innovative approaches.

This program provides a quality example of one of the first and longest standing tiered evidence grant programs at the federal level.

Based on database³ searches of current federal grant programs, formally tiered evidence grantmaking strategies are no longer as commonly employed to the degree that they were immediately following the implementation of the GPRA Modernization Act. The TPP program is one of the only tiered evidence grants on the federal level that still receives annual appropriations.

³ Grants.gov and SAM.gov are the dominant databases for federal grant notices and funding history. Both were used to conduct this search.

However, evaluation and evidence building are still strongly emphasized in many grant programs through different methods and funding schedules emphasized in the Evidence Act of 2018.

INNOVATION GRANTS

Innovation grants resemble tiered evidence grants in that they provide funding to test new ideas and project strategies, but instead of tiering the program to include new and proven projects, innovation grants exclusively fund new ideas.

The Smart Policing Initiative through the Department of Justice (DOJ) provides an example of an innovation grant. The purpose of the grant program is to “provide resources, training, and technical assistance to enable police agencies to identify and define their most pressing crime problems and institute lasting cultural and organizational changes that foster reliance on and effective use of evidence-based practices, data, and technology to address those problems” (DOJ Bureau of Justice Assistance 2021). In FY 2021, the program was administered in two parts:

(Part A): Supporting Innovation

(Part B): Responding to Crime Through Applied Technologies, Crime Analysis, and/or Improved Information Sharing

The purpose of Part A: Supporting Innovation is to support the development of innovative, data-driven approaches to challenges currently confronting law enforcement agencies. The purpose of Part B: Responding to Crime Through Applied Technologies, Crime Analysis, and/or Improved Information Sharing is to support the implementation and testing of applied information-sharing technology designed to respond to crime and improve data usage and exchange among criminal justice agencies, public agency sectors, and/or between two or more jurisdictions. While Part A of this DOJ program is similar in purpose to that of new innovation tiers in the tiered evidence methodology, it is not funded at a lower level than Part B. Both Part A and Part B projects include some level of innovation and evaluation methods and are eligible for up to \$500,000 in funding. Grant programs with the primary purpose of innovating and evaluating new programs are often described as “Innovation Funds” or “Demonstration Projects.”

EVALUATION AND EVIDENCE IN APPLICATION SCORING CRITERIA

Another method of funding evidence-based grant projects is to include scoring criteria that awards additional points to evidence-based projects, making them more likely to be funded through the grant program. An example of this method is the FY 2021 Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) Program from HHS. Out of a maximum category score of 20 points, up to 2 points are awarded to applications which “include a well-defined logic model that demonstrates a reasonable and significant relationship between planned SRAE project activities and intended outcomes and outputs” (HHS 2021). In HHS’ 2020 Evidence-Building plan, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), which funds the SRAE program, includes a detailed evidence-building plan on issues of adolescent pregnancy prevention and sexual risk avoidance research and evaluations. ACF outlines ongoing research and evaluation on these grant programs including exploratory studies and funding evidence-building capacity for grantees.

TYING FUNDING TO PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Some programs make funding contingent on program outcomes through a variety of methods. One innovative method that has been piloted on a small scale is a pay for success (PFS) model. In this model, a private or nonprofit organization signs an agreement with a funding agency in which the organization provides up-front funding for a program with certain outcome goals. If an independent evaluation shows that the program delivered the outlined outcomes, the funding agency repays the organization for the program costs. This shifts the risk of program innovation away from the government funder and onto the organization, meaning that the funding agency only pays for programs that achieve their target outcomes (Urban Institute 2016). PFS models were introduced in the mid-2010s. In FY 2016, the U.S. Department of Education awarded over \$3 million to eight school districts under a Preschool Development Pay for Success Feasibility Pilot Grant (Department of Education 2016). While not a common grantmaking model, it is still employed selectively by some agencies. In May 2021, DOJ solicited the FY 2021 Second Chance Act Pay for Success Initiative: Performance-Based and Outcomes-Based Contracting for Permanent Supportive Housing or Reentry Services which supported outcomes-based contracts for reentry, permanent supportive housing, or recovery housing providers to reduce recidivism and address the substance use disorders impacting formerly incarcerated people. Awards, to be issued after the completion and submission of an independent outcome evaluation, can be up to \$1.1 million (DOJ 2021).

Some agencies tie program outcomes to funding without a PFS model by pending additional funding for future award periods on previous program outcomes. In May 2021, DOJ solicited the FY 2021 Advancing Hospital-Based Victim Services program which is designed to “increase support for victims of crime, improve victim outcomes, and reduce future victimization” (DOJ 2021). Awards of up to \$500,000 were available for demonstration programs. Applicants were required to budget at least \$25,000 per year to support the local evaluation of the project. Continuation funding after the initial award period was available based on the agency’s consideration of evaluated progress towards the program goals.

DISCUSSION

The GPRA Modernization Act established the expectation that federal agencies develop and update strategic plans and establish performance targets. Building on the foundation of the GPRA Modernization Act, the Evidence Act is the most significant evidence and data infrastructure reform in generations, according to nonpartisan experts (Hart 2021). In the three years since the Evidence Act became law in January 2019, the Evidence Act has changed federal agency operations. These changes include introducing the role of chief data officers and evaluation officers into the 24 largest federal agencies, requiring the composition and implementation of agency learning agendas, and bridging data gathering and application silos across the complex landscape of agencies and bureaus. Because of these changes, the law has considerable implications for federal, state, and local governments, and their grantees, including requirements to produce evidence for decision-making and incorporate that evidence into grantmaking.

The implementation of the Evidence Act is ongoing across federal agencies, including the imminent rollout of agency learning agendas. These learning agendas are intended to promote

learning cultures within federal agencies, invigorate meaningful performance improvements, and increase evidence-informed policy and programs (Newcomer, Olejniczak, and Hart 2021). The initial cohort of public learning agendas required by the Evidence Act needed to be published by February 2022. However, some agencies have already published learning agendas or produced interim plans offering insights on the approaches that the agencies are taking towards evidence-based grantmaking, including several discussed in the sections above.

As evidence-based capacity grows in the federal government, the next challenge will be growing evidence-building capacity in partners, stakeholder, and grantees. For some agencies, advancing evidence-informed policy and performance improvements includes equipping grantees with the technical support and funding necessary to collect evidence and complete program evaluations of programs funded by federal grants. Currently, technical support and funding are largely administered through grant set-asides. It is likely that as agencies seek to grow evaluation capacity in grantees, these set-asides will become larger. As the implementation of the Evidence Act progresses, capacity building may also take other forms, such as data sharing. The Evidence Act, paired with federal transparency requirements, compels agencies to inventory and publish information and datasets for public use. However, the behemoth task of organizing and publishing open data could take years and would likely require additional guidance from OMB to “facilitate consistency across federal agencies as well as prioritizing which high-value data should be made first” (Hart 2021).

Even as implementation of the Evidence Act continues, additional efforts are underway to further promote evidence-informed policies. In early 2021, the National Secure Data Service Act was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives with bipartisan support, aiming to smooth the process of collecting and sharing data across government and government partners and to address key data gaps (Data Coalition 2021). As of this writing, the bill is being considered in committee. Among the data gaps in evaluation capacity in government is an official inventory of contract and grant funding directed to evaluation purposes. The last inventory of program evaluation activities in government was conducted by OMB in 1977 (Fatheree and Hart 2019). In the report *Resources for Program Evaluation*, OMB estimated that the government spent \$170 million in contracts and grants and \$73 million in personnel to support program evaluation activities (OMB 1977). This approximates to over \$1 billion today, adjusted for inflation. With the implementation of the Evidence Act and the additional pushes for data collection and transparency, further research regarding the amount of government funding allocated to data and evidence-building activities may support efforts to ensure that government and government partners, such as grantees, have adequate capacity to conduct evaluations and pursue evidence-based policies and programs.

CONCLUSION

Legislation, especially the GPRA Modernization Act and the Evidence Act, has changed government operations and increased the emphasis on data gathering and evidence-based programs. As federal agencies build on the precedent set by the GPRA Modernization Act and incorporate the new requirements of the Evidence Act into their operations, evidence building through grant making will likely become a more robust practice. Government agencies may employ a variety of methods to incorporate evaluation requirements into grantmaking including

tiered evidence grants, set-asides for program evaluation costs in the total grant award, soliciting specific innovation grants, including evaluation capability as a scoring criterion, and tying funding to demonstrated program outcomes. The implementation of the Evidence Act, including the publication of agency learning agendas, will continue to strengthen evaluation requirements, capacity, and funding in federal grantmaking.

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