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Pitfalls in Designing and Implementing Performance Management Systems

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During the second half of the 1990s, the federal government worked its way through a long, slow, and still incomplete implementation of a governmentwide performance management system, as mandated by the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA). As Richard Nathan's introduction to this volume makes clear, reasonable people can still disagree about whether performance management in the federal government is a glass half full or half empty. Optimists believe that GPRA will help improve management in Washington, make the federal government more accountable, and improve resource allocation decisions. Pessimists worry that incoming officials will succumb to the temptation to pick another three or four letters of the alphabet and start all over again, or that GPRA will end up another in a long list of costly and failed reform initiatives, adding to the federal paperwork burden as did earlier reforms like Performance Planning Budgeting Systems (PPBS), Management by Objective (MBO), and Zero-Based Budgeting (ZBB).

Drawing on the case studies and analytic chapters in the rest of this book, this essay summarizes findings from earlier experience at

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all levels of government with performance management, and uses those findings to look ahead to the problems GPRA will face in its next phase of implementation. Along the continuum from optimism to skepticism, I sit uncomfortably in the middle. On the one hand, I see performance management (PM) systems as valuable tools for managers and overseers of public agencies. Skeptics often understate the benefits of performance measures linked to strategic plans, and overstate the difficulties of obtaining useful information from PM systems. On the other hand, there are limits to the value of performance data, and many difficulties associated with designing and implementing PM systems. Advocates sometimes commit what Schick calls “the great mistake of the performance measurement industry” – assuming that “an organization can be transformed by measuring its performance” (chapter 3 in this volume). The limits of performance management are especially evident in performance budgeting, which has not transformed governmental budgeting as its most optimistic proponents expected. This chapter focuses more carefully those problems and discusses some successful strategies for overcoming them, so managers and overseers have a better chance to reap the benefits of performance management systems.

A “performance management system” is an interrelated set of performance plans and performance indicators and or measures. Strategic plans or other multi-year business plans are key ingredients of all performance management systems. Without such plans, a government may boast of a set of performance indicators, but does not have a performance management system. Some PM systems provide incentives for high performance or sanctions for shortfalls in results. Some are also linked to budgetary decision processes through one or another variant of what is usually called performance budgeting. In chapter 2, Hatry provides a more extensive introduction to the vocabulary of performance measurement and management.

Any of these elements may be the source of design and implementation problems. Confusion about the goals or audiences of performance information, inattention to measurement challenges, and poor choices of incentives are all sources of difficulties for PM systems. Special problems arise when trying to manage the performance of agents outside the direct control of an agency, including

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independent contractors and other levels of government. Opposition within the bureaucracy can derail PM systems during implementation, and additional difficulties arise when a government tries to use performance data to allocate resources. Finally, performance management systems sometimes clash with the political needs of elected officials. I discuss each of these problem areas in turn. At the end of the chapter, I return to GPRA to examine the pitfalls and possibilities it faces during the next stages of its implementation.

Designing Performance Management Systems to Fulfill Multiple Goals

Performance management systems seek improvement in three primary areas:¹

- ✿ *Accountability*: Data on government performance can help elected officials as well as citizens and the media judge whether government is performing adequately.
- ✿ *Management improvement*: While “performance measurement does not, in itself, produce performance,” (Ingraham and Moynihan, chapter 12), PM systems can provide strategic focus, useful metrics, and goals and incentives to help government agencies manage better.
- ✿ *Decisionmaking*: Information about the performance of government agencies and programs can be used in budget deliberations and other decisionmaking processes.

Disputes about the proper design of performance management systems often reflect confusion about the relative priority of these three goals. High-level, top-down systems designed for accountability may not link easily to actual agency operations, and may not provide data useful for managers of those operational units. For example, the Oregon Benchmarks system was originally designed to help citizens and government officials gauge the progress of the state on broad social goals such as reducing poverty and improving air quality. But Oregon’s top-down social indicators (or “end outcome measures,” to use the performance management term) were

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so sweeping that they were distant from the day-to-day activities of most government managers. Thus, the benchmarks have proved to be of limited value in encouraging management improvement.²

Alternatively, bottom-up systems producing data for day-to-day management may not yield information of much value for accountability and oversight. For example, the City of New York has produced a semi-annual Mayor's Management Report for 25 years. Some of the data in that report are useful for tracking real-time agency performance, but provide little information that is useful to the public, the mayor, or the City Council. For example, the Sanitation Commissioner may care about simple output measures such as the number of mechanical broom routes scheduled and the percentage of those routes completed. But for accountability purposes, the Mayor's Office of Operations also publishes trained observers' survey data on street cleanliness — a much better measure of at least one of the outcomes the public wants.³

Additional PM design issues arise if a goal is improved budgetary decisionmaking. While agency managers require data about all the activities in their departments, budget offices and the chief executives whom they serve need fewer indicators, focused on strategically important activities in each agency. To be employed in budget making, performance data must be available for the same organizational units as used in budget accounts, and must be delivered on a schedule that meshes with the calendar for preparing the budget. The critical work of budget preparation takes place part way through the fiscal year, but performance management systems may produce data at the end of a fiscal year. Budget officials may also want efficiency or productivity measures based on cost-accounting data that can be expensive and difficult for agencies to collect. The budget office and the chief executive, together with the legislature, may also want performance data about similar programs delivered by agencies in different departments. Data on activities that spill over agency lines — called crosscutting programs in the parlance of federal performance management — have been painfully hard to produce.

Although the chief executive and the legislature may agree on the need for data on crosscutting programs, divergent legislative

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and executive goals for performance management data can imperil PM systems. In 1981, as part of legislation requiring New York State to use generally accepted accounting principles (GAAP) in its budgeting and financial reporting, the legislature also authorized a performance measurement system called the Key Item Reporting System (KIRS). The executive branch, led by the Division of the Budget, complained bitterly. Opponents argued that that KIRS indicators measured performance in marginal programs of special interest to the legislature, and that those data were not suitable for comprehensive oversight or decisionmaking, much less management improvement. In spite of the statutory basis of KIRS, executive branch compliance was grudging and spotty. After the executive branch was criticized in the press for poor compliance, Governor Cuomo argued that the statute was a failure and eventually won its repeal.

Overall, without careful attention to each goal, managers can easily make mistakes as they design useful performance indicators and PM systems. In chapter 14, Robert Bradley and Geraldo Flowers show how officials in Florida designed Performance-Based Program Budgeting (PB²) with an eye toward different goals and the needs of different audiences, and thereby reduced the risk that Florida's PM system would malfunction.

Measurement Challenges

A recurring theme in the debate over performance management concerns the usefulness of measures of end outcomes. Legislators and other overseers often argue that the executive's preferred performance indicators are too narrow, and push for broader outcome measures. Agency managers and their bosses respond that output measures are more useful for tracking and evaluating their work, and for improving agency management. In Washington, this is a regular theme in GAO assessments of agency performance plans and reports.

Agency managers are uncomfortable about being accountable for broad outcomes, arguing that their work may have only limited impact on them. For instance, prominent among the 90 Oregon

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Benchmarks are infant mortality and teen-age pregnancy rates. Success or failure in meeting those targets depends on many factors, including federal policy and programs, the economy, demographics, and community values. However, the legislature and public may find information about end outcomes more valuable than data on workloads, such as the report from the Adult and Family Services Division that the Oregon Health Plan Branch handled 252,000 applications and reapplications during the last biennium.

Experienced designers of performance management systems conclude that governments should use a combination of input, output and outcome measures to track key programs (Hatry, 1999). Support for that approach can be found in recent work to develop “balanced scorecards” for corporations. These include not just financial data but also information on customer needs, internal business processes and procedures, and personnel skill levels and technology systems. Proponents of balanced scorecards also try to complement outcome data, which are retrospective, with forward-looking indicators and milestones tracking progress toward performance improvements (Kaplan and Norton, 1996).

Designers of effective performance reports in state and local governments also include explanatory data, highlighting the impact on agency performance of forces beyond the direct control of agency managers. For example, reports from the ICMA-Urban Institute consortium of local governments include not only performance information about crime rates but also data on poverty and housing conditions — two factors that show statistically significant relationships to crime rates (Urban Institute and International City/County Management Association, 1998).

Debate over whether to use output or outcome data may reflect differences in interests as well as perspectives. In monitoring activities of the U.S. Forest Service, for example, the lumber industry and its allies focus on traditional output measures such as board feet of timber harvested and associated revenue. Environmentalists, in contrast, downplay timber-cutting goals and are trying to develop broader indicators of ecosystem health to assess the agency’s success or failure.

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Another source of dispute can occur when designers of PM systems require a comprehensive set of measures tracking every program in every agency, as Congress did with GPRA. This drive to comprehensiveness conflicts with the need of CEOs and top agency managers to focus on smaller numbers of performance targets for programs with strategic importance. Typically, these would include key presidential or gubernatorial initiatives, programs of particular interest to key legislators, and those programs with special budgetary or implementation risks. Behn takes the argument for a smaller subset of strategic measures to its logical extreme by making the case for the “value of a single, simple goal” for an agency or program (1991, pp. 79-80).

These tensions are more apparent than real. In Chapter 3, Schick reminds us that while it may make sense to establish many performance *indicators*, performance *targets* should be few in number. Indeed, he argues, “Targeting everything is equivalent to targeting nothing.” A narrower subset of key strategic indicators — called an Executive Information System (EIS) — can be easily drawn from comprehensive data, presented in an accessible format, and revised as chief executives change. Meanwhile, the full set of data is still useful for monitoring agency operations and providing early warning of problems in agencies or programs.

We can imagine a hierarchy of performance measures, with many tracking outputs available to agency managers, and a smaller number more focused on outcomes provided to agency heads and budget examiners. Of these, an even narrower subset would be made available to the chief executive, the legislature, and the general public.

Frequency of reporting is another issue of some technical importance but little policy relevance. Agency managers need data frequently to fine-tune operations. In chapter 16, Smith and Bratton show how top managers convene monthly to use the New York City Police Department’s COMPSTAT — a high-stakes performance management technique — to review precinct performance. Budget offices and top executive branch staff, in contrast, may be satisfied with quarterly data, and legislatures and the public with annual indicators. In fact, it may be impractical or too costly to obtain end

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outcome data, such as student test scores on standardized tests, more frequently than once a year.

After lengthy efforts to develop timely and verifiable measures that link to their strategic plans, the designers and users of performance management systems alike may forget that those data may not support in-depth analysis of program performance. If programs' strategic goals are primarily operational – getting checks to Social Security recipients on time, for example – performance indicators may suffice. But as Blalock and Barnow argue in chapter 17, full-fledged evaluation studies will still be needed to analyze programs with more far-reaching goals. Such costly and time-consuming studies are still the gold standard for understanding the net impacts and limitations of complex programs.

Overseers concerned with tracking crosscutting programs administered by more than one agency may find it difficult to create a common set of indicators for reviewing and managing performance, as those programs are likely to have different goals. GAO has focused considerable attention on this question in its reports on federal strategic plans and performance reports, but each program cluster presents unique problems.

Another measurement problem involves what Fossett, Gais, and Thompson call in chapter 9 “dissonant spillover,” which occurs when operating agencies are expected to pursue potentially conflicting objectives, but are held accountable for only a subset of those objectives. Agency managers may produce good performance on the closely watched activities, but not on others. As Schick points out in chapter 3: “[T]argets skew behavior by emphasizing some aims and leaving out others.”

As Boyer and Lawrence show in chapter 8, state welfare administrators showed positive results under welfare reform by cutting welfare rolls and increasing work participation rates. “Ending welfare as we know it” was not supposed to reduce access to health insurance and food stamps – important elements in what remained of the social safety net. Yet, as Fossett and his colleagues document in chapter 9, eligible families and individuals have lost these benefits. Indeed, increasing participation in the Child Health

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Insurance Program (CHIP) was one of President Clinton's priorities. However, eligibility for Medicaid, CHIP, and food stamps was determined by the same agencies responsible for reducing welfare rolls, and those bureaucrats apparently found it difficult to pursue conflicting objectives. The Clinton administration responded with informal performance management initiatives designed to boost participation rates for health insurance and food stamps, but participation rates continued to fall. The lesson for designers of performance management systems is that performance on the full range of important goals should be measured and rewarded, given potential conflicts among related objectives.

Designing Effective Incentives

Designers of performance management systems often find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, PM systems are much less robust if they are not backed up by incentives for high-performing individuals or organizations. On the other hand, powerful incentives in response to poorly conceived or imperfectly measured performance indicators can produce unexpected and even counterproductive behavior. As Marschke puts it in chapter 4, "Bureaucrats do respond to financially backed performance incentives, but that bureaucratic response is often dysfunctional." For example, the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) awarded additional funds to its contractors for high performance. However, the contractors sometimes responded to those incentives by signing up clients who were more likely to get jobs and keep their organizational scorecards high and ignoring clients who were more needy and more difficult to place (Barnow, 2000).

Organizational incentives in some PM systems include waivers of rules and regulations governing purchasing, hiring, salaries, and reallocation of funds across budget categories (Willoughby and Melkers, chapter 13, Table 3). Other incentives include allowing an agency to roll over some or all of its budget surplus, access to special pools of funding, and public recognition. Robert Bradley's discussion of performance budgeting in Florida shows that disincentives — in the form of additional reports and reinstatement of controls — may also be part of a PM scheme (chapter 13).

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Marschke relies on principal-agent analysis to show that designers of incentive systems must be cautious when the principal (the governor, for example) decides to use indicators that are not completely under the control of the agent (the agency manager). This “noise” in the indicators diminishes the value of the incentives for controlling the agent’s behavior (chapter 4).

Most government agencies find it even more difficult to design effective incentives for individual managers and front-line workers, especially in programs where outcomes and even output are hard to measure. In such programs, Marschke points out, “performance incentives should be used sparingly or not at all.” Questions may arise about the contribution of the specific worker to the outcome in question, and whether the baseline condition is measured carefully enough so workers get credit for “value added,” not just for high performance. These issues arise even when incentives entail awards and recognition, but they are debated more hotly when the reward is additional pay for performance. A case in point is merit pay for teachers.

An alternative approach provides performance pay for all workers in an organizational unit — a school, for instance. Proponents of this design argue that paying bonuses to everyone reinforces teamwork. But it still makes little sense to provide incentives for workers who operate under narrow bureaucratic rules and procedures and have little room for discretion. According to Marschke, “The general principle here is that incentives should be placed on agents who are able to respond to them.” What’s more, in most jobs, workers perform several tasks, and failure to provide incentives to some of those tasks may lead to their neglect. For example, teachers and schools that are rewarded solely on the basis of reading and math test scores may neglect arts education or student counseling. Overall, practitioners must remember that high-stakes incentives for organizations and individuals can distort as well as improve performance, and that performance pay for individuals is especially difficult to design and implement successfully.

Managing the Performance of Independent Agents

While government faces many difficulties in measuring and managing the programs it operates directly, those problems multiply when applying performance management to contractors and local governments. Indeed, programs are often contracted out or devolved precisely because a government is less certain of its goals or how to achieve them. A recent example is the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Empowerment Zone and Enterprise Community (EZ) Initiative. As David Wright points out in chapter 10, the EZ program was "inherently complex, overlapping, and subject to macro-level social and economic forces beyond local control." Without a clear sense of goals, HUD had trouble even defining a process for goal-setting in each community, and those problems were compounded as the agency tried to measure progress and establish sanctions when cities and local organizations fell short of their objectives.

Beryl Radin argues in chapter 11 that Congress and the federal bureaucracy are pursuing conflicting objectives in applying PM to the intergovernmental arena.

On the one hand, they are attempting to hold third parties accountable for the use of federal monies; on the other hand, they are constrained by the political and legal realities that provide significant discretion and leeway to the third parties for the use of those federal dollars. In many ways, the performance movement in federal agencies collides with strategies of devolution and a diminished federal role. What is most interesting about this situation is that few of the individuals in the policymaking world (particularly in the Congress) are aware that they are setting up incompatible strategies.

She makes the case that governmentwide approaches such as GPRA that require measures and targets for direct federal programs simply will not work in the intergovernmental arena. She holds that a careful strategy, based on such tools as performance partnerships, incentives, negotiated performance measures, legislated performance

goals, voluntary standards, and waivers, can sometimes bridge the gap between devolution and accountability.

Implementation Challenges

In the absence of support from top management, a makeshift coalition of nervous agency heads, the staff of legislative appropriations committees, cynical budget examiners, and lower-level and less visible agency managers may undermine implementation of PM systems. These actors may wonder why it is necessary to go to the trouble of providing the public and potential political and bureaucratic opponents with performance information for use as ammunition against them. The political staff of chief executives may be sympathetic to such concerns, and join the anti-measurement coalition. Less frequently, implementation of PM systems can be halted when a new elected chief executive takes office and reflexively discards the initiatives of his or her predecessors.

A statute mandating performance management may give firmer footing to implementation than an executive order. Analysts who have studied the implementation of GPRA agree that its standing in permanent law helped it outlive predecessors such as PPBS, MBO, and ZBB, which were based on executive orders (Posner 1997). Similarly, Bradley (chapter 14) points out that disputes between the governor and legislature in Florida might have derailed implementation of that state's PB² initiative had it not been enacted into law.

However, while embedding the design of a performance management system in statute encourages all parties to work through transitory disputes, it will not guarantee successful implementation of a system that is poorly designed or lacks fundamental support by key players. In 1981, when the New York State legislature added the Key Item Reporting System (KIRS) to a broader fiscal reform bill, the governor and his budget office saw the initiative as a legislative power-grab, designed without significant input from the executive. The budget office complained about the legislature's choice of agencies, programs, and indicators for monitoring, and simply refused to take the statute seriously. Nearly ten years after its enactment, as

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New York State suffered through its worst economic downturn since the 1930s, the executive branch stopped providing the required data. After a brief dust-up in the press over this noncompliance, the governor persuaded the legislature to repeal the KIRS requirement. Twenty years after the initial enactment of KIRS, New York is one of only three states that make no claim to do performance budgeting.⁴

Statutory creation of a PM system was presumably less threatening at the federal level in Washington, D.C., and at the state level in Tallahassee, two jurisdictions where strong legislatures were already a fact of life. Florida's PB² and the federal GPRA share several common traits. Both provided for slow and cautious implementation, phasing in agency participation over several years. Both allowed for relief from some regulations and controls as incentives, although this provision has gone essentially unused in Washington. Both are generally deemed limited successes.

In implementing GPRA, Congress and the General Accounting Office reviewed the strategic plans of agencies in detail, and congressional leaders even developed a short-lived grading system for them. GAO's careful and sustained analysis encouraged strategic and performance plans that were comprehensive, well grounded in agency activities, and accompanied by performance indicators that provided overseers and the public a good understanding of results in key programs (Forsythe, 2000). Similarly the PB² effort in Florida benefited from consistent and careful follow-up by the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Governmental Accountability, a legislative office created to oversee the new performance management initiative.⁵

Where to lodge responsibility within in the executive branch for PM staff work is an open question. In New York City, a specialized management office collects and publishes the Mayor's Management Report (MMR), a twice-yearly two-volume compendium of performance targets and indicators. While academics and others have demonstrated shortcomings in the MMR (see Smith, 1993 for one such critique), the Office of Operations does use it to monitor agency operations, and the City Council and the media rely on it for performance information about key agencies and programs.

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In Albany and in Washington, the executive branch assigned responsibility for implementation of KIRS and GPRA to the Division of the Budget and the Office of Management and Budget. For those budget shops, performance management was clearly a lower priority than preparing and executing the budget, and implementation of performance management systems suffered. In Florida, however, the Governor's Office of Planning and Budgeting, with strong leadership from the state budget director, played a central role in implementing the PB² system.

These examples show that where strong support from chief budget officers does not exist, it makes sense to lodge executive branch responsibility for performance management in a stand-alone management office. This location may help keep performance management systems alive during economic downturns, when managing the fiscal effects of business cycles tends to overshadow any other activities in budget offices.

In New York City, the long history of the MMR also illustrates a tension between maintaining a consistent set of indicators to allow comparisons over time, and tinkering with indicators to improve them. In the published material that accompanies the release of MMR data every six months, the Office of Operations does note when indicators are changed or dropped. Whatever the technical value of these changes, critics complain that their true purpose is to hide data that might have been of value to mayoral opponents. Accountability therefore suffers when technicians or politicians tinker with long-standing series of performance data.

Powerful PCs and inexpensive but robust database programs have made the collection and display of performance data much easier. However, the relative ease with which these data can be stored and analyzed does not mean that those data will be "timely, complete, accurate, useful or consistent" (GAO, 1999, p. 7). Managers and overseers of PM systems need to provide specific and credible information about how they will verify and validate performance data if they want overseers and the public to believe them. The series of reports by GAO on federal performance indicators provides a useful tutorial.⁶

The Special Problems of Performance Budgeting

Those who yearn for performance budgeting seem to share a recurring fantasy: that the availability of performance data will suddenly simplify the process of allocating funds, automatically providing additional funding to high-performing programs while cutting funds from poor performers. However, as Willoughby and Melkers point out in chapter 13, performance budgeting has not produced this kind of change, although it has stimulated some efforts at formula budgeting to allocate funds between similar organizational units. The leading example is in higher education, where 17 states allocate some of their funds to institutions of higher education according to formulae. In general, those formulae reward success in reaching specific targets, such as graduation rates. They are used to allocate relatively limited amounts of dollars, with upper limits of about 6 percent of funding, although South Carolina did briefly experiment with allocating all of its higher education funds by performance formula (Burke, chapter 15). Higher education's experience seems to show that formula allocations may have some limited value in distributing funds among competing institutions within a single program area.

In general, however, performance data have not made it easier to answer V. O. Key's famous question, "On what basis shall it be decided to allocate x dollars to activity A instead of activity B?" (Key, 1940). In battles between programs for funds, advocates of activity A are likely to use poor performance reports as a rationale for additional funding ("we can't fix the public schools without more money") while supporters of activity B argue greater investment in successful programs ("WIC works; let's expand its funding and reach"). State officials who have implemented performance budgeting told researchers that performance information has not radically changed the character of budgetary decisionmaking, and that from the beginning they "expected budget reform to *inform* budget decisions rather than dramatically change them" (Willoughby and Melkers, chapter 13).

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Whether or not their governments have adopted performance budgeting formally, most examiners in high-performing budget offices do use performance data to help them understand their programs and their operational problems. They also use both output and outcome data, sometimes informally and sometimes formally, to analyze budget needs. Because they already collect performance data on an ad hoc basis, many budget officers see no special need to build large data systems to collect performance measures, and have little interest in allowing legislators and the public systematic access to all information. Meanwhile, less capable budget examiners may focus on financial data and ignore performance information, fearing that it will saddle them with responsibility for agency performance as well as agency spending.

In chapter 6, Virginia Thomas speaks for many legislative advocates for a smaller government when she argues that performance data can be a critical tool in budget cutting. In theory, legislators may like the idea of responding automatically with budget cuts when agencies cannot meet performance targets. In practice, however, they respond differently when performance data are used to challenge their pet program or spending in their district. When Ingraham and Moynihan looked at managing for results in the states, they found that legislators interpreted performance shortfalls as indicators of inadequate resources in agencies, and responded by increasing funding or reorganizing programs to address a social problem (chapter 12). In sum, in the legislative arena, poor performance is more likely to lead to funding increases than cuts.

Performance budgeting schemes also create organizational tensions between appropriators, who allocate funds, and substantive committees with programmatic expertise. For this reason, legislators and staff on appropriations subcommittees often resist the implied shift in power as substantive committees seek a wider role in performance budgeting (Bradley, 2000). These realities confirm the expectation, based on survey information from state officials, that performance measurement's greatest impact is likely to be during executive branch budget development, not legislative budget review and adoption (Willoughby and Melkers, chapter 13).

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Two technical issues also arise when implementing performance budgeting. First, the account structures of budgets — the frameworks within which budget data are reported — have been developed over many years to meet the needs of legislators and chief executives concerned about budgeting for specific programs, not about performance reporting. In many agencies, the program accounts displayed for budgeting purposes are not the organizational units with responsibility for delivering specific results. Meshing performance information with budget data may involve substantial realignment of existing budget accounts — a step that budget office and legislators and their staff often resist. Sometimes the problem can be solved by the use of crosswalks — tables reconciling old and new account structures. But creating those crosswalks may require considerable additional work by agency and budget office staff.

A second problem is that many agencies lack the kind of cost-accounting data that businesses collect as a matter of course. Without those data, however, analysis of unit costs for outputs and outcomes must remain crude and oversimplified, and the use of unit cost data in budgeting will be limited. Schick concludes that governments need to invest the time and money required to build the cost accounting infrastructure:

Performance budgeting failed half a century ago for many reasons, but one of the most prominent facts was the inadequacy of government cost-accounting and allocation systems. The lack of data on the costs of particular services made it exceedingly difficult to link resources and results....Fifty years later, cost accounting is still underdeveloped in the public sector....[F]ew governments allocate budget resources among cost centers, or distinguish between fixed and variable or average and marginal costs. These cost measures are essential for successfully implementing performance budgeting (chapter 3).

The Politics of Performance Management

As suggested above, chief executives and their staff sometimes worry — not without reason — that collecting and publishing

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performance information will provide ammunition to political opponents and legislative critics. However, performance data can also provide early warning of failures in agency management. With adequate notice, chief executives can solve some of those problems before they grow into crises, sending management teams in to fix troubled agencies, and reprimanding or replacing failing agency heads. Even the modest warning time provided by publication of performance data can be enough to elicit a pledge of effective response. When the press reported on shortfalls in several key performance measures in a Mayor's Management Report, Rudolph Giuliani's promise of quick action dominated the coverage, not the failure to meet his management goals.⁷

Forceful governors and mayors should be able to use performance management systems to their advantage by monitoring key initiatives more systematically. Successful implementation of a performance management system also provides evidence of a chief executive's skills as a manager and deflects criticism from management watchdogs like the Government Performance Project, headquartered at Syracuse University's Maxwell School (Ingraham and Moynihan, 12).

Less dramatically, the publication of performance data can sharpen differences over programs and their goals that were blurred when debate focused on funding instead of results. Adding performance goals and data to the budget debate may make timely agreement on the compromises required to get budgets adopted more difficult. In Florida, for example, discussion of performance funding formulae for community colleges provoked a sharp debate over goals for those schools in particular and higher education in general. These disagreements may be useful in principle but are painful in practice.

Next Steps in Implementing GPRA⁸

Since the passage of the Government Performance and Results Act in 1993, executive branch agencies in the federal government have been working their way through many of the problems state and local governments faced as they implemented PM systems. Although

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varied across agencies, the impact of the Results Act has generally been positive. Like states and local governments, the federal government has seen greater success in developing and using performance measures and targets for services that agencies deliver directly, and where government action is the primary factor in achieving expected outcomes. Among federal agencies that meet those criteria, several have produced serious plans and thoughtful performance measures. A smaller number of program areas have documented real improvements in performance.⁹ In chapter 7, Broadnax and Conway describe management improvements in the Social Security Administration, an agency with clear responsibility for the delivery of checks and related eligibility activities.

As governor of Texas, George W. Bush worked with a performance management system that is in many ways better developed than GPRA. His MBA-trained management style seems to mesh well with performance management, and as president he has said that he expects to set targets for his executives and hold them accountable. Thus, the GPRA apparatus could be a useful tool for the new president as he establishes his goals and measures progress toward achieving them.

Over the next few years, however, the federal government must steer carefully around pitfalls to realize its goals of improved accountability, better management, and more informed decision making. The government faces particularly daunting problems in measuring and managing performance in federally funded programs implemented at the state or local level or by independent contractors.

Fostering Accountability

The Results Act requires the federal government to compile detailed performance data, program by program, for each agency. Some interest groups may welcome systematic data tracking the programs of importance to them. Others may find those data threatening. But in either case, interest groups, agency personnel, and congressional staff members responsible for individual programs are likely to pay close attention to performance. As annual

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performance reports provide more and more complete data and GAO helps digest and display those data, Congress will begin to use this timely information in its oversight activities. On the agency side, many program managers hope that regular reports required by GPRA will obviate the need for other special reports to Congress, especially those that require extraordinary detail on spending and activities. This trade-off — more flexibility in agency reporting and controls in return for high performance by agency managers — has been a valuable incentive in states like Florida where performance management systems are taking root.

From the perspective of the public at large, GPRA performance reports are a jumble of raw data. So far, little effort has been devoted to making those data understandable and meaningful. Given the volume of the performance reports, some staff units somewhere in the federal government will have to provide the public with a subset of those data and some sense of their strategic significance. This need could, in fact, present the new administration with an opportunity to design its own report cards, selecting those programs most important to the president. Such report cards could also provide management focus for White House staff and cabinet officials. The problem, of course, will be to keep these new summaries from themselves growing so large as to be unwieldy.

Another challenge for accountability will be measuring results in crosscutting programs, sometimes in different cabinet agencies, that pursue related goals and serve the same or similar constituencies. For example, Congress has asked planners in the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the National Park Service to develop common performance indicators for federal land-management agencies. While progress has been slow, cross-cutting programs could become a focus of OMB's mandated governmentwide performance plan — an annual GPRA report that has drawn little attention to date.

Improving Agency Management

Echoing the rhetoric of the GPRA statute, many program oversight officials, especially but not only in GAO, have pushed hard for

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agencies to use broad outcome measures to track performance. For example, the Forest Service has adopted ecosystem health — an end outcome — as a strategic goal. It has not, however, developed useful baseline measures of the health of its forest systems. In the field, foresters continue the work they have always done — cutting timber, putting out fires, maintaining roads, and assisting visitors, to name a few activities that are easily measured with output data. But front-line personnel find it difficult to see how those activities affect the strategically desirable but ill-defined outcome of ecosystem health.

Agency managers are the troops in any battle to improve results, and they are understandably concerned about being held accountable for outcomes that are so broad that they can be controlled only partially, if at all, by agency actions. To maintain linkages between their work and strategic goals, agency planners and oversight officials at the GAO and OMB are trying to devise detailed logic models that trace the relationships between higher-level outcomes and day-to-day output and process indicators. Performance plans and reports also need to include explanatory data describing other factors — in the case of the Forest Service, for example, weather and the economy — that affect performance.

To build the capacity of its agencies to improve performance, the federal government also needs to invest money and management talent in the development of new computer systems, in auditable financial statements for key agencies and other financial management initiatives, in human resource systems, and in the management of its capital assets. While such initiatives do not produce “results” in the programmatic sense, they build the “government’s intrinsic ability to marshal, develop, direct, and control its human, physical, and information capital, to support the discharge of its policy directions,” according to Ingraham and Moynihan (chapter 12). In Schick’s words, “Organizations must be transformed to make use of data on results” (chapter 3). An important part of that transformation involves investment in management systems, which lay the groundwork for future improvements. Agency performance reports should track the progress of these initiatives.

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For the first GPRA performance reports in 2000, OMB and the agencies were focused primarily on displaying baseline data. With those reports now available annually, overseers and top managers should concentrate on setting performance targets that agencies must reach to achieve them, but not so high as to discourage effort. "Reach targets" are especially important in programs areas where funding is growing. In a fresh look at the value of incrementalism in performance management, Schick suggests that governments establish their own "services baseline" and negotiate performance targets as projected changes from that baseline (chapter 3).

To reinforce the importance of meeting performance objectives, the federal government also needs to develop a wider variety of incentives for high-performing individuals and departments. As detailed above, government faces many problems in designing incentives, but it is important to keep trying. Such incentives might range from higher levels of pay for performance to organizational incentives, such as flexibility and access to agency-generated surpluses for one-time spending needs.

Measurement myopia also looms as a threat to the 1993 Results Act. In New York City, where performance management and measurement has been operational for more than twenty-five years, the Mayor's Management Report has lost its value as a cutting-edge tool and become for many participants a routine technical exercise. Effective management innovation, such as the New York Police Department's COMPSTAT system, detailed by Smith and Bratton in chapter 16, occurs outside of the MMR framework. New York City has tackled important technical issues, validating performance data and developing reliable historical series for baseline comparisons, and those areas still need work at the federal level. However, the New York City experience shows how easy it is for technical concerns over baselines and data to displace the operational goals of performance management systems, bogging down keepers of the systems in shortsighted disputes over measurement. Similarly, in Texas, another jurisdiction where a performance management system has been in place long enough to become mature, one program director complained that performance measures can "become the focus rather than an indicator of progress or circumstances" (Willoughby and Melkers, chapter 13). As GPRA ages, federal managers

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will need to balance the technical concerns entailed in maintaining and improving the GPRA system itself with more fundamental goals of improving federal programs and services.

Improving Budgetary Decisionmaking

Beyond providing feedback on agency performance, GPRA proponents hope that performance data will be used for budgeting in the executive branch, and for resource allocation in Congress. However, this hope will be difficult to realize, based on experience with performance budgeting at other levels of government.

Budgeting for Results in the Executive Branch

The GPRA legislation calls for OMB to institute performance budgeting pilots, using performance data linked to budgeted resources in a limited number of program areas. OMB has been slow to implement this provision. This caution is neither surprising nor unwarranted. Careful students of performance budgeting in the states — held up as models to the federal government — have found that “state government applications of performance-based budgeting systems are complicated, incomplete and still evolving; each system is different, and implementation strategies and successes are varied” (Willoughby and Melkers, chapter 13). Moreover, even though all but three states report that they use performance budgeting, more pointed inquiries reveal that their use of performance data for budgeting is actually quite limited. Researchers at the Government Performance Project found that “...in only four states — Missouri, Texas, Louisiana, and Virginia — are performance measures used extensively by the budget office (with 19 budget offices reporting some use)” (Ingraham and Moynihan, chapter 12).

Implementation at the federal level will be even more difficult. Federal programs are less likely to provide direct services and more likely to use independent agents — contractors or state and local governments — to deliver services. These characteristics significantly increase the problems with performance management and budgeting. OMB has made progress revising budget account

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structures so they link to performance measures, but more work needs to be done in the agencies on cost accounting before it will be possible to develop reliable data on the cost of federal services. This is a high priority of GAO Controller David Walker.

Attitudinal changes are also necessary before OMB embraces performance budgeting. OMB budget examiners know their program areas well. They already use performance data to track key programs, and we should not be surprised if they see little advantage in collecting additional data and making them publicly available. While GAO pushes for more use of outcome measures, budget examiners overseeing direct federal programs may agree with Schick that data on activities and outputs are most useful in budgeting. Indeed, Schick contends in chapter 3 that the emphasis on measuring outcomes has undermined progress in performance budgeting:

[I]n allocating resources, activities are an indispensable yardstick for decisions. I sense that if measurers had emphasized activities, performance budgeting would be more advanced than it is. There would less wrangling over definitions and more attention to allocations.

However, some OMB staff who oversee complex social programs know that measures of outputs and/or even outcomes cannot by themselves provide clear answers to more complex questions of program impacts. The point made in chapter 17 by Blalock and Barnow is essential and inescapable: for all but the simplest federal social programs, costly and time-consuming evaluation research will still be needed to determine the program's net impact, and policymakers and the budget officers who serve them will need that kind of information to determine whether program benefits equal or exceed their costs.

OMB is also the federal agency with the most painful memories of failed budget systems in the past, such as PPBS, MBO, and ZBB.¹⁰ While each of these initiatives had some value, they created huge paperwork burdens, produced data of limited use for presidential and congressional decisionmaking, and did not last.

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President Bush's experience with performance budgeting in Texas has undoubtedly taught him that performance data are no substitute for political preferences in allocating funds among program areas. But in his first budget message he has promised wider use of performance budgeting pilots. If Bush sustains his interest, OMB's pride in being responsive to the president will outweigh its haunting memories of budget systems past, and the agency will speed up its progress on performance budgeting. And OMB will respond with real enthusiasm if the new president actually uses performance data in making his own budget choices.

Even with enthusiastic support from the president and new responsiveness from OMB, performance budgeting is not likely to transform executive branch budgeting. State experience shows that performance measures have not been vital decision aids, and state budget officers are still lukewarm about their value, although the vast majority of state respondents agree that moving ahead with performance budgeting is "better than doing nothing" (Willoughby and Melkers, chapter 13). At the federal level, systematic use of performance data will help examiners focus on results at the same time they consider resources, and will make it easier to communicate to the public and to Congress the rationale for executive branch budget decisions.

Performance Budgeting and Oversight in Congress

Experience in the states does not inspire confidence in the willingness or ability of legislatures to use performance data effectively. Willoughby and Melkers conclude that legislators and their staff find performance data much less useful than does the executive branch, and that these data have had very little impact on actual appropriations levels. As outlined earlier, the states have primarily used formula budgeting — or performance funding, as Burke prefers to call it — in higher education, and the funds dispensed by formula have been quite limited. According to Ingraham and Moynihan, "In responding to the GPP, states explain that performance measures are often viewed with skepticism by state officials, and unlikely to be used unless performance information coincides with dominant constituent interests" (chapter 12).

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In Washington, the legislative agenda is much busier than in state capitols. Congress often is unable to come to timely agreement on budget bills, and professional staff are understandably concerned about further burdening the budget process. Staff members also worry that changing familiar account structures to clarify links to performance data will disrupt negotiating routines of legislators and interest groups. They also know that clarifying objectives sometimes can sharpen conflict instead of reducing it. In sum, Congressional staff members say that they fear that making decisions about performance in conjunction with spending will delay and overburden the budget process.

On the other hand, members of Congress can reasonably expect higher levels of performance when allocating additional funds to programs, and performance targets can and should be used selectively to highlight areas where programs are being expanded or contracted, or where major quality-improvement initiatives are under way. The use of performance data for basic oversight may spread, beginning with new or priority programs and expanding into other areas.

If the use of performance data takes hold in Congress, members and their staff should — and certainly will — resist asking too much from performance data when reviewing complex programs. By definition, performance measures are relatively simple, collected frequently, and comparatively inexpensive to produce. To make more definitive judgments about the long-term impact of complex initiatives, Congress will still need additional data from evaluation research.

Members of Congress are likely to use performance data in key program areas to focus and inform bargaining and negotiation, not to determine funding levels. With state experience reinforcing the concerns of congressional staff, GPRA proponents should be neither surprised nor discouraged if Congress fails to move quickly to make extensive use of performance data in its budgeting routines.

Performance Management in the Intergovernmental Arena

Success stories in implementing GPRA stem from federal agencies that deliver services directly. However, in many important domestic program areas, ranging from education and welfare to highways and urban development, the federal government provides the funds but states and local governments deliver the services. Much less progress has occurred in measuring and managing performance in these areas.

In the past, a decision not to require strict and detailed accountability has often allowed Congress to reach agreement in intergovernmental programs. Sometimes that decision took the form of allowing freedom to experiment at the state and local level – in the legislation implementing welfare reform, for example. Sometimes – in education, for example – such an approach has reflected the relatively small share of federal funding in the program area. When the federal government doesn't really pay the piper, it is hard to see how it can call the tune. Sometimes the decision not to try to measure and manage program performance may signify a realistic judgment about the problems likely to be encountered in collecting data from systems and agents not under the federal government's direct control. The chapters on welfare reform by Boyer and Lawrence and by Fossett, Gais, and Thompson highlight these difficulties.

Other intergovernmental programs have encountered similar problems. In chapter 10, David Wright sums up his analysis of HUD's efforts, initiated with some enthusiasm, to manage performance in the Empowerment Zone program:

Taken as a whole, this review of benchmarking in the Zone program serves as something of a cautionary tale. The story helps illustrate how difficult it can be to implement seemingly straightforward performance measurement systems for actually quite complex, multi-level community development interventions; how important it is to try; and how such efforts in the future may be improved.

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When federal funds are cut back, the government has often consolidated categorical programs into block grants, which allow states and localities greater discretion in the use of federal funds. However, by definition, block grants create “problems balancing the flexibility of the block grant (allowing states and localities to meet their particular needs) with a desire for greater accountability for the use of those funds” (Radin, chapter 11). Incentives for high performance have sometimes exacerbated disagreements about a program’s intended objectives. For example, the TANF bonus program for states has drawn fire from critics of welfare reform, who argue that:

...the criteria that have been established [to track reductions in the welfare rolls and increases in work participation] do not measure the real goal of TANF – the well-being of children. They call for the establishment of performance measures that highlight child welfare, child care, Head Start, and other non-cash programs, rather than focus only on the employment behavior of adults.

As suggested earlier, a full array of performance indicators in broad social programs such as TANF can help avoid the problem of dissonant spillover – success in some goals, such as reduction of the welfare rolls, accompanied by failure in others, such as boosting participation in the Child Health Insurance Program.

In short, the use of performance data in oversight of intergovernmental programs has proven problematic, and intergovernmental PM initiatives have seen limited success. As Fossett and his colleagues put it in chapter 9:

Intergovernmental arrangements complicate virtually all aspects of performance management – agreement on key goals, the development of indicators, the timely collection of pertinent and timely performance data, the implementation of an incentive system (e.g., rewards for strong performers), and more.

Nonetheless, the growing emphasis on results in directly operated federal programs has increased pressures to develop workable performance measures and targets in intergovernmental programs.

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The problems outlined above will take center stage in debates regarding many new programs, beginning with President Bush's educational initiatives.

As the federal government reduced its staffing during the Clinton administration, it increased its reliance on independent contractors to deliver federal services. As Marschke's analysis of the Job Training Partnership Act (chapter 4) makes clear, it can be painfully difficult to devise measures that create incentives for independent contractors to improve performance without creating unwanted behavior. Like welfare agencies, contractors may find a way to meet one goal — job placements, for JTPA — at the expense of other goals, such as serving the most needy job searchers. However, the decision to contract out a program often reflects the hope that contractors will develop new approaches to solve old problems. This hope argues in favor of giving leeway to contractors and against the level of performance oversight that might be employed with directly provided services. Given the difficulties, federal officials sometimes settle for minimal performance data and easy-to-reach goals.

Pitfalls and Possibilities for GPRA

The overall aim of this volume is to strike a balance between the positive views of performance management advocates, who believe that GPRA will bring deep-seated changes to the federal government, and the negative views of skeptics, who see it as another in a long line of failed federal budgetary and management reforms. If pushed off the fence, I would stand uneasily with the optimists, believing that GPRA will lead to improved accountability and management in many federal programs, and that systematic use of performance data in budget offices can produce a more disciplined focus on results in allocating resources.

However, I also believe that the federal government will have to work hard to get full value from the GPRA initiative, and that victory is not assured. No governmentwide strategy for performance management will magically solve the difficult problems of monitoring the results of federally funded programs administered by state

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and local governments and by private contractors. Indeed, poorly designed performance measures and incentives can heighten disagreement about intergovernmental programs. Radin's conclusion about intergovernmental programs — that performance measures and approaches need to be carefully tailored for each situation — holds true as well for programs where governments provide complex services directly. For complex social programs, as Blalock and Barnow warn, even the best designed performance measures cannot answer questions about net program impacts.

For many, the use of performance data to transform budgeting is a touchstone for success of the GPRA effort. Schick is pessimistic, based on prior federal effort, concluding that "efforts to budget on the basis of performance almost always fail" (chapter 3). While most of the state budget officials surveyed by Willoughby and Melkers thought that the use of performance data in budgeting was "better than doing nothing," they did not report significant changes in budgeting methods or outcomes based on performance data. Still, my own experience in working with state and local budget offices suggests that they can integrate performance data into decisionmaking without much disruption, and that systematic use of data on activities and outcomes can bring additional discipline and focus on results to the budgeting process.

If we cannot expect executive branch use of performance data in budgeting to bring major transformations, extensive use by Congress of performance data for budgeting is even less likely. If the state experience provides lessons for the federal government, we should expect to see more impact from GPRA in improving management and accountability, and less in transforming budgeting practices and outcomes.

As GPRA implementation proceeds, its proponents must still overcome technical problems, especially those concerning the validity and reliability of data. They must also strive to measure outcomes without losing the connection to GPRA's important management objectives. But if GPRA proponents can steer around these pitfalls, they can continue to refine a tool that can help the federal government achieve several notable goals — helping decision makers consider results while they think about dollars, improving

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agency management, and helping elected officials and the public understand what the federal government does and how well it does it. Performance management may not bring revolutionary change in the federal government, but it should yield a reasonable return on the investment in money and time required to implement it.

Endnotes

- 1 Ingraham and Moynihan (chapter 12) argue for four goals, and Behn (2000) offers a much different and more extensive set of goals just for performance measurement.
- 2 See www.econ.state.or.us/opb/index.htm for the complete Oregon Benchmarks presentation.
- 3 The New York City Mayor's Management Report can be found on-line at www.ci.nyc.ny.us/html/ops/html/mmr.html.
- 4 I am grateful to Frank Mauro, one of the designers of KIRS, for his recollections concerning this initiative. Additional discussion of KIRS can be found in Carroll, 1984.
- 5 OPPAGA's reports monitoring Florida government can be found on the Internet at www.oppaga.state.fl.us/government/.
- 6 See GAO, 1999 for references to key reports in this series.
- 7 *New York Times*, February 9, 2001.
- 8 This section draws heavily on Forsythe and Nathan, 2001.
- 9 See GAO 1999 for detailed assessment of agency performance plans, and Mihm, chapter 5, for a quick review of performance reports.
- 10 See Posner, 1997 for a thoughtful review of these initiatives.

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