

**A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT
OF
THE OMB HELP DESK**

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This paper presents a preliminary assessment of the operations of the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy's Help Desk in the Office of Management and Budget.

BACKGROUND

The Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, established in September 2001, has worked with federal and State officials "to advance social policy based on rigorous evidence of program effectiveness." The Coalition advocates randomized controlled trials (RCT) as "generally the strongest study design" for identifying highly effective social interventions. According to the Coalition, "randomized controlled trials measure an intervention's effect by randomly assigning individuals (or groups of individuals) to an intervention group or a control group".

While confident that its work has "resulted in important, concrete evidence-based reforms", the Coalition determined that an "infrastructure of user-friendly tools that program staff...need to implement these reforms generally does not exist...." The missing tools included those needed to "(i) carry out rigorous program evaluations, particularly well-designed randomized controlled trials; (ii) sponsor such evaluations; and (iii) implement research-proven interventions." In order to address this deficiency, the Coalition launched a "Help Desk" for the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the Department of Education (ED), and other federal agencies on January 20, 2006.

The OMB Help Desk, the subject of this evaluation, offers "user-friendly" assistance to OMB program analysts. They can access Coalition staff directly through the telephone and receive personalized assistance or use the Internet to reach the Help Desk and obtain quick reviews of evaluation studies and access to experts. The Coalition believes that the medium and long-term measures of the Help Desk's performance would be "(i) the number of high-quality, rigorous evaluations that result from our work, (ii) the number of research-proven interventions that are identified by these evaluations, and (iii) the extent to which our work results in the effective, widespread implementation of research-proven interventions by federal funding recipients (e.g., program grantees)."

INTERVIEWS

This assessment used not-for-attribution interviews with OMB users of the Help Desk to ascertain what value they placed on it and their use of its resources. These interviews were supplemented by an examination of the log kept by the Coalition of inquiries made to the Help Desk from January through mid-July, interviews with officials and staff from other agencies who have been involved with the OMB Help Desk, and interviews with OMB staff who have not taken advantage of the resources offered by the Help Desk. Most requests for assistance to the Help Desk were by phone, often followed by meetings between OMB and Coalition staff. The majority of contacts related to the Academic Competitiveness Council and the Program Assessment Rating Tool.

Academic Competitiveness Council (ACC)

The ACC was created by the Deficit Reduction Act, which was signed into law by the President on February 8, 2006. Chaired by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, the Council consists of cabinet secretaries and other senior officials from 13 agencies, which collectively have a total of 200 programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), plus OMB, the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, and the White House Domestic Policy Counsel. Its mission is to “evaluate the effectiveness of each program, identifying areas of overlap and recommending ways to efficiently integrate and coordinate them in the future.” The Council’s first meeting was held on March 6. The ACC has strong Administration support: a meeting of ACC agency heads was held at the White House; the President dropped in briefly. The Council’s report to the Congress is due in February 2007.

OMB engaged the Coalition as the principal advisor on evaluation to the ACC. In addition to providing ongoing advice to the ACC, the Help Desk held a workshop on rigorous evaluation at the end of June for about 45 OMB and agency officials participating in the ACC. Coalition staff have also been attending meetings of the various subgroups set up by the ACC and have prepared for the ACC (a) a “hierarchy” of evaluation study designs, and (b) a preliminary analysis and critique of the existing evaluations of about 70 STEM programs which concluded that very few had been rigorously evaluated. In a memo to all ACC members, Secretary Spelling “affirmed” the Coalition’s hierarchy, endorsed its preliminary inventory, and stated that the goal of the ACC was that “every STEM program...undergo rigorous evaluation”. The ACC is now the major focus of Help Desk activities.

From the perspective of those OMB officials and staff with prior knowledge of and experience with the Coalition, the Help Desk has been an invaluable asset to the ACC. In their view, it has provided objective evaluation expertise to the ACC; agencies could see it as an independent third party, representing neither OMB nor ED. It enables agencies, many with limited background in evaluation and differing conceptions of appropriate evaluation methodologies, to learn ways to conduct rigorous program evaluations, especially RCT.

Some agency participants saw things quite differently. They initially viewed the Help Desk as an OMB “plant” or “hired gun”, whose purpose was to impose an RCT evaluation on STEM programs -- whether or not the programs were really suitable for that type of evaluation. From their perspective, if sufficient time were taken to understand the essential nature of many of the STEM programs, it would be apparent that other types of evaluation strategies would be more effective than RCT. In this regard, it’s interesting to note that in the Coalition workshop mentioned above, the senior OMB official present made a point of mentioning that RCTs “are not expected to be used at all times nor are they appropriate in every situation.” Apparently not everyone present at the workshop took that statement at face value.

Much of the early agency suspicion of the Help Desk has dissipated. Agency participants seem to appreciate the hard work and evaluation advice that the Coalition has been providing. One person, still skeptical of the value of RCT, stated that the Coalition had done a significant service just by forcing those involved in the ACC effort to ask the “right questions” about conducting program evaluations. Another remarked that, while the Coalition might discover that rigorous evaluation could be defined in many ways, and that RCT was not the right approach for many STEM programs, the agencies could profit greatly from the Coalition’s expertise in evaluation.

Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART)

OMB instituted the Program Assessment Rating Tool several years ago as an integral part of the federal budget process. PART is a “systematic method of assessing the performance of program activities across the federal government.” It is a diagnostic tool; its objective is to improve program performance; and it helps link performance to budget decisions. PART assessments are intended to inform budget decisions, support management, identify program design problems, and promote performance measurement and accountability. About 20% of the federal government’s programs have been “parted” each year since the program began; OMB and the agencies are currently discussing the final group of programs to be reviewed.

PART is composed of a series of questions directed to federal agencies about specific programs which they administer. The purpose of the questions is to provide a consistent approach to rating programs across the government. They cover four areas: program purpose and design; strategic planning; program management; and program results/accountability. OMB analyses the agency responses to the PART questions and assigns each program a numerical rating and places it in one of five categories (effective, moderately effective, adequate, ineffective, results not demonstrated); the analyses and numerical and categorical ratings are printed in the President’s Budget. (See Attachment for a summary of PART results.) Most of the OMB-agency interactions on PART take place between January/February when the President’s Budget is submitted to Congress and September when OMB begins the preparation of the next President’s Budget.

Because a large number of federal programs have undergone the PART review process in the last several years, OMB staff have been encouraged to consider evaluation issues. Thus, many of the inquiries directed to the Help Desk stemmed from staff involvement in PART, even if the program they were seeking assistance for was not under PART review in 2006. By all accounts, Help Desk assistance to OMB analysts interested in improving program evaluations has gone very smoothly. Interviewees almost unanimously state that the Help Desk has responded quickly with relevant, useful advice. In some cases, the Help Desk has completed its assignment (the Coalition log indicates the case is “closed”); in others the work is still in progress. One OMB staff member said that, in addition to its work in particular programs, the Help Desk has through its activities validated some of the OMB thinking behind the entire PART effort.

The Help Desk has responded to inquiries about an impressive variety of programs. They include federal retirement, health and life insurance programs, the community service block grant program, and disability employment programs. Another OMB request covered a number of agencies that have “what works” sites for numerous programs designed to reduce adolescent crime, delinquency and substance abuse. Many of these sites use different and inadequate criteria to rate the programs and assess their effectiveness. The Help Desk, in a meeting with OMB and involved agency staff, proposed “standard criteria for determining which policy areas are backed by the strongest evidence of effectiveness”. These criteria are currently being reviewed by the agencies.

Extent of Use of the Help Desk

When the OMB Help Desk was established, information about it was sent by email to all OMB program analysts and a meeting for staff from a number of OMB units was held to describe its functions. Yet users have been comparatively few and concentrated in one part of OMB. Why? One answer is that knowledge of and appreciation for the work of the Coalition has yet to spread widely throughout OMB; this subject is pursued in more detail in the next section of this paper.

The interviews suggested some additional reasons. There is a certain amount of confusion about the purpose and scope of the Help Desk in OMB. Some OMB analysts thought its assistance was limited to programs being “parted” that year; some believed that agencies couldn’t directly contact the Help Desk but had to contact OMB first; some thought the Help Desk was only available through the end of the year. Some OMB staff thought that the Help Desk would not be very interested in aiding them to develop effective performance measures for agency programs; they thought the Help Desk was exclusively concerned with evaluation methodologies. (A few agency personnel learned about the Coalition and the Help Desk through their involvement in the ACC and expressed surprise that they had not been informed that they could go directly to the Help Desk to assist their agencies.)

Several OMB staff members contacted the Help Desk to find out what resources it had available but never followed up to take advantage of them. Certain staff were informed about the Help Desk’s existence and purpose but specifically decided not to use it. Some senior staff asserted that they “knew” their programs and how to evaluate them based on years of experience and didn’t need outside assistance. Others decided that the possible benefit of using the Help Desk was more than outweighed by the cost of dealing with another set of people and issues in the context of an institution that already has too few overburdened staff to handle too many assignments.

Some OMB partisans of the Help Desk believe that it could be more influential if rigorous evaluation and RCT were made mandatory on agencies in several ways. For example, OMB’s existing Circular on evaluation could not only encourage the use of RCT but require it; and questions on evaluation in the PART process could be given more weight in determining the agency’s score. Other supporters of the Coalition’s efforts counseled against a mandatory approach; they advised instead a slow, steady effort. Their view was that it would take a considerable amount of time and patient encouragement to influence the thinking of a variety of federal agencies on conducting program evaluations.

ASSESSMENT

During its seven months of existence the OMB Help Desk has impressed all its users, even commentators who had reservations about evaluation or the importance of RCT, with its timely responses and the professionalism of its staff. Supporters of the Coalition praise the staff for its “passion” in promoting rigorous evaluation. Everyone seems to agree that its responses to inquiries have been clear and helpful. It is far too early to know whether the long-term goals of the Coalition (e.g., “the effective widespread implementation of research-proven interventions”), will result from its work. But a good foundation appears to have been put in place.

One concern regarding the Help Desk is the misinformation about it noted in the previous section of this paper. The Coalition may be able to address this concern and improve the “marketing” of the Help Desk to OMB program analysts in several ways. It could plan, in concert with OMB officials, to have an announcement sent out each year, in the January-February time period after the President’s Budget has been submitted to Congress, reminding all OMB staff of its existence and function. Such an announcement might clarify its responsibilities and resolve any uncertainties about its scope of operations. The announcement could also provide the names of staff who had used the Help Desk and suggest that other OMB staff contact them for their assessment of its work. The most powerful selling point for the Help Desk to many staff would be the testimony of their colleagues.

There are also some other Help Desk issues that the Coalition may wish to review.

An examination of those OMB staff identified as Help Desk users reveals that a majority have present or past connections with a single unit in OMB, the one responsible for overseeing the activities, among other agencies, of the Department of Education. Senior staff in this unit are strong supporters of the Coalition and their leadership has influenced the program analysts in the unit. Other parts of OMB are not yet converts to the cause. One agency supporter of the Coalition remarked that its view of evaluation has penetrated deeply in parts of OMB and in fairly few agencies but has not yet had wide influence throughout OMB or the government as a whole.

Further, while the Help Desk appears to be meeting the needs of individual OMB program analysts and providing useful assistance in the evaluations of specific agency programs, it is not clear if such efforts in themselves will improve the institutional acceptance and use of rigorous evaluation, especially RCT, in a large number of federal agencies. While continuing to provide assistance to OMB and agency staff through the Help Desk, the Coalition might consider strategies that could result in building a permanent institutional base for rigorous evaluation in federal agencies.

One strategy would be to use the ACC experience as a model. The Help Desk appears to have found its greatest opportunity to spread knowledge and acceptance of the value of rigorous evaluation, especially RCT, in its association with the ACC. Serving as principal advisor to the ACC allows the Help Desk to initiate contacts with a number of federal agencies in the context of a legislatively-required, Administration-supported activity. While the danger of being perceived as an Administration or OMB "plant" is clearly present, over the long term, helping the agencies ask the right questions about evaluation may lead to future productive associations with those agencies. Thus, the Coalition may want to search out, in conjunction with OMB, similar "targets of opportunity", i.e., a number of agencies with similar programs requiring assistance in conducting evaluations. One example is the Help Desk's work in developing criteria for the "what works" sites covering a number of related programs in several agencies, mentioned earlier in this paper.

The Coalition could discuss another strategy with OMB: the potential for strengthening the institutional capacity of federal agencies to carry out evaluations. One agency interviewee mentioned that many agencies currently have either no central evaluation unit or a weak one. The Coalition currently has a strong influence in certain agencies, like the Department of Education, because of support at both the policy and career staff level along with corresponding support from their OMB counterparts. At the ED level, that support is centered in a central evaluation unit. If similar offices were established at other agencies, the Coalition would have the chance of helping imbed knowledge about rigorous evaluation and RCT in the organizational structure of those agencies. The Help Desk would potentially have a natural ally in each agency.

A third possible strategy would be to propose that OMB require that all agencies present their overall evaluation plans to it when they were first developed. Thus OMB would be able to review and comment on the design and methodology of the agency plans in their formative stage. The central evaluation units suggested above, if created, could be the agency locus for preparing such plans. If such a requirement were instituted, the Help Desk would be a logical place for agencies to turn to for assistance in developing the plans and for OMB to call on for help in reviewing them. (Early review of one agency's evaluation plan was suggested by the Help Desk in response to a request from an OMB branch.)

None of the suggested strategies will be easy to implement nor can they be done quickly. It is not likely that all the major components of the ACC – congressional authorization, White House support, OMB participation, and a legislative deadline for a report – can be replicated. Agencies will not be eager to establish new evaluation units or to have OMB review their evaluation plans and, even if they were, all agencies have to contend with severe budgetary and human resource constraints. OMB has a host of responsibilities and may not be eager to take on additional struggles with the agencies. On the other hand, the Coalition currently has strong support in some senior levels in OMB, recognition of its existence and value among certain White House staff, and has come to the attention of a number of agencies through the Help Desk and the ACC. Now may be the time to begin to capitalize on these strengths.

SUMMARY OF PART RESULTS

Total number of federal programs	950 (OMB est.)
Number of programs assessed (2005)	793
Effective:	119 (15%)
Moderately effective:	230 (29%)
Adequate:	222 (28%)
Ineffective:	32 (4%)
Results Not Demonstrated:	190 (24%)