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# THE EFFECT OF THE GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE AND RESULTS ACT ON MUSEUMS

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by Susan A. Timberlake

Museums receive funding from a wide variety of government agencies. As a result, any policy change that affects how federal agencies account for their funds may affect these institutions. This article looks at the effect of one government policy, the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), on museums (and other institutions as defined broadly by AAM). The article discusses how the increased emphasis on outcome evaluation in GPRA, and from funders in general, will be passed on to grantees, and how they need to respond.

## What is GPRA?<sup>1</sup>

The Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) is a 1993 Federal law that requires every government agency to:

- 1) Clearly define its mission
- 2) Establish long-term strategic goals and a strategic plan
- 3) Establish annual performance goals linked to its strategic goals
- 4) Measure its performance against these goals
- 5) Report publicly how it is doing.

Agencies were required to submit the strategic plan by September of 1997. With fiscal year 1999 budget requests, agencies were required to submit performance goals. By March 31, 2000, the first annual reports are due comparing actual agency performance to the set goals.

GPRA increases emphasis on program evaluation, the assessment of the manner and extent to which a program achieves its intended goals. GPRA requires agencies to focus not just on outputs such as the number of participants in a program, but also outcomes—how the program actually affected participants.

GPRA is an attempt of agencies to answer the question, “How do we know that our spending has any value to it?” Focusing on results, service quality, and customer satisfaction is expected to improve program effectiveness and public accountability.

## GPRA: Part of a Larger Trend

Regardless of the particular effects of GPRA, there is an overall trend toward more outcomes-based evaluation in the nonprofit sector as a whole. Beverly Sheppard,

Acting Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), has talked to leaders of a number of foundations, and “they are all moving in this direction. They want to know what was the impact of what we [the grantees] did on the audience, on the visitors, in some numerical way.”

In December of 1998, the IMLS held a two-day discussion with heads of many different organizations, including several foundations, the American Association for State and Local History, the Association of Youth Museums, the American Zoo and Aquarium Association, the American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta, and the American Association of Museums. Together they are working on “making the case for museums,” by talking in the broad sense about data and accountability issues that are permeating everything.

Overall, Sheppard says, this increased emphasis on evaluation “is really going to have an impact on how museums do business.”

## Challenges of the Increased Emphasis on Outcomes

While many Federal grant programs have always required an evaluation component, GPRA will probably cause an increased emphasis on evaluation plans, and an increased expectation

for evaluations to measure outcomes, rather than just outputs. According to Sheppard, GPRA is “basically going to affect all of our grants.” Summative evaluation may take precedence over front-end or formative evaluation because only summative evaluation can be considered “outcomes-based” evaluation as the term is now being used in much of the nonprofit sector.

The overall trend toward increased emphasis on quantifiable outcomes will be challenging for informal education institutions, which typically emphasize individual, self-paced learning. Often, such organizations seek to affect visitors’ attitudes towards a subject, rather than trying to impart specific factual information. Such outcomes are particularly difficult to measure.

As Sheppard explains, “We rely upon anecdotal evidence—the quality, the feeling, the experience. How do you translate that kind of experience into something that

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can be measurable?" There are instruments to test audience satisfaction; however, the field may not yet have the methods by which to measure some of the more subtle but important effects that museums strive for.

A number of organizations are working to improve this, including the Visitor Studies Association. Members of the American Education Research Association (AERA) recently established a special interest group on Informal Learning "to further educational research in informal learning environments such as science centers, museums, zoos, aquariums, and nature centers."<sup>2</sup> The Museum Learning Collaborative, a group of researchers and museums funded by an IMLS-led consortium of government agencies, is working to further theoretically driven research on learning in museums. (Visit their website at <http://mlc.lrdc.pitt.edu/mlc/>)

Until significant progress is made in basic research on museum learning, applicants may be applying for grants for programs they do not have the tools to evaluate. Will this have an impact on how people structure programs?

Beverly Sheppard suggests that there are real dangers for museums with this increased emphasis on outcomes. The challenge, she says, is "How do we move forward maintaining what we do best?" She gives the example of a project on which she served as an advisor. According to Sheppard, a museum had developed a "stunning" exhibit and a very fine education program on how the African-American experience had been omitted from city's history. The exhibit was very provocative, and perceived as very successful. The project leader did not build in evaluation tools, however, so they hired an outside agency. According to Sheppard, "The organization didn't understand the subtle emotional aspects." They did [the evaluation] in school education terms, "looking at easily measured, fact-based learning outcomes." As a result of the evaluation, which said the exhibit was unsuccessful, the organizers retooled it to emphasize factual information. In the process, the exhibit lost some of its original essence, which Sheppard describes as "a real tragedy." Although the project was a historical exhibit, some of the concerns may be the same for other types of museums, which often strive to change attitudes, rather than only teaching specific facts.

However, AAM's Andy Finch was skeptical that changing demands for evaluation would affect the programs for which grants are submitted. He acknowledges that requiring evidence of the more subtle effects that museums

strive for might affect the types of programs applied for, but he thinks that program officers at agencies such as the National Science Foundation (NSF) have enough sophistication and understanding of the goals of informal science education programs and activities not to make unreasonable demands.

The increased emphasis on evaluation will also be a challenge because many museums do not have the staff expertise or financial resources to perform evaluations. Grants may be structured so that a component of the money in the grant will cover part of the evaluation procedure.

### How Will Museums Respond?

While there may not be much awareness in the museum community about GPRA, this may be changing. At the 1998 Annual Meeting of the Visitor Studies Association, Rebecca Danvers of the IMLS and Barbara Butler of the NSF presented a session entitled, "An Introduction to the Government Performance and Results Act, or How This Seemingly Esoteric Government Act May Impact the

Lives of Evaluators." During the 1998 annual development workshop held by the Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC), representatives from the National Science Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, Department of Commerce, and Department of Transportation discussed GPRA. NSF program directors said that they were putting new emphasis on summative evaluation due to GPRA, although successful proposals must also address the front-end and formative

evaluation elements as has been previously required. Sheppard expects the IMLS and other government agencies will do the same. The IMLS is currently looking at how to build evaluation into its own grant application process.

Regardless of whether the effect comes from GPRA or from an overall increased emphasis on outcome-based evaluations, museums and other facilities will have to respond. "Museums are going to have to get much more savvy in leadership and management and the development of strategic planning," says Sheppard. She sees a potential role for nonprofit boards in outcomes-based evaluation, "in terms of strategic planning and assessing how well the organization is doing in meeting its goals." Building in accountability is going to take more time and more focus than in the past.

Sheppard and Rebecca Danvers, IMLS Director of Re-

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## EFFECT OF GPRA ON MUSEUMS (CONT.)

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search and Technology, have been talking about GPRA whenever they attend museum meetings. The IMLS will probably use their website to deliver information about evaluation. They have also held workshops on the subject, and will probably do more of this.

Museums are going to need even more people who are real experts in doing evaluation. Museum staff will have to learn about evaluation tools such as focus groups, surveys, and exit interviews, and there will be increased demand for the expertise of members of organizations such as VSA and CARE. Museums needing to do evaluations may want to collaborate with university researchers in departments of psychology, sociology, museum studies, and education.

### Benefits of GPRA to Museums

In addition to the increased emphasis on evaluation, there may be a number of other effects of GPRA, according to AAM's Andy Finch. For example, largely as a result of GPRA, IMLS is talking about collecting information in a more systematic way in order to be able to demonstrate their impact on the museum field. This is a major step for museums, because there is currently no single source of information on the field. If real information is collected on a sustained basis about issues like salary, attendance, and collections, Finch thinks this will be a real benefit from a management standpoint.

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### Conclusion

The Government Performance and Results Act will have a far-ranging impact on museums. Museums will have to develop the internal staff expertise to perform outcome-based evaluations, or turn to outside consultants for help. Until researchers develop a better understanding of learning in museums and evaluators use this knowledge to develop additional tools for measuring the impact of museums, the increased demand for evaluation may also

impact the type of programs developed, or the way these programs are described in grant applications. While there is a danger that the subtle nature of museum learning experiences may be overlooked in the short term, in the long term museums will likely become stronger and more effective. Most importantly, museums can not afford to ignore GPRA, for, as Beverly Sheppard of the IMLS says, "It's not going to go away."

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> The discussion in this section is adapted from a presentation at the 1998 Visitor Studies Association Annual Meeting: "An Introduction to the Government Performance and Results Act: A Perspective from IMLS and NSF," Barbara Butler and Rebecca Danvers.

<sup>2</sup> AERA Informal Learning SIG web site, <http://darwin.sesp.nwu.edu/informal/>

## ***Words from the Past...Wisdom for Today*** ***A Museum Flashback to 1939***

These excerpts are from *The Museum in America*, by Laurence Vail Coleman, Director of the American Association of Museums, published in 1939.

*"...no other institution besides the museum calls upon people to learn standing up" (p. 277).*

*"Anyone who thinks that exhibits 'get across' should go along with members of the public for awhile and watch what they do" (p. 280).*

*"One of the most hopeful recent signs of better exhibition is the growing inclination to study visitors' reactions to different arrangements" (p. 272).*