

# Learning agendas: Motivation, engagement, and potential

Kathryn Newcomer<sup>1</sup>  | Karol Olejniczak<sup>2</sup>  | Nicholas Hart<sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration, The George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA

<sup>2</sup>SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw, Poland

<sup>3</sup>The Data Foundation, Washington, DC, USA

## Correspondence

Kathryn Newcomer, Professor, Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration, The George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA.  
Email: [kathryn.newcomer@gmail.com](mailto:kathryn.newcomer@gmail.com)

## Abstract

In 2017, the U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking recommended that federal agencies produce strategic plans focused on research and evaluation, referred to as learning agendas. This requirement was later incorporated into the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act) for the 24 largest federal agencies. Prior to the Evidence Act, only a few federal agencies had experimented with learning agendas, a relatively new concept in the evaluation literature. Learning agendas hold potential for supporting organizational strategic planning that focuses on the generation of relevant knowledge for decision-makers, organizational leaders, and stakeholders. An inclusively- and strategically-developed learning agenda provides a list of important questions as well as plans for addressing the questions, balancing the interests, informational needs, and time horizons for different organizational decision-makers. We draw upon the policy design and the evaluation capacity building literature, our analysis of existing learning agendas, and interviews with federal evaluation leaders who guided their development to describe how the process of developing a learning agenda can support intentional learning and impactful evaluation practice within public agencies. Our work should contribute to the development of both theory and practice regarding the implementation of the new expectation to produce learning agendas in federal agencies that contribute to the increased use of evaluation and evidence in policymaking.

The authors thank the William T. Grant Foundation for funding for open access.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2022 The Authors. *New Directions for Evaluation* published by American Evaluation Association and Wiley Periodicals LLC.

## INTRODUCTION

Leaders and managers in many public organizations seek to use data and research findings to inform how they design and implement policies and programs. Challenges in aligning the evidence with decision-making needs arise when expectations between those producing data and evaluation studies and the potential users of the information differ. Decision-makers need information at the point that decisions are made, which may not align with the availability of different types of data or studies, the scope of the existing information, or the specificity needed to address a particular topic (Weiss, 1998). Calibrating data and evidence availability with real-time pressures, substantive coverage, and alignment to the specific questions or topics demanded is key to ensuring that relevant information is available for decision-makers when it can also be useful and therefore used.

Learning agendas present a potential tool for supporting organizational strategic planning that focuses specifically on the generation of relevant knowledge for decision-makers, organizational leaders, and stakeholders. A learning agenda is sometimes described as a strategic plan for research and evaluation activities, but it can be much more than that in practice (Nightingale et al., 2018). An inclusively- and strategically-developed learning agenda provides a list of important questions along with plans for addressing the questions while balancing the interests, informational needs, and time horizons for different organizational decision-makers. An effectively developed learning agenda, sometimes called an evidence-building plan, can present a coherent strategy for recognizing and prioritizing approaches to fill unmet information gaps and build bridges between evidence producers and potential evidence users in organizations.

A recommendation for U.S. federal agencies to develop learning agendas gained traction when it appeared in the 2017 report of the U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking. The Evidence Commission's recommendation was included as a legal requirement for the 24 largest federal agencies in the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act) that was enacted in January 2019. The Evidence Act codified the value of evaluation as an essential practice for program improvement, and prioritized building capacity for evaluation by requiring the designation of Evaluation Officers throughout the federal government, as well as the development of evaluation standards, agency Annual Evaluation Plans, and agency learning agendas in large federal agencies. Thus, developing and publicly sharing learning agendas is now an aspect of evaluation policy in the federal government. However, the requirement is new, and the first mandated learning agendas will not be available to the public until 2022. Furthermore, only a few federal agencies had been experimenting with learning agendas prior to their becoming a legal requirement. For most agencies, producing a learning agenda is a new and potentially difficult task. Thus far, learning agendas have rarely been discussed in the evaluation literature since they are relatively new and there are still few practical applications.

In this chapter, we draw upon the policy design literature and the evaluation capacity building (ECB) literature to describe how the processes employed to develop learning agendas can provide a valuable opportunity to support intentional learning and impactful evaluation practice in public agencies. We adopt a policy design conceptual lens to review initial and emerging practices for effectively developing learning agendas. We have analyzed federal agency learning agendas and interviewed agency evaluation leaders who have been involved with developing learning agendas. We have researched how contextual differences across agencies have been accounted for when learning agendas have been developed. Our work should contribute to the development of both theory and practice regarding the implementation of the new federal mandate to produce learning agendas. It should

also enhance the impact of the learning agenda development process on the usefulness and use of evaluation within public agencies.

In the next section we clarify what a learning agenda entails and describe the current federal guidance and experience with learning agendas. We then review the relevant literature on policy design and ECB. Next, we describe promising practices for developing learning agendas and relate these practices to key concepts from the policy design and ECB literatures. We draw upon existing U.S. federal experience to offer guidance on how to design a learning agenda development process. Finally, we discuss the potential benefits and potential challenges (and ways to address them) of implementing this new component of federal evaluation policy.

## Learning agendas and current federal guidance

A learning agenda, or evidence-building plan, is a set of prioritized questions about informational needs to inform future decision-making in an organization. The questions and analytical approaches to address the questions should be collaboratively developed by organizational leaders, staff, and stakeholders. The plan clarifies how and when priority questions will be addressed to provide findings useful to organizational leaders for informing decision-making and improvement of an agency's effectiveness.

A learning agenda can cover a broad scope of topics while also offering specific details about ongoing or planned activities to fill information gaps. A learning agenda can help prioritize organizational objectives, ideally in sync with the agency's strategic plan. Developing a learning agenda effectively entails recognizing and supporting key program stakeholders with relevant knowledge and perspectives relevant to mission achievement. The agenda delineates a specific, priority set of short- and long-term questions about policies, activities, or services and may focus on the measurement of both implementation and the attainment of anticipated outcomes. A learning agenda should identify the data, methods, and resources needed to either gather relevant evidence or produce new evidence to address the questions. The agenda also provides a transparent opportunity for ongoing feedback on knowledge needs and even, when appropriate, reprioritization of those information needs to reflect emerging issues.

In sum, developing a learning agenda is a strategic approach for producing a meaningful, stakeholder-informed plan for how organizational decision-makers work together to develop key questions and learn how those evidence-building priorities will be specifically and systematically addressed. In turn, the organization is provided with a dynamic evaluation and research agenda to determine what works, when, and how.

The Evidence Act included a requirement that agencies develop an agency evidence-building plan, or learning agenda. In 2019, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) provided initial guidance on the expectations for agencies to produce the learning agendas (see Box 1 for the legislative requirements and OMB's initial guidance). Subsequent guidance was issued by OMB in 2021 further outlining the role of the learning agenda process in supporting evidence capacity in federal agencies (OMB, 2021a). Thus, developing and publicly sharing learning agendas is now an evaluation policy in the federal government.

**Box 1: Evidence act requirements and OMB initial guidance for learning agendas**

Congress passed and the president enacted the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act in early 2019. Section 312 of that law included details of an evidence-building plan at the agency-level, as a requirement for the 24 largest agencies in the U.S. federal government. The section outlines the basic expectations of what must be included in agency-level learning agendas:

*Sec. 312. Agency evidence-building plan*

- a. *The head of each agency shall include in the strategic plan required under section 306 a systematic plan for identifying and addressing policy questions relevant to the programs, policies, and regulations of the agency. Such a plan shall contain the following:*
  1. *A list of policy-relevant questions for which the agency intends to develop evidence to support policymaking.*
  2. *A list of data the agency intends to collect, use, or acquire to facilitate the use of evidence in policymaking.*
  3. *A list of methods and analytical approaches that may be used to develop evidence to support policymaking.*
  4. *A list of any challenges to developing evidence to support policymaking, including any statutory or other restrictions to accessing relevant data.*
  5. *A description of the steps the agency will take to accomplish paragraphs (1) and (2).*
  6. *Any other information as required by guidance issued by the Director.*

In 2019, OMB issued initial guidance on learning agendas. The guidance generally provided agencies considerable flexibility in determining the structure, scope, scale, and format of the learning agendas. It also outlined an expectation that agencies submit interim agendas in 2020 with complete agendas in 2021, with the 2020 agendas focused on short-term issues (see Office of Management and Budget (OMB), 2019, p. 17):

Agencies should identify priority questions that, when answered, will have the biggest impact on agency functioning and performance. Agencies may, but are not required to, tie their questions to strategic goals and strategic planning. Learning agendas should include both short- and long-term questions of interest to the agency, as well as mission-strategic and agency-operational questions..., in a balance that emphasizes those of greatest relevance and priority to the agency. In identifying questions, agencies should move beyond high-level, broad questions, even at the enterprise level, to those that have sufficient detail to be answerable and useful.

Additional guidance to federal agencies provided in OMB Circular A-11 further specifies OMB's intent for agencies to review their learning agendas annually, but only to formally update them periodically:

... agencies must revisit their learning agendas at least annually and update them as needed to reflect progress toward meeting the agency's original learning goals and objectives, shifting agency priorities, changing contexts within which the agency operates, and emergent needs. Learning agendas should also be updated to incorporate, when available, the results of the activities an agency undertakes to answer priority questions. However, OMB does not expect that agencies will rewrite or draft a new learning agenda annually. Similarly, while part of agency strategic plans, OMB recognizes that the Learning Agenda can be updated independently from those plans. (See Sections 290.7-10. Washington, D.C.: OMB, 2021b. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/a11.pdf>)

Only a few federal agencies produced learning agendas prior to the requirement in the Evidence Act, including the Department of Labor, Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Small Business Administration (SBA). (See Box 2 for background on early use of learning agendas in federal agencies.) The positive responses that the Labor Department and HUD learning agendas received from agency management and other stakeholders were instrumental in popularizing the concept, especially within the OMB and then Congress.

### **Box 2: Examples of learning agendas used by federal agencies**

While learning agendas are now required for many federal agencies, several agencies developed the approach before it was required. Below are a few examples that also demonstrate the range of techniques that can be used to develop a learning agenda.

***Department of Housing and Urban Development's Research Roadmap.*** Initially launched as a process in 2011, HUD designed its learning agenda on a 5-year cadence. An update in 2017 that acknowledged the country's changing needs for housing also selected priority questions to address in communities from a list of more than 500 possibilities across eight core themes (HUD, 2017). The HUD's final plan from 2017 involved multiple strategies for stakeholder feedback and input and resulted in the identification of overall priorities framed around questions such as the following:

- How are foreclosed units affecting the size of the affordable rental stock?
- What are the most cost-effective strategies for lowering the operating costs of housing?
- Do HUD renters who live in neighborhoods with better transit have greater work participation?

HUD also incorporates in its published, public learning agenda information about existing partnerships, resource availability, and the status of projects (<https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/Research-Roadmap-2020.pdf>).

**Department of Labor Learning Agenda.** Within the Labor Department, each individual operating division develops a unique, non-public learning agenda that is aggregated into a department-wide plan by the Chief Evaluation Officer. The Labor Department's approach intends to specifically identify topics for the annual evaluation plan and the allocation of resources the agency receives annually to support specific evaluation projects. (See additional discussion in Irwin & Nightingale, this volume.)

**Small Business Administration Enterprise Learning Agenda.** Following publication of the Evidence Commission report, the Small Business Administration launched its process to develop the agency's first learning agenda, updated annually. The agency collected feedback internally through meetings and outreach, as well as externally through contacts to trade groups, think tanks, researchers, and a publication in the *Federal Register*. Constructed around the agency's four strategic priorities, the plan prioritizes long-term questions that the agency seeks to address. In addition to identifying relevant existing research, the plan also provides updates on the prior year's progress. It also includes specific long-term and short-term questions such as the following:

- What impact does lending have on long-term job creation, revenue growth, and export sales?
- What regulatory, policy, or process improvements could be made to help strengthen the SBA's oversight and risk management of its programs?
- How satisfied are small business borrowers or other recipients of the SBA's capital access products?

In addition to outlining the questions, SBA's public learning agenda identifies priorities for the subsequent 2 years that the agency intends to fund, relevant datasets that can be accessed for the projects, and relevant literature for reference by the evidence-building community (see <https://www.sba.gov/document/report-enterprise-learning-agenda>).

## INSIGHTS FROM POLICY DESIGN AND EVALUATION CAPACITY BUILDING LITERATURE

### Insights from policy design literature

In simple terms, policy design is the process by which policies are developed. It covers both technical analysis and the political process, an idea about policy goals, a causal model for goal attainment, and tools and methods to put a policy in motion (Birkland, 2020). Applying this lens to a discussion of an emerging evaluation policy seems especially beneficial because it forces us to clarify up front the goal, the toolbox, and the implicit theory of change driving the new policy.

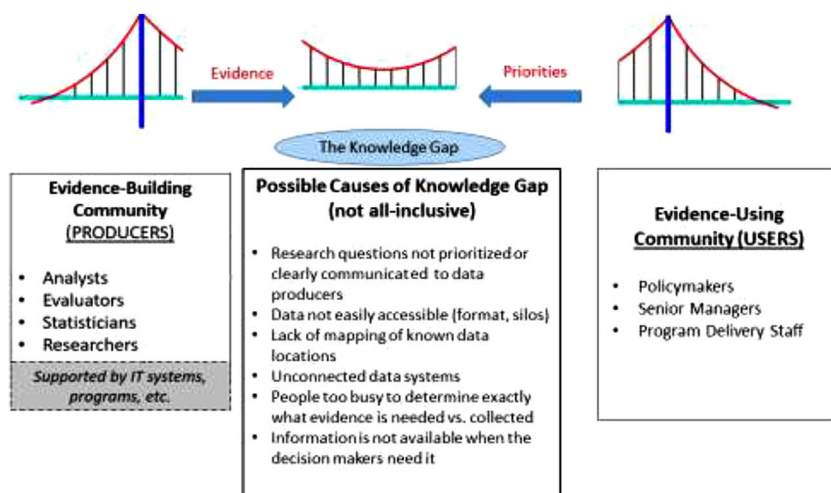
The idea of applying design concepts in the public domain can be traced back to the work of Herbert Simon. In his book on the science of design, he extensively discussed the design of social institutions and policies as vehicles for social change (Simon, 1996). As a topic of study, policy design emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in the literature on policy sciences (Siddiki, 2020). In the last decade, there has been a renewed interest in applying design approaches in public policy (Colebatch, 2018; Peters, 2018).

Within the expanding literature on public policy design, we can distinguish at least three different perspectives. Peters provides the first and broadest perspective (2021). He claims that policy design consists of three components – a model of causation (a conception of socio-economic dynamics that are producing the problem to be solved), a model of intervention, and a model of evaluation (a set of criteria to judge the policy and its outcomes). The second approach dominant in the literature frames policy design simply as a process of matching policy tools to policy problems (Howlett & Mukherjee, 2020; Howlett et al., 2015) and draws special attention to aligning interventions with behavioral mechanisms among the people the policy addressees (Jones et al., 2013; Low, 2011). The third approach builds heavily on elements of product design and proposes that methods, techniques, and quick prototyping logic be transferred into the public policy arena, especially into designing service delivery (Bason, 2014; Kimbell, 2015; Liedtka & Salzman, 2018).

Looking across those three streams of the policy design literature, we can identify five shared characteristics relevant to learning agenda development. These design characteristics are: (1) a problem-solving orientation, (2) a focus on understanding users, (3) an iterative logic of trial and error (experimentation), (4) a push for inclusive processes, and (5) a mechanistic logic of change. We discuss them briefly here, relating them to the evaluation policy context.

The first shared concept is a problem-solving orientation. Design is viewed as a purposeful attempt to address a specific problem. In terms of learning agendas, the goal seems to be bridging the gap between supply (producers) and demand (potential users) of evidence, with evidence use in decision-making as the key desired outcome of requiring a learning agenda. Learning agenda formulation seems intended to calibrate the production of evidence with the needs of the primary users of the resulting information. Engaging the potential users and the producers in the same conversation about organizational learning needs provides a bridge between the perspectives that may traditionally operate on different timelines or even prioritize different policy research questions (see Figure 1). There are many factors contributing to a knowledge gap between the producers of data and evaluation studies, and the potential users within public organizations. For example, analytical staff and program managers may not be in frequent contact, they likely operate in silos separated by bureaucratic layers, and they may operate distinct and even incompatible data systems.





**FIGURE 1** Learning agendas can bridge the gap between evidence producers and users. *Source:* Newcomer et al., 2021

The second concept ubiquitous in the policy design literature is user orientation. Taking users into account entails defining who are the targeted users or groups to be impacted by the policy, and carefully analyzing their needs and how a proposed policy will affect their behaviors.

Policy designers use a spectrum of methods and techniques transferred from human-centered design product and service practices. The key elements of the approach are first, to characterize the “customer” journey with main touchpoints (when interactions between service providers and users happen), pain points (when users face difficulties in trying to access the services), and gain points (elements of the interaction, or transaction, that motivate the users) (Kumar, 2012; Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011). The second element involves constructing “personas,” or profiles of typical users of services that capture their means, motives, and environmental settings; and third, developing a conceptual map to better identify points to leverage to produce the desired behavior (Stickdorn & Schneider, 2012).

Employing a user orientation with the learning agenda requirement entails asking who the primary users of evidence are. Characterizing the users’ profiles will entail identifying the decision situations when they will need evidence, and their preferences in terms of information content, form, and channels of communication. Finally, understanding the users should include acknowledging the cognitive limitations of the users, and trying to anticipate differing mental models and biases.

The third common theme in the literature on policy design is the need for a trial-and-error approach that entails prototyping, user tests, field experiments, and pilot development often executed in a lab-like environment (McGann et al., 2018; Tomitsch & Wrigley, 2018). Applying this element to the learning agenda development process requires reflection on the extent to which the requirement is received by federal agency staff to be a linear process that should follow OMB guidance, or an ongoing, iterative, open-ended effort to be adapted to agency context. The Evidence Act calls for a multi-year perspective for the learning agenda, with opportunities for refreshing the agenda as context and challenges evolve for agencies, thus there is room built in for refining and learning about the agenda’s development process itself.

The fourth common concept is co-design, and in the context of public services, this is also called co-production (Nabatchi et al., 2017). Co-design entails securing the



involvement of interested parties, or stakeholders, a concept well recognized in the evaluation literature. The driving rationale is that effective design needs to be adapted to a spectrum of different users. Inclusive participation helps gain insights into users' mental models, and thus better calibrates solutions to the needs. With regard to learning agenda development, decisions about when and how to structure active engagement of stakeholders are affected by political, bureaucratic, and resource constraints.

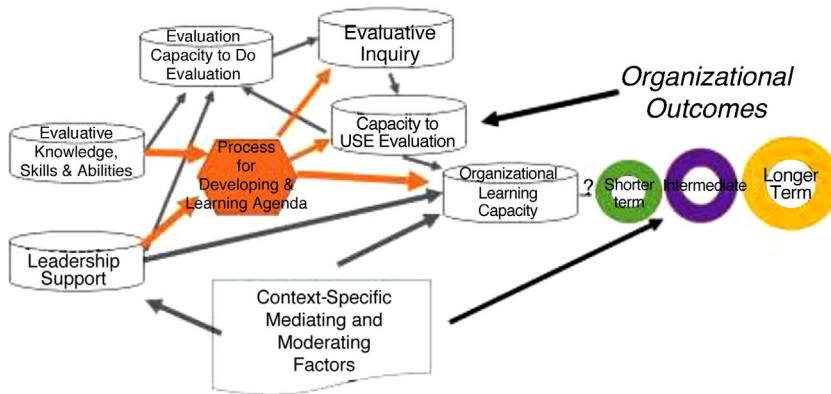
The final shared concept in the policy design literature is the need to take an explanatory approach to unpacking behaviors and analyzing the mechanism, that is, looking inside the "black box" of factors and interactions that, when triggered by policy, could eventually lead to intended and unintended behavioral consequences (Capano & Howlett, 2021). Analyzing the sequence of behaviors that are triggered by policies or programmatic elements is not novel for evaluation practitioners who use a theory of change or logic model, tools that are frequently employed to clarify how policies and programs are intended to work (Astbury & Leeuw, 2010). However, in the policy design literature scholars draw a useful distinction between first-order mechanisms (triggered by the intervention's application to affect individual policy actors or intended beneficiaries) and second-order mechanisms (effects that transform the context of particular policymaking, that is, systemic organizational and policy learning) (Capano et al., 2019). The distinction between first- and second-order mechanisms offers a useful insight for strategizing about learning agendas. To trigger the first-order behavior, stakeholder engagement can help to clarify barriers to using evidence by specific groups of learning agenda actors, and then co-create ways to address them. However, promoting the second-order change in the organizational setting is likely to be much harder, and for strategizing about that, we turn to a different but relevant stream of literature – evaluation capacity building.

## Insights from evaluation capacity building literature

There has been much written about the supports and processes needed to build evaluation capacity within public organizations (see e.g., Bourgeois & Cousins, 2013; Compton et al., 2002; Cousins et al., 2014). Organizational capacity and commitment to develop evaluative thinking and processes are clearly needed, and evaluation thought leaders have researched strategies and tools to cultivate these factors (e.g., Nacarrella et al., 2007; Nielsen et al., 2011). Bradley Cousins and others summarized the key factors affecting an organization's capacity to "Do and Use Evaluation" in their *New Directions for Evaluation* volume in 2014. They note that there are two key antecedent resources that they label "Sources of Knowledge, Skills and Abilities" and "Organizational Support Structures" (2014, p. 14).

Drawing upon the conceptual framework Cousins et al. (2014) provide, we envisioned how the process of developing a learning agenda can benefit from antecedent support and – if implemented in a meaningful fashion – enhance the capacity to do and use evaluation and develop organizational learning capacity. This is represented in Figure 2. In line with Cousins et al., we insert a question mark in the figure regarding the impact that capacity to do and use evaluation has on organizational outcomes, because the extent to which evaluation actually improves government performance is always an open question and is greatly affected by the contextual factors associated with a specific agency.

We now turn to a review of the new federal policy governing learning agendas, and evolving practices in federal agencies. We draw out promising practices for development processes and relate these strategies to guidance from the policy design and ECB literatures.



**FIGURE 2** Theory of change for learning agendas. *Note:* This model was inspired by the framework developed by Cousins et al., 2014

## Promising practices for developing learning agendas

As more public agencies are beginning to develop learning agendas, institutionalize processes, build stakeholder engagement infrastructure, and otherwise determine how to meaningfully accomplish the intent of the planning exercise, common themes are beginning to emerge about how to successfully develop and use a learning agenda. The exact process an organization uses to develop and then implement a learning agenda must be specific to the context of the particular organization – its staffing capabilities, history, culture, and context. Regardless of the organization, there are certain core steps relevant for planning a learning agenda development process and then implementing it effectively to realize the benefits.

## Pre-conditions to consider

Based on the experience of several agencies that have published evidence-building plans, before launching a learning agenda development process, it is useful to consider several **pre-conditions**.

First, senior leaders and program managers will need to identify and agree on mission objectives and goals. While clarifying goals can be supported through a learning agenda development process, if there is not a shared understanding or agreement about core mission objectives, then it will be difficult to reach agreement among leaders about relevant questions and how to prioritize those questions. Clarification of objectives may be accomplished through strategic planning and/or developing theory of change models for policies and programs.

Second, developing a learning agenda that will result in the provision of useful information will only occur if there are staff and stakeholders willing to use the process and eventual activities to promote learning in the organization. Agency staff interested in inclusively developing a learning agenda may want to first assess whether the existing support exists to either launch evidence-building activities based on the learning agenda or whether the learning agenda may be useful for other reasons, like demonstrating to senior leadership that knowledge gaps exist in the first place. Educating and persuading leadership about the value of a learning agenda will help inform which stakeholders to include in the development process and how to engage those stakeholders efficiently and productively.

Finally, agency leaders developing a learning agenda should decide on the organizational level for which the agenda should be produced. The agenda could cover a program, an operating division, a bureau, or an entire agency. While federal agencies are required by the Evidence Act to develop an enterprise learning agenda, how agencies implement the practice will vary across contexts. The Evidence Act recognizes the need for a department-level, or enterprise, learning agenda, similar to HUD's and SBA's approach that could be a single process and document for the entire agency. The Labor Department and the Department of Health and Human Services have employed a bottom-up process for generating learning agendas by operating division or unit, which are then consolidated and combined into a single, department-wide agenda. Some non-profits and external stakeholder groups have also developed program-level learning agendas unique to a particular project or activity.

## **Twelve key steps for formulating a useful learning agenda**

Based upon our research in agencies where learning agendas have been successfully developed and accepted, twelve key steps are needed to enhance the usefulness of the learning agenda development process to promote organizational learning. While we list the steps in an orderly fashion, this is not likely to be a linear exercise. Many actions will need to be undertaken concurrently, and even revisited and repeated. We align the likely drivers of successful development processes literature that we discuss here with the policy design and ECB literature in Table 1.

### **Consult leadership across the organization to secure buy-in to the development process**

At the outset of the development process, those leading the learning agenda formulation should consult with agency senior leaders and relevant program managers about all aspects of the process. It is especially important to secure agreement on core objectives, resources for the development process itself, agreement on staff time to support formulation, and resources to support evidence building based on the agenda. Senior leaders should also be asked to demonstrate support for the process by signaling to the staff or organization they are also participating in the development process and will support the implementation of the learning agenda based on a collaborative design.

### **Identify relevant stakeholders and consider outreach strategies**

Establishing a collaborative and inclusive process for developing the learning agenda requires efforts initially to identify relevant and core stakeholders within the organization, as well as externally. Stakeholders could include those inside or outside the organization who indirectly support or benefit from an activity, such as clients or beneficiaries of services, grantees, contractors, researchers, non-profit partners, industry, trade associations, agencies, and oversight bodies. Depending on priority stakeholder outreach needs, strategies for most effectively reaching key stakeholders will likely vary. Those shepherding the development of a learning agenda should consider a range of options for external outreach, such as the use of broad public consultation by notice or website, listserv, professional associations, webinars or meetings, advisory committees, expert panels, or other stakeholder convenings. Both internal and external stakeholders should be engaged

**TABLE 1** Desired characteristics of the learning agenda development process

<b>Relevant policy design/ECB concepts</b>	<b>Learning agenda development characteristics</b>	<b>Relevant actions needed</b>
Users, their profiles, and their decision journey	Decision-oriented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address actual programs and upcoming policy or programmatic decision-making points</li> <li>• Focus on problem-solving on strategic and operational level with an aid of evidence</li> </ul>
Users, their profiles, and their decision journey	User-oriented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on users of evidence, their information needs and their communication preferences</li> <li>• Pay special attention to program managers at the appropriate level in the organization who will actually use the information</li> </ul>
Inclusive	Inclusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include in the co-design both internal and external stakeholders e.g., relevant regional and state agency personnel, grantees, advocacy groups, and congressional staff</li> <li>• Ensure an open process where all participants feel comfortable offering input</li> </ul>
Problem-solving	Structured/Methodical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start with systematically identifying policy or programmatic elements and how they are supposed to interact</li> <li>• Address the same key points in each session, e.g., relevant strategic goals, key users, key decision points</li> </ul>
Iteration and experimentation	Interactive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage that program managers, analysts and other stakeholders work in diverse small teams on each specific task or step in the development process</li> </ul>
Organizational learning	Iterative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• View the agenda as a living document that will require adjustments and revisions as priorities and circumstances for programs and/or policies change</li> </ul>
Organizational learning	Top-down support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secure both visible and actual support from the top leadership in the agency for the development process</li> <li>• Include high level executives in deliberation processes</li> </ul>
Organizational learning	Grass roots input	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure the program managers who will use the information provided through evaluation and research listed on the agenda are actively involved and offer grounded ideas about information gaps</li> </ul>

in the development process to identify issues, prioritize topics, and build buy-in for the final product.

## Determine major decision points for the program or organization

Leaders and program managers in an organization are presented with inflection points at which major decisions need to be made. While some of these moments may be unpredictable, others are recurring based on established planning and decision processes such as budget formulation, policy development, and oversight or stakeholder meetings. Recognizing these key points for priority activities offers a roadmap to ensure that information needs can be prioritized according to decision timelines. If the intent of the

learning agenda is for evidence to be available before a decision will be made so that the evidence can inform the decision, knowing the timeline for the decision is a critical ingredient for planning the evidence-building activity.

### Identify the knowledge needs of users, including particular questions

The questions about program activities or policy implementation could be initially generated as an exhaustive inventory with input from internal and external stakeholders, or a more targeted list based on strategic and operational learning needs. Efforts to identify questions with short- or long-term time horizons will support further prioritization of questions based on an organization's key decision moments.

### Prioritize questions in consultation with power-holding stakeholders and senior leaders

Questions should be prioritized using clear criteria, in consultation with the more powerful stakeholders and senior leaders. For example, priority questions could be selected based on those that fill the greatest gaps or achieve the largest impact on performance. The leaders may also seek to have a mix of priority questions that simultaneously ensure progress along multiple criteria, multiple program goals, and lengths of time to produce the evidence. Prioritization may require periodic reviews based on the production of new data, identification of existing data, changing resource needs, or even evolving circumstances once a learning agenda is developed.

### Review existing data and evaluation studies to determine availability of existing evidence

Developing strategies to respond to priority questions likely requires organizations to also understand the breadth of knowledge already accumulated on particular questions. A landscape analysis of relevant descriptive statistical capabilities, research, evaluation, and systematic reviews, in addition to core data assets, can help minimize duplication in the evidence-building process and efficiently align existing infrastructure with emerging needs. Based on the existing research and evidence, questions should be reviewed to ensure that priority questions for further research are still the top priorities based on established criteria.

### Determine which data and approaches are relevant for addressing priority questions on the agenda

Once the questions on the agenda are agreed upon, individuals familiar with the available data and with expertise in research and evaluation methods should determine how to go about responding to the questions. Some questions may merit analysis using descriptive statistics of existing performance information or administrative records, while other questions may rely on new data collections, information collected by other organizations, or necessitate research contracts with external partners to apply rigorous evaluation methods to generate high-quality studies. The determination of approaches should be conscious of available resources.

## Produce a written draft of the plan for review, reflection, and agreement

While a draft learning agenda may be produced at multiple points in a process, a written learning agenda is necessary for the organization to conduct a final review and reflection with key stakeholders and senior leaders to gauge whether the learning agenda will be relevant and useful if implemented. Drafts of the agenda should be shared to elicit feedback from diverse stakeholders in a timely fashion to incorporate pertinent changes.

## Share the learning agenda with key stakeholders, and then publicly

Once agreement is reached with appropriate senior leaders, the learning agenda can be shared internally across an organization so staff members are familiar with the common, shared goals and direction. Then the learning agenda can also be shared publicly or with external stakeholders, particularly those who participated in the development process. Engagement externally may produce insights about additional resources beyond the organization that can support implementation, including resources from other government agencies, philanthropic funders, and research institutions. Sharing a learning agenda publicly can also address transparency and accountability goals, while also providing an external oversight mechanism to encourage and foster implementation of the plan.

## Apply resources to address priority questions

The first step in meaningfully using a learning agenda occurs with the sharing among stakeholders internally and externally. The second step is ensuring that resources are actually applied by senior leaders and program managers to address the questions and thus begin building the needed evidence. Agency staff may also seek out partners who can supplement intramural evidence-building activities, including contract or in-kind support. In federal agencies, under the Evidence Act, evaluation officers produce publicly available annual evaluation plans that outline specific activities underway with allocated resources. Other public organizations may find this approach useful as well.

## Periodically review the plan with senior leaders

The evaluation staff or shepherds of the learning agenda development process should periodically review the entire plan and progress in addressing questions with senior leaders. Active dialogue about the plan can support efficient allocation, or reallocation, of resources as priorities and needs shift. For example, if an expected regulatory action has been delayed by a year, then resources for building evidence relevant to that plan might be reallocated to more pressing needs.

## Revise the agenda periodically to incorporate new learning, evidence, and priorities

Learning agendas are intended to be dynamic documents, not static ones. As learning from evidence is produced and knowledge gaps are filled, the learning agenda should reflect new insights and ensure priorities are indeed reflective of current needs. In this way, the



learning agenda development process should be considered as continuous with a feedback loop that supports ongoing dialogue with stakeholders and organizational leaders, as well as a capability to periodically adjust priorities.

Regardless of the precise process devised, developing an appropriate process to ensure competent, relevant, and sufficient evidence are provided to answer the prioritized questions is a central component to successful development and use of a learning agenda. Notably, some suggest particular steps for a learning agenda that occur in a linear fashion. For example, Gallagher et al. (2019) describe an approach that begins with stakeholder engagement, then moves to question formulation and prioritization, development of activities, drafting of plans, and eventual publication (Gallagher et al., 2019). In contrast, the steps described above call for adapting the development process to fit the agency context and culture, and intentionally entail a top-down as well as a bottom-up approach to engagement within the agency.

Based upon initial experience in the federal government with developing learning agendas, and guidance from both the policy design and ECB literature, we offer the design characteristics of the development process that are likely drivers of successful development processes in Table 1.

## **Benefits of developing and using an organizational learning agenda**

The adoption of learning agendas has garnered support across some federal agencies because of the practical benefits that the process of developing the agendas may provide. The benefits also accrue over time, making the implementation of the agenda development process, and execution of the specific research and evaluation activities listed more transparent and internalized throughout the agencies. Based upon our interviews with staff from five federal agencies that have developed learning agendas during the past 8 years, we have summarized the benefits experienced. Key benefits include:

### **Building relationships across senior leaders**

The learning agenda development process typically involves collecting feedback from program managers and senior leaders engaged in implementation or decision-making activities about what they want to learn. For evaluation or analytical staff, talking to leaders during the learning agenda development process can be invaluable for strengthening day-to-day relationships with program managers and leaders that can help them support all types of evidence-building activities, in addition to fostering more collaborative engagement with the types of data and studies that are being requested. The intelligence the analytical staff secures from the program side can help them ensure that the information they provide can actually be useful – and therefore used – by decision-makers. In other words, collaboration during the development of the learning agenda can productively promote buy-in for evidence building through the relationships forged across an agency's program and analytical staff, like data analysts and program evaluators.

### **Institutionalizing the learning process**

Organizational learning is iterative and dynamic, not static. The inclusive and collaborative routine used to develop learning agendas – with feedback incorporated periodically and

revisions to the plan as priorities and conditions in an organization change collectively – allows for learning to be assimilated into organizational activities while planning for new and emerging knowledge needs.

## Educating leaders about evaluative thinking

Evaluative thinking, especially thinking through theories of change for policies and programs, has benefits for all aspects of design, implementation, and evaluation and is especially valuable for aligning program activities with intended outcomes. The process of developing a learning agenda can contribute to formulating a shared understanding and agreement on key goals, desired program outputs and outcomes, and obstacles to goal attainment. Because the learning agenda development process entails sense-making about specific data and evaluation needs, the process can support the integration of evaluative thinking by program leaders and managers.

## Prioritizing evidence-building resources

No organization has infinite resources to allocate to generating data, even in the best of circumstances. For many organizations, resources allocated to data collection, management, and data analysis may be constrained to prioritize direct service delivery or program activities. The learning agenda can help ensure that the highest priority, most important information needs of decision-makers receive sufficient and necessary resources. For example, agencies developing annual evaluation plans can determine from the timelines and questions included in a learning agenda how to allocate available resources across multiple years or across agency initiatives.

## Sharing thoughts and insights about mission achievement and progress across program management and analytical staff

Analytical staff may learn important contextual background about the realities of program implementation, and challenges that they would not otherwise have experience with, which helps them better frame their work. Involving stakeholders from across large agencies with multiple sub-units, such as the Departments of Homeland Security, Agriculture, Health and Human Services and Commerce, and/or geographically dispersed agency units allows staff to learn through hearing other perspectives about approaches to mission achievement.

## Educating program managers about existing sources of data or previously conducted analyses that they may not be aware of

When leaders and program managers bring up knowledge gaps, the analytical staff may be able to point out that existing data or studies are available to address the questions, given that the program side may not be aware of all existing resources.

## Calibrating information needs in changing contexts

In the real-world public managers grapple with constantly shifting circumstances and leadership priorities in a political, multi-cultural environment. Developing and updating a learning agenda offers opportunities to review and calibrate what information is needed to align information gathering to revised organizational goals and strategic plans.

## Recognition of inter-organizational information gaps

Employing a systematic approach to identifying information gaps may generate capabilities for sharing insights across siloed analytical units of organizations, or analysts, to allow for coordinating approaches to address particular information needs. As agencies identify strategies to promote interagency or intra-agency data sharing, for example, the learning agenda can be used not only to identify what relevant data are collected and managed by other agencies or units, but also to devise strategies to facilitate access.

Importantly, the creation of a learning agenda itself is not a guarantee that an organization will automatically increase the use of data across the board or create a learning culture. However through deliberations and the prioritization process, agenda development may help unite managers and staff across an organization to determine what data and studies are needed to help determine the extent to which goals are achieved and help them identify future information needed to make further progress.

## Potential challenges to developing useful learning agendas

There are many challenges to developing and implementing a learning agenda in an organization, especially for the first time. Because there is no perfect recipe for how to create a learning agenda in organizations, to best address objectives and goals unique to each, challenges should be carefully planned for at the outset of the process.

As with many planning exercises, there is a tremendous risk that mandates producing learning agendas in the public sector can result in a compliance mindset. Compliance-oriented activities tend to reflect those that are completed as a “check-the-box” exercise to placate oversight officials or partners, without any intent of meaningful engagement or use of the product. Ensuring that executives, senior leaders, and program managers are adequately involved and incentivized to participate promotes the development of a useful product.

As learning agendas are developed, there is also the possibility that, based on the participants in the process, the substance reaches a level of abstraction that makes implementation difficult. For example, the lack of clearly specified program-level goals to inform the development of an enterprise- or organization-wide learning agenda may mean that important details are lost in the process needed for framing questions to address the impact of specific program activities. At the same time, learning agendas may be perceived as “too big to succeed.” Both risks demonstrate why designing a development process with the right participants and with iterative feedback will promote usefulness.

Fortunately, there are existing examples of the plans and the practice at federal agencies that balance these constraints. For example, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), which is one component of the U.S. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has been developing very well targeted research and evaluation learning agendas for several

years, prior to the legislative requirement. Their task is to advise the HHS Assistant Secretary for Children and Families on “increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of programs to improve the economic and social well-being of children and families” (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/fact-sheet>). Through an inclusive engagement process, the OPRE has developed learning agendas that have strategically organized contracted research and evaluation work to inform decision-making in ACF programs.

Developing and implementing learning agendas also requires participation from a range of stakeholders and internal program staff. Some staff may be unfamiliar with the need or reason for engaging in evidence-building or learning activities. A limited understanding at the start of the process may also constrain how the development process unfolds and that combined with limited time availability of the staff usually create a substantial challenge. However, as noted above, the learning agenda development process can also be offered as an educational opportunity to engage more members of the program team about the role and use of evidence in all aspects of program operations. Furthermore, time constraints can be addressed with the aid of interactive design approaches such as an on-line design sprint (Newcomer et al., 2021). Project team members’ participation in developing the learning agenda process can also offer insights into aspects of programs that may present clear opportunities for substantial operational or administrative improvements in the short-term, providing salient success stories the program or organization can use to demonstrate the value of the process.

Engagement with stakeholders and program partners can be a challenge, even in the best of circumstances. Engaging stakeholders in a dynamic dialog about learning may require new types of consultation and engagement that avoid unidirectional feedback. Requirements in the Evidence Act, for example, specifically direct federal agencies to engage in multi-directional consultation with Congress and other stakeholders, suggesting that policymakers have an interest in being included in the learning agenda formulation. New approaches for collecting feedback from stakeholders could also include simulation or game-like workshops, which have been used in some agencies like the National Science Foundation (Olejniczak et al., 2019). However, agencies proceed in developing a learning agenda, agency staff must also weigh the consequence of non-engagement from stakeholders who might otherwise be interested in the process, and the effect non-engagement might have on long-term program support, as well as buy-in on the learning priorities.

Some program managers and staff may struggle to obtain resources to address learning priorities. In such circumstances, leadership might identify partners, or leverage external stakeholders for support to adequately address priority questions. Indeed, the sponsoring organization need not necessarily fund or staff the production of all knowledge relevant to the questions, as some questions may actually be better addressed by other entities or partners.

Realistically, there is a core capacity challenge that the widespread production of learning agendas will face within the evidence-building community, unless the community continues to grow. As public agency leaders highlight their own learning priorities, there may not be sufficient capacity or resources in the broader community to answer all questions or provide collective support within specified timeframes. In many ways this constraint further stresses the need for inter-organizational and interagency collaboration on shared priorities, especially when topics like homelessness, poverty, economic mobility, and public health are prioritized by many different laws, programs, and organizations at all levels of government and in the non-governmental community. Table 2 summarizes challenges to successful development and use of a learning agenda to promote organizational learning, along with some potential mitigating actions that might be undertaken.

**TABLE 2** Challenges to obtaining value from the learning agency policy and mitigating actions

Potential challenge	Mitigating actions
Organizational leaders view the policy as a “check-the-box” compliance exercise	Messaging from both the Executive Office of the President and Congress needs to reinforce the value of the process to the agency leaders
Focusing the questions at the “right” level - balancing the programmatic level versus organizational level priorities	Organizational leaders need to be involved up front to clarify expectations about the focus and scope of the agenda
Securing and sustaining engagement of stakeholders across organizational and regional areas	Organizational leaders need to be involved up front to clarify expectations about who should be involved and at what point they should be involved in the development process
Inadequate evaluation capacity to support the learning agenda development and implementation processes	Identify partners, or leverage external stakeholders for support to adequately address priority questions

## CONCLUSION

The requirement that each major department in the federal government develop a learning agenda, along with the expectation from OMB that other agencies and bureaus do the same, collectively presents a new and highly valuable evaluation policy. The way the agencies approach this task and implement the policy will determine how much value agency leaders and managers realize from the exercise, as well as the impact the development process has upon evaluation capacity and organizational learning in the agencies. Based upon the policy design and ECB literature, and on our research on the experience some agencies have already had with developing learning agendas, we offer promising practices for implementing this new policy.

We conclude by stressing four crucial points. First, it is not the format or content of the learning agenda (document) itself that will confer all of the policy value; the process through which the learning agenda is developed also matters. There are many benefits to be gained from a well-planned and inclusive development process. Most importantly, if executed effectively, the process can help bridge the gap between evidence producers and potential users of evidence to better inform decision-making in government and promote organizational learning.

Second, given the importance of the development process, there are ten essential characteristics that should guide planning and execution of the learning agenda development process. These guiding principles include a development process that is: user-oriented, inclusive, co-designed, structured, interactive, tangible, methodical, iterative, and inclusive of both top-level support and grass root input.

Third, context matters. There is no one-size-fits-all recipe for implementing the learning agenda mandate. Each public agency operates within its own ecosystem, with differing stakeholders, so the process through which a learning agenda is developed and used will need to be tailored to reflect key contextual factors and values. This is consistent with guidance from OMB (2021) about the role of formulating and using learning agendas to support evidence-based policymaking activities.

Finally, there are clear benefits to agencies from strategic and intentional efforts to implement the learning agenda policy to bolster both evaluation capacity and organizational learning within public agencies. The time and thought invested in designing an effective learning agenda development process will earn great dividends for both evaluation practice and use.

As federal agencies develop, adopt, and use learning agendas, we will also continue to learn about how to improve this process. Evaluators and policymakers alike must also be honest in coming years about the usefulness of the exercise in achieving the theoretical goals in practice. However, if the promise of the learning agenda is realized, the tool will provide a substantial means to improve governmental outcomes.

## ORCID

Kathryn Newcomer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1431-6634>

Karol Olejniczak  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7079-2440>

Nicholas Hart  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3541-4337>

## REFERENCES

- Astbury, B., & Leeuw, F. L. (2010). Unpacking black boxes: Mechanisms and theory building in evaluation. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 31(3), 363–381. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214010371972>
- Bason, C. (Ed.). (2014). *Design for policy*. Gower.
- Birkland, T. A. (2020). *An introduction to the policy process*. Routledge.
- Bourgeois, I., & Cousins, J. B. (2013). Understanding dimensions of organizational evaluation capacity. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 34(3), 299–319.
- Capano, G., & Howlett, M. (2021). Causal logics and mechanisms in policy design: How and why adopting a mechanistic perspective can improve policy design. *Public Policy and Administration*, 36(2), 141–162. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0952076719827068>
- Capano, G., Howlett, M., & Ramesh, M. (2019). Disentangling the mechanistic chain for better policy design. In G. Capano, M. Howlett, M. Ramesh, & A. Virani, (Eds.), *Making policies work. First- and second-order mechanisms in policy design* (pp. 2–13). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Colebatch, H. K. (2018). Design as a window on the policy process. In H. K. Colebatch & R. Hoppe (Eds.), *Handbook on policy, process, and governing* (pp. 131–168). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Compton, D., Baizerman, M., & Stockdill, S. H. (Eds.). (2002). *The art, craft and science of evaluation capacity building. New directions for evaluation: No. 93*. Jossey-Bass.
- Cousins, J. B., Goh, S. C., Elliott, C. J., & Bourgeois, I. (2014). Framing the capacity to do and use evaluation. In J. B. Cousins & I. Bourgeois (Eds.), *Organizational capacity to do and use evaluation. New directions for evaluation* (Vol 141, pp. 7–23). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.20076>
- Gallagher, D., Finkelstein, D., & McNab, J. (2019). *Promising practices from early experiences with developing evidence-building and evaluation plans*. Mathematica Policy Research. <http://www.mathematica.org/our-publications-and-findings/publications/promising-practices-early-experiences-developing-evidence-building-evaluation-plans-summary-report>
- Howlett, M., & Mukherjee, I. (Eds.) (2020). *Routledge handbook of policy design*. Routledge.
- Howlett, M., Mukherjee, I., & Woo, J. J. (2015). From tools to toolkits in policy design studies: The new design orientation towards policy formulation research. *Policy & Politics*, 43(2), 291–311.
- Jones, R., Pykett, J., & Whitehead, M. (2013). *Changing behaviours. On the rise of the psychological state*. Edward Elgar.
- Kimbell, L. (2015). *The service innovation handbook: Action-oriented creative thinking toolkit for service organizations*. BIS Publishers.
- Kumar, V. (2012). *101 Design methods: A structured approach for driving innovation in your organization*. Wiley.
- Liedtka, J., & Ogilvie, T. (2011). *Designing for growth: A design thinking tool kit for managers*. Columbia University Press.
- Liedtka, J., & Salzman, R. (2018). *Applying designing for thinking to public service delivery*. IBM Center for The Business of Government. <http://www.businessofgovernment.org/report/applying-design-thinking-public-service-delivery>
- Low, D. (Ed.). (2011). *Behavioural economics and policy design: examples from Singapore*. World Scientific Publishing Company.
- McGann, M., Blomkamp, E., & Lewis, J. (2018). The rise of public sector innovation labs: Experiments in design thinking for policy. *Policy Sciences*, 51(3), 249–267. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-018-9315-7>
- Nabatchi, T., Sancino, A., & Sicilia, M. (2017). Varieties of participation in public services: The who, when, and what of coproduction. *Public Administration Review*, 77(5), 766–776. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12465>
- Nacarrella, L., Pirkis, J., Kohn, F., Morley, B., Burgess, P., & Blashki, G. (2007). Building evaluation capacity: Definitions and practical implications from an Australian case study. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 30(3), 231–236.



- Newcomer, K., Olejniczak, K., & Hart, N. (2021). *Making federal agencies evidence-based: The key role of learning agendas*. The IBM Center for The Business of Government. <http://www.businessofgovernment.org/report/making-federal-agencies-evidence-based-key-role-learning-agendas>
- Nielsen, S. B., Lemire, S., & Skov, M. (2011). Measuring evaluation capacity – Results and implications of a Danish study. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 32(3), 324–344.
- Nightingale, D., Fudge, K., & Schupmann, W. (2018). *Evidence toolkit: Learning agendas*. Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/evidence-toolkit-learning-agendas>
- Office of Management and Budget (OMB). (2019). *Phase 1 implementation of the foundations for evidence-based policymaking act of 2018: Learning agendas, personnel, and planning guidance (M-19-23)*. White House.
- Olejniczak, K., Newcomer, K., & Hart, N. (2019). Designing learning agendas: moving beyond compliance. Paper on the 4th International Conference on Public Policy (ICPP4)., June 26–28, Montreal. <https://www.ippublicpolicy.org/file/paper/5d06ad4209dc9.pdf>
- OMB. (2021a). *Evidence-based policymaking: learning agendas and evaluation plans (M-21-27)*. White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/M-21-27.pdf>
- OMB. (2021b). *Circular A-11*. White House.
- Peters, B. G. (2018). *Policy problems and policy design (New horizons in public policy series)*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Peters, B. G. (2021). *An advanced introduction to public policy*. Edward Elgar.
- Siddiki, S. (2020). *Understanding and analyzing public policy design*. Cambridge University Press.
- Simon, H. (1996). *The sciences of the artificial* (3rd ed.). The MIT Press.
- Stickdorn, M., & Schneider, J. (2012). *This is service design thinking: Basics, tools, cases*. Wiley.
- Tomitsch, M., & Wrigley, C. (2018). *Design. Think. Make. Break. Repeat.: A handbook of methods*. BIS Publishers.
- Weiss, C. (1998). Have we learned anything new about the use of evaluation? *American Journal of Evaluation*, 19(1), 21–33.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Kathryn Newcomer** is a professor in the Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration at the George Washington University where she teaches graduate level courses on public and nonprofit program evaluation, and research design. She served as president of the American Evaluation Association for 2017.

**Karol Olejniczak** is a professor of public policy at SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw, Poland, and co-founder of the Polish policy research company Evaluation for Government Organizations (EGO s.c.).

**Nicholas Hart** is President of the Data Foundation and Chair of the American Evaluation Association Evaluation Policy Task Force. He served as the Policy and Research Director of the U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking and previously worked at the White House Office of Management and Budget during the Bush, Obama, and Trump Administrations.

**How to cite this article:** Newcomer, K., Olejniczak, K., & Hart, N. (2022). Learning agendas: Motivation, engagement, and potential. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 2022, 63–83. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.20495>