

January 2010

**EMPLOYMENT AND
TRAINING
ADMINISTRATION**

**Increased Authority
and Accountability
Could Improve
Research Program**



GAO

Accountability * Integrity * Reliability

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Abbreviations

EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
ERS	Economic Research Service
ETA	Employment and Training Administration
HUD	Department of Housing and Urban Development
IES	Institute of Education Sciences
NSF	National Science Foundation
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
OPDR	Office of Policy Development and Research
USDA	U. S. Department of Agriculture
WIA	Workforce Investment Act of 1998

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United States Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

January 29, 2010

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman
The Honorable Michael B. Enzi
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
United States Senate

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chairman
The Honorable Johnny Isakson
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety
Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
United States Senate

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

With current rising unemployment rates and the need for a more skilled workforce, it is important for the Department of Labor's (Labor) Employment and Training Administration (ETA) to invest in sound research that identifies the most effective and efficient ways to train and employ workers for 21st century jobs. While ETA traditionally has played an important role in providing job training, employment assistance, and labor market information for the nation's workers, the current unemployment crisis has made this role more critical. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that jobless rates have increased over the past year in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. In particular, several states have reported unemployment rates well over 10 percent.

As ETA's new leadership works to help the nation meet these economic challenges, it must have solid information that is supported by sound research to guide decision-making. Since 2002, GAO and others have criticized ETA for not focusing sufficient attention on its research program, particularly with regard to complying with congressional mandates, conducting policy-relevant research, and disseminating key

research findings in a timely way. In this context, we have examined the structure and processes of ETA's research and evaluation center in terms of the elements that leading national research organizations cite as essential to a sound program; that is, research independence, transparency and accountability, and policy relevance. Based on these elements, we addressed the following questions: (1) How does ETA's organizational structure provide for research independence? (2) What steps has ETA taken to promote transparency and accountability in its research program? (3) How does ETA ensure that its research is relevant to workforce development policy and practice?

On December 3, 2009, we briefed your staff on the results of our analysis. This report formally conveys the information provided during this briefing (see app. I for the briefing slides). In summary, we found that ETA's research center lacks independent authority for research, has limitations with regard to transparency and accountability processes, has not routinely involved stakeholders in developing its research agenda, and has been slow to evaluate the programs and activities carried out under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA).

- ETA is currently in the process of revising its organizational structure. Previously, its research and evaluation center, within the Office of Policy Development and Research (OPDR), was several levels removed from the Office of the Assistant Secretary and lacked independent authority for conducting research. Under ETA's revised structure, it is unclear whether OPDR will report directly to the Assistant Secretary or the Deputy Assistant Secretary. Furthermore, unlike the heads of some other research and evaluation centers, the head of ETA's research and evaluation center does not have the authority to set the research agenda, to approve requests for funded projects, or to disseminate research and evaluation reports.
- While ETA has recently made improvements to its research program, some limitations remain with regard to its accountability processes and timely dissemination of research products. In 2007, ETA documented all stages of its research process from project selection to dissemination. ETA also began coordinating its research process with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and renewed its practice of sponsoring biennial research conferences to address a range of policy and program issues. Despite these recent changes, ETA's research processes lack specificity, including specific time frames for key milestones and an established criteria for peer review. In addition, ETA's research program lacks an information system to track its research from completion to dissemination and does not have a mechanism to ensure that research findings are

disseminated in a timely manner. In 2008, ETA disseminated 34 research products to the public. However, 20 of these products, which had a combined cost of about \$28 million, were delayed for between 2 and 5 years.

- Labor, consistent with recent efforts of OMB, has taken steps to emphasize the value of research and evaluation, but ETA does not have sufficient mechanisms to ensure that its research can inform policy decisions. OMB currently has efforts underway to help agencies to enhance their research and evaluation programs. Labor also announced plans to create a position of chief evaluation officer and a new evaluation center within the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy to foster research relevant to policy. However, ETA has been slow to comply with a congressional mandate to evaluate WIA¹ and it also lacks a standard process and advisory bodies to consistently involve stakeholders in the development of its research agenda. Similarly, ETA has no formal process in place to ensure that research findings are used to inform strategic planning and policy.

GAO is making several recommendations concerning the structure and processes of ETA's research and evaluation center. Specifically, GAO recommends that the Secretary of Labor:

- take steps to ensure that ETA clarifies its organizational structure and OPDR reports directly to ETA's Assistant Secretary;
- provide sufficient decision-making authority to ETA's research and evaluation center regarding its research;
- direct ETA's research and evaluation center to establish more specific processes, including time frames for dissemination of research;
- create an information system to track research projects; and
- instruct ETA's research and evaluation center to develop processes to involve outside experts in setting its research agenda.

We used several methodologies to develop our findings. To identify elements of sound government-sponsored research, we reviewed relevant guidelines established by the American Evaluation Association and the

¹29 U.S.C. § 2917(c).

National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences. To apply these guidelines to ETA's research and evaluation center, we examined ETA's organizational structure and processes in terms of three basic elements of sound research—independence, transparency and accountability, and policy relevance. As part of this examination, we analyzed information on ETA's disseminated research to determine whether research products were released in a timely manner. (App. II contains additional information regarding the time frames of these research products.) In addition, we reviewed the research structures and processes of five other federal agencies' research and evaluation centers that had some of the characteristics that were identified by the American Evaluation Association and the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences to support sound research.² We did not evaluate the operation or quality of the research produced by the centers but rather the structures and policies supporting their research. We also reviewed relevant federal laws.

We conducted this performance audit from October 2009 through December 2009 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

We provided a draft of this report to ETA for its review and comment. ETA provided written comments, which are reproduced in appendix III. In addition, ETA provided technical comments, which we incorporated where appropriate.

In its response, ETA concurred with two of our recommendations and cited ongoing activities addressing the areas covered in the other three. Regarding our recommendation to clarify its organizational chart to ensure that OPDR reports directly to ETA's Assistant Secretary, ETA concurred

²In addition to ETA, we present information for comparative purposes on the following research centers: the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Economic Research Service (ERS) and National Institute of Food and Agriculture; the Department of Education's (Education) Institute of Education Sciences (IES); the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Office of Policy Development and Research; the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Office of Research and Development; and the National Science Foundation (NSF).

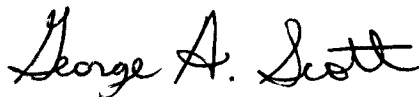
and has since clarified this point in an updated organizational chart that it has posted on its Web site. ETA also concurred with our recommendation to create an information-tracking system for its research products, noting that it has plans to implement such a system to track product milestones. However, officials did not provide specific time frames for implementation. Because of the importance of developing such a system, we urge ETA to give this effort high priority.

On the remaining three recommendations, ETA did not agree or disagree, noting instead its relevant ongoing activities.

- Regarding our recommendation that ETA provide its research and evaluation center with sufficient decision-making authority, officials cited ongoing efforts to provide recommendations to the Assistant Secretary and to collaborate with relevant program offices on ETA's research plans. We considered these activities in our review and discussed them in our report, but these efforts alone fall short of providing OPDR with the necessary authority to make key decisions, and they do not serve to insulate OPDR from undue political influence.
- Regarding our recommendation that ETA establish more specific processes to guide research, officials cited their work with OMB to establish time frames for disseminating research. However, specifying time frames is but one component of ETA's research process that needs to be addressed. Our report cites other steps that ETA should take including specifying the criteria to be used in deciding whether a report should be peer reviewed. In ETA's technical comments, officials noted that they will be updating their process steps in early 2010. As ETA reviews and updates its processes, we urge the agency to make the steps more specific in order to help ensure transparency and accountability.
- Regarding our recommendation to develop processes to routinely involve outside experts in setting its research agenda, ETA officials cited the various informal methods they currently use to gather input from outside experts. These efforts may serve to increase outside involvement in setting the agenda, but they are informal and ad hoc and, therefore, do not provide ETA with a formal mechanism to ensure outside experts—including researchers, policy makers, and practitioners—consistently have a role in setting its research agenda.

We are sending copies of this report to relevant congressional committees. In addition, this report will be available at no charge on GAO's Web site at www.gao.gov.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7215 or scottg@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff members who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.



George A. Scott
Director, Education, Workforce,
and Income Security Issues

Appendix I: Briefing Slides

Appendix I: Briefing Slides



Employment and Training Administration: Increased Authority and Accountability Could Improve Research Program

**Briefing to Congressional Committees
December 3, 2009**



Overview

- Introduction
 - Research Objectives
 - Scope and Methodology
 - Summary of Findings
 - Background
 - Findings
 - Conclusions and Recommendations
-



Introduction

A sound program of research and evaluation is essential to finding effective ways for training and employing workers for 21st century jobs.

Since 2002, we and others have criticized the Employment and Training Administration (ETA) for not focusing sufficient attention on its research program, particularly with regard to:

- complying with statutory research mandates;
 - conducting research to help policy makers understand what works and what does not; and
 - disseminating key research findings in a timely way.
-



Introduction

- Most recently, we have been asked to review the extent to which ETA's structure and processes promote sound research.
 - At the time of our review, ETA was transitioning from one administration to another, and
 - ETA's new leadership is formulating new plans on how best to carry out its research and evaluations.
-



Introduction

Leading national research organizations, including the American Evaluation Association and the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences—have identified a number of elements of a sound research and evaluation program.

Three of the elements of sound research are:





Objectives

Based on these elements, we examined ETA's research program to answer the following questions:

1. How does ETA's organizational structure provide for research independence?
 2. What steps has ETA taken to promote transparency and accountability in its research program?
 3. How does ETA ensure that its research is relevant to workforce development policy and practice?
-



Scope and Methodology

To identify basic principles of sound government-sponsored research, we reviewed relevant guidelines as developed by the American Evaluation Association and the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences.

These guidelines are suitably applicable to a full range of government research and evaluation centers.



Scope and Methodology

To examine ETA's organizational structure and processes, we:

- Interviewed agency officials, stakeholders, and experts.
- Examined agency documents, policies, and procedures.

To examine the structure and processes of other government research and evaluation centers, we:

- Interviewed research experts.
 - Examined agencies' documents and external reports.
 - Obtained information from GAO officials with knowledge of these centers.
-



Scope and Methodology

In addition to ETA, we present information for comparative purposes on the following research centers:

- The Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Economic Research Service (ERS) and National Institute of Food and Agriculture;
 - The Department of Education's (Education) Institute of Education Sciences (IES);
 - The Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Office of Policy Development and Research;
 - The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Office of Research and Development; and
 - The National Science Foundation (NSF).
-



Scope and Methodology

We did not evaluate the operation or quality of the research produced by the centers but rather the structures and policies supporting their research.

We selected these centers as examples because they had some of the characteristics that support sound research as identified by the American Evaluation Association and the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences guidelines.



Scope and Methodology

We conducted this performance audit from October 2009 to December 2009 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.



Key Terminology

- **Governing or advisory board:** This term generally refers to an independent body that provides advice to senior leadership on a range of issues, including recommending research priorities, helping to safeguard the independence of the agency, and providing critical links to practice and policy communities.
 - **Peer review:** A quality assurance process that involves selecting independent and knowledgeable individuals to review and provide objective feedback on an agency's research.
 - **Research and evaluation center:** The entity within an agency responsible for planning and conducting research and evaluations.
-



Summary of Findings

- ETA is currently in the process of revising its organizational structure. Previously, its research and evaluation center, within the Office of Policy Development and Research (OPDR), was several levels removed from the Office of the Assistant Secretary and lacked independent authority for conducting research.
 - While ETA has recently taken steps to improve its research program, some limitations remain with regard to its accountability processes and timely dissemination of research products.
 - The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and Labor have both emphasized the value of research and evaluation. However, ETA has not routinely involved stakeholders in developing its research agenda and has also been slow to evaluate the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA).
-

Background



Some Essential Elements of a Sound Government Research and Evaluation Program

Some elements of sound research practices that can help agencies' strengthen their research and evaluation function, regardless of key differences related to the agency's overall mission and the size of its research and evaluation center.



Background



**Research
Independence**

Some Essential Elements of Sound Practices

According to leading experts, to achieve research independence, research and evaluation centers should be:

- Located at a level of influence within the agency or department. That is, research centers should be located at a level that allows its leaders to report directly to the senior executive of the organization.
- Responsible for key aspects of its research program, including the design, conduct, and dissemination of research studies.



Background

**Transparency
and
Accountability**

**Some Essential Elements
of Sound Practices**

To achieve transparency and accountability, research and evaluation centers should:

- Release their research agendas to the public;
- Document research policies and procedures; and
- Publicly disseminate research findings in a timely and accessible manner.



Background

Policy
Relevance

Some Essential Elements of Sound Practices

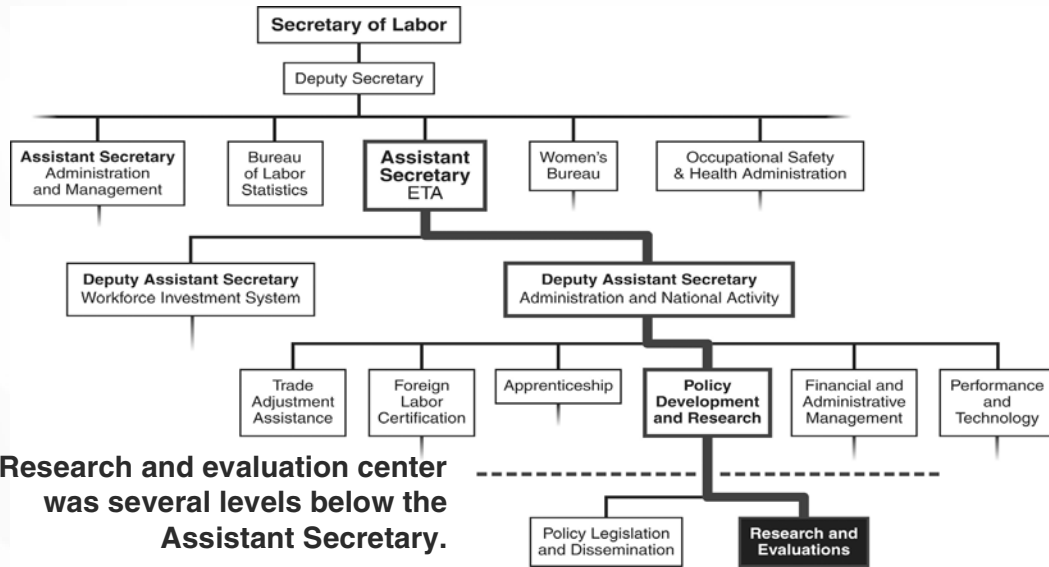
To achieve policy relevance, research and evaluation centers should:

- Use research results to both inform and respond to agency strategic planning;
- Focus research agenda on issues of importance to policy and practice; and
- Involve key stakeholders (researchers, policy makers, and practitioners) in planning, designing, and conducting research.

Objective 1

Research Independence

Previously, ETA's OPDR Did Not Report Directly to the Assistant Secretary



Source: Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration and GAO analysis.



Objective 1

Research Independence

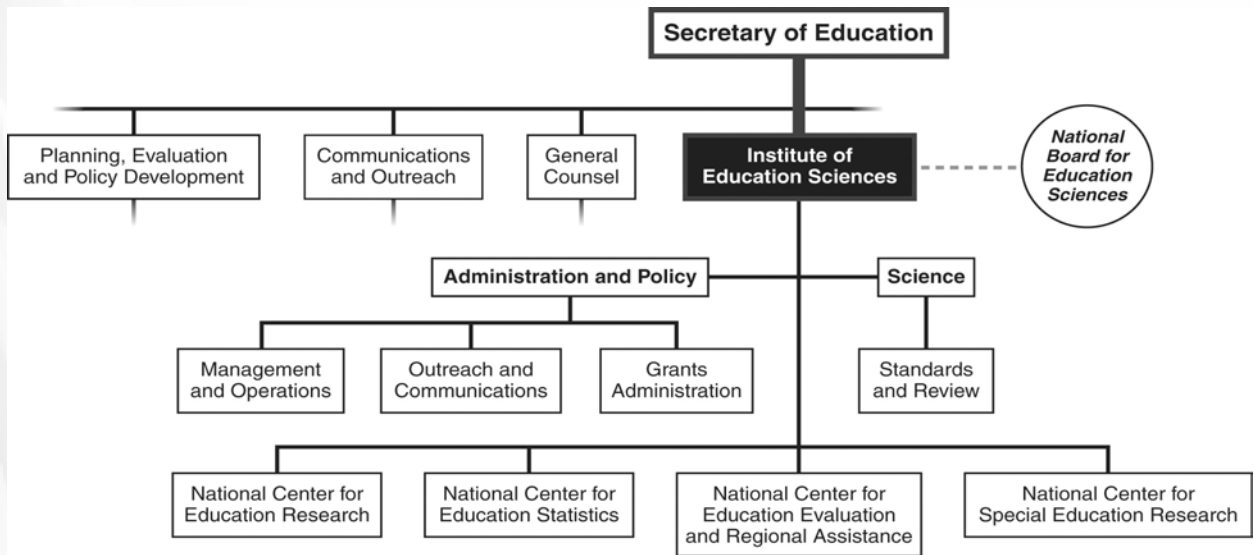
ETA’s Emerging Organizational Structure Does Not Ensure OPDR is Located at a Level of Influence

- At the time of our review, ETA was revising its organizational structure.
- Under the revised structure, OPDR is placed at the same level as several program offices such as the Offices of Apprenticeship and Trade Adjustment Assistance.
- It is unclear from ETA’s revised organizational chart whether OPDR reports directly to the Assistant Secretary or the Deputy Assistant Secretary.
- It is also unclear whether, as part of OPDR, ETA’s research and evaluation center is located at a level of sufficient influence within ETA.

Objective 1

Research Independence

Alternative Example: Education’s Research Center (IES) Reports Directly to the Secretary



Source: Department of Education and GAO analysis.

Objective 1



Research
Independence

**ETA’s Research and Evaluation Center
Lacks Sufficient Independence**

The head of ETA’s research and evaluation center lacks sufficient authority to approve:

- its research agenda;
- requests for funded proposals, grant announcements, and statements of work; or
- dissemination of research and evaluation publications.

According to ETA officials, these authorities reside with ETA’s Office of the Assistant Secretary.

Neither ETA’s research and evaluation center, nor the Office of Policy Development and Research of which it is a part, has a specific mechanism that could provide insulation from undue influence.

Objective 1



Research Independence

Other Agencies Have Mechanisms Designed to Promote Research Independence

For example, the directors of IES and NSF take the following actions:

- Implement their research agenda;
- Design funded projects;
- Submit reports for peer review and publish research, statistics, and evaluations with or without the approval of any other office within their organizations; and
- Work with governing boards on research agenda and policies.

Objective 2



Transparency
and
Accountability

**ETA Has Recently Documented Its
Research Process**

In 2007, ETA began documenting its research process.

- This documentation details the eight steps ETA uses to conduct its research, from project selection to dissemination, and the expected time frames for each step.
- ETA developed this documentation at the request of OMB.
- Prior to this, ETA did not have a documented process.

However, ETA has not made this documentation available to the public and includes little information regarding its processes on its Web site.

Objective 2



Transparency
and
Accountability

**ETA's Research Process Involves
Coordination with OMB**

In September 2007, ETA agreed to inform OMB of sizable research projects and evaluations.

- OMB reviews the statement of work for all projects that exceed \$250,000.
- OMB informs ETA if it wants to discuss the statement of work.
- OMB has requested that ETA alert it of research reports submitted to ETA for dissemination and not approved by the Office of the Assistant Secretary within 9 months.



Objective 2

Transparency
and
Accountability

ETA Now Allows Contractors to Release Products Delayed for More Than 9 Months

Since January 2008, ETA has included a provision in its research contracts that allows the contractor to release products submitted to ETA but not approved by the Assistant Secretary within 9 months.

However, ETA does not broadly advertise the availability of these products on its Web site to the public.



Objective 2

Transparency
and
Accountability

ETA Has Also Renewed Its Practice of Sponsoring National Conferences to Highlight Research Findings

In the past, ETA has sponsored biennial research conferences to address a range of policy and program issues and document promising program practices. This practice ended in 2003.

In September 2009, ETA renewed this practice by sponsoring a national research conference on “Recovery and Reemployment” that highlighted ETA sponsored research.

- The conference also assembled leading researchers from a variety of government and private entities and fields of research and practice.
- ETA has made the PowerPoint presentations of conference sessions available on the Internet and is in the process of making the audio and visual transcripts available to the public.



Objective 2

Transparency
and
Accountability

**Despite Recent Changes, ETA's
Research Processes Lack Specificity**

Time frames for ETA's key milestones are stated loosely.

For example:

- During the final review and approval process for dissemination, project managers are instructed to inform management when products have not been approved by the Office of the Assistant Secretary, and as a result, have stalled in the process for an "excessive" amount of time.
- However, ETA has not explained what constitutes an "excessive" amount of time.



Objective 2

Transparency
and
Accountability

ETA Does Not Have Specific Guidance for Peer Review

ETA’s research process provides for peer review but does not specify the criteria that will be used to determine whether a report should be peer reviewed.

ETA officials told us that the scope of a project determines whether it will be peer reviewed, but did not provide specific criteria.

ETA does not provide information on or guidelines for the peer review process, including how comments will be used and who will be selected to serve as peer reviewers.



Objective 2

Transparency
and
Accountability

ERS Reported That It Has Specific Policies and Procedures for Peer Review

According to USDA information:

- ERS conducts peer reviews of its reports and has established review guidelines, including criteria for selecting qualified peer reviewers.
- Each report is subjected to both internal and formal, independent, external peer review.
- ERS requires thorough review of data products by knowledgeable staff prior to dissemination.



Objective 2

Transparency
and
Accountability

ETA Lacks a System to Track Research Progress

ETA has not established an information system to track its research products from completion to dissemination.

- As a result, ETA is unable to track the status of products and determine which products are delayed and where in the process they are delayed.
- Without a tracking system, it is difficult for ETA to determine if it is following its processes or complying with established time frames.

Objective 2



Transparency
and
Accountability

**ETA Has Not Consistently
Disseminated Research Findings
in a Timely Manner**

ETA disseminated 34 research products to the public in 2008.

- Twenty of these products had been waiting 2 to 5 years for approval. (See app. II for information on report dissemination time frames.)
- ETA officials attributed the delays to inadequate methodologies and poorly written products. However, ETA had previously agreed to these methodologies at design and reviewed and approved earlier drafts of these reports.
- Presently ETA is reviewing its procedures to identify areas where it can obtain organizational buy-in earlier in the process.



Objective 2

Transparency
and
Accountability

Dissemination Delays Could Have Cost, Policy, and Practice Implications

- Most of ETA's sponsored research whose publication was delayed until 2008 were evaluations of workforce development strategies.
- The combined cost of the 20 delayed research products was about \$28 million.
- Due to the delays, findings from these studies could have a limited impact in influencing policy and practice.
 - Delayed products covered a range of topics including evaluations of labor exchanges in the one-stop delivery system, the youth offender demonstration project, and workforce development in rural areas.



Objective 2

Transparency
and
Accountability

ETA's Dissemination of Research Findings Is Limited

ETA's dissemination of research findings is largely limited to postings on its Web site and consists of research and evaluation reports that it has sponsored.

ETA also issues e-mail advisories to notify its subscribers of newly released research publications.

ETA has not used dissemination strategies, such as the use of clearinghouses, to more broadly disseminate its research.



Objective 2

Transparency
and
Accountability

HUD Disseminates Its Research, including Data Sets, through Clearinghouses and a Dedicated Web Site

According to department information:

- HUD uses a dedicated Web site to disseminate information that it and others have collected on housing issues, including housing market trends, economic and demographic data, housing finance, and energy and resource-efficient housing designs and construction.
- It has two clearinghouses that provide (1) information on state and local regulatory reform strategies to support affordable housing and (2) access to HUD-sponsored research and publications.
- HUD also makes data sets collected for both research and administrative purposes routinely available to the public.



Objective 2

Transparency
and
Accountability

EPA Disseminates Its Research Products through Partnerships and a Range of Media

According to department information:

- EPA partners with other federal agencies and with states to disseminate and publicize its research.
- EPA's Web site contains a searchable database of EPA science activities and scientific and technical products produced by EPA and through EPA-funded assistance agreements.
 - It also provides public access to its data sets.
 - Users can receive e-mail notifications of new products based on key words, topics, or general research.
- EPA issues press releases and holds research and press conferences.



Objective 3

Policy
Relevance

OMB Has Taken Steps to Promote and Strengthen Evaluation Efforts

Current efforts are underway at OMB to encourage agencies to increase their emphasis on the importance of research and evaluations and strengthen evaluation methods.

OMB plans to work with agencies to:

- Expand information about program evaluations that are made public.
- Establish an interagency working group to build evaluation capacity and create effective evaluations that work.
- Provide additional funding to agencies for high-priority evaluation activities.



Objective 3

Policy
Relevance

Labor Has Taken Recent Steps to Foster Research Relevant to Policy

In September 2009, Labor announced plans to create a position of chief evaluation officer and a new evaluation center within the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy.

- This position is designed to link evaluation with policy development and strategic planning.
- However, the linkage between the new position and ETA's research and evaluation center is unclear.

Recently, ETA's Assistant Secretary has acknowledged the importance of research-driven policy and the need to conduct rigorous evaluations.

ETA has taken steps to increase its evaluation activities and has applied to OMB for additional funds to conduct rigorous evaluations.



Objective 3

Policy
Relevance

However, ETA Has Been Slow to Evaluate WIA Program Activities

Congress required an impact evaluation of WIA activities by 2005.¹

- However, ETA did not award a contract to conduct the evaluation until 2008.
- As of mid-November 2009, the evaluation's research design has not yet been finalized.
- Officials told us that they plan to implement the evaluation in January 2010.

¹ 29 U.S.C. § 2917(c).



Objective 3

Policy
Relevance

Key Stakeholders Have Not Been Consistently Involved to Ensure ETA's Research Is Relevant

ETA has had no standard process for selecting stakeholders to review its research agenda or incorporating their comments.

ETA's documents indicate that, in recent years, ETA's Assistant Secretary had set and implemented the agenda with limited involvement from external stakeholders.

- For example, ETA did not solicit public comment on its finalized 2007 research plan.
- Moreover, ETA never finalized its 2003 and 2005 revisions to its 5-year research plan or made the plans available to the public.
- However, in 1999, ETA advertised the availability of a draft of its plan through a Federal Register notice and solicited public comments for consideration before the plan was finalized.



Objective 3

Policy
Relevance

Unlike Other Agencies, ETA Does Not Have Advisory Bodies to Involve Stakeholders in the Development of Its Research Agenda

For example:

- EPA's Board of Scientific Counselors provides advice, information, and recommendations about its research program.
- IES' National Board for Education Sciences approves or disapproves the priorities for the Institute proposed by the Director and ensures that its priorities are consistent with its mission.
- NSF's National Science Board establishes its research policies and approves its strategic budget direction.



Objective 3

Policy
Relevance

Labor Is Currently Assisted by 14 Advisory Boards That Perform a Variety of Functions

Currently, 14 advisory boards assist Labor and serve a variety of purposes. For example:

- The Advisory Committee on Apprenticeship provides assistance and advice to the Assistant Secretary of ETA on policies and programs regarding apprenticeship.
- The Bureau of Labor Statistics Data Users Committee provides advice on the collection and analysis of the Bureau's statistics, its published reports, and its overall mission.

Objective 3



Policy
Relevance

ERS Routinely Consults with Stakeholders to Ensure Its Research Is Relevant and Useful

According to USDA, ERS' procedures call for consulting with stakeholders—including policy makers and key institutions that influence public policy.

- ERS involves stakeholders in discussions of past research accomplishments, and program effectiveness and impact.
- ERS also consults with and works across department offices and programs in devising cross-cutting research.



Objective 3

Policy
Relevance

While Advisory Committees Can Promote Research Relevance, They Involve Some Trade-Offs

- Involving advisory committees requires additional time and effort, as well as some minimal expense.
- In creating advisory committees, federal agencies are generally required to follow the provisions of the Federal Advisory Committee Act, which include provisions limiting when such committees can be established.
- Most of the agencies we reviewed had advisory committees. For example, during FY 2008, the General Services Administration reported a total of 917 active committees with a total of nearly 64,000 members who provided advice and recommendations to 50 federal agencies.



Objective 3

Policy
Relevance

**ETA Does Not Have a Formal Process
in Place to Ensure Strategic Planning
Is Informed by Research**

Although ETA coordinates with its strategic planning office, there is no formal process in place to ensure that research findings are used to inform strategic planning and policy.

For example:

- Officials told us that they respond to requests from other departments to provide information on research and evaluation findings.
- However, there is no formal process in place to ensure that all research and evaluation findings are shared on a consistent basis.



Objective 3

Policy
Relevance

In Contrast, EPA’s Structure Has the Potential to Encourage Coordination Between Research and Strategic Planning

According to agency documents, EPA has established two offices within its research office to help ensure its policy and planning are informed by its research.

- **Office of Science Advisor** – establishes specific mechanisms for ensuring that scientific results and hypotheses, with technical evaluation and peer-review, play a prominent role in all regulatory decisions.
- **Office of Science Policy** – ensures that the scientific information generated through EPA and other research is used to inform EPA decisions.



Objective 3

Policy
Relevance

USDA’s Advisory Board Reported That It Serves as a Link to Strategic Planning

According to department information, USDA’s advisory board plays a key role in coordinating strategic planning for the National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

The board is to help this institute to:

- establish policies and priorities on a quarterly basis,
- evaluate the effectiveness of those policies and priorities, and
- develop its 5-year strategic plan.

In addition, according to the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, it revises its strategic plan on an ongoing basis so that its research, education, and extension strategies align with Agriculture’s goals and objectives.



Objective 3

Policy
Relevance

Additionally, IES' Board Facilitates Stakeholder Involvement

The National Board for Education Services is required by law to:

- Solicit advice and information from those in the field of education to recommend topics that require research, and
- Recommend ways to enhance partnerships and collaboration among other federal and state research agencies.

IES also involves stakeholders by establishing:

- Fellowships for education research at universities, and
- Standing review panels of scientists from university and industry settings who review grant applications.



Conclusions

- A variety of elements—including research independence, transparency and accountability, and policy relevance—may foster conditions that can help achieve sound and relevant research.
- ETA’s OPDR and its component research center have limited decision-making authority and lack formal access to executive leadership leaving it potentially vulnerable to undue political influence.



Conclusions

- Moreover, lacking specific processes and a tracking system to monitor progress through review inhibits transparency and may lead to continued delays in approving and disseminating research products.
 - The involvement of stakeholders and advisory bodies can help ensure that decisions to conduct research are grounded in policy implications. Such involvement also serves to foster public accountability. While deciding to involve advisory bodies comes at some cost in time and resources, such a move may lend credibility to the research program.
-



Recommendations

To improve ETA's research program, we recommend that the Secretary of Labor:

- Take steps to clarify ETA's revised organizational structure and ensure that OPDR reports directly to ETA's Assistant Secretary;
- Provide sufficient authority to ETA's research and evaluation center to plan, conduct, and disseminate research;
- Direct ETA's research and evaluation center to establish more specific processes, including time frames for dissemination of research to promote transparency and accountability;
- Create an information system to track research projects at all phases to ensure timely completion and dissemination; and
- Instruct ETA's research and evaluation center to develop processes to routinely involve outside experts in setting its research agenda and to the extent required, do so consistent with the Federal Advisory Committee Act.

Appendix II: Dissemination Time Frames for ETA's Research Products Published in 2008

Table 1: ETA's 2008 Research Products by Dissemination Time Frames

	Publication title	ETAOP#	Date of final submission to ETA/OPDR	Date posted on ETA publication database/Web site	Time frames between submission and dissemination^a
1	Current Strategies to Employ and Retain Older Workers	2008-01	1/1/2008	3/3/2008	2.2 months
2	Reemployment and Eligibility Assessment (REA) Study	2008-02	3/1/2008	3/12/2008	11 days
3	Assessment of Strategies to Retain Experienced Technical and Professional Healthcare Personnel After Retirement Age: Mature Healthcare Workers Focus on Group Research - Final Report	2008-04	1/22/2008	5/8/2008	4 months
4	Early Implementation of Generation I of the Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development (WIRED) Initiative: 2007 Interim Evaluation Report	2008-03	5/16/2008	5/21/2008	5 days
5	Evaluation of State Implementation of Section 303 (K), Social Security Act, "SUTA Dumping" - Final Report	2008-05	5/7/2008	6/12/2008	1 month
6	Evaluation of Prisoner Re-Entry Initiative- Interim Report	2008-06	9/28/2007	6/16/2008	8.5 months
7	Unemployment Insurance: Assessment of the Impact of the 2002 Reed Act Distribution	2004-11	12/1/2004	7/30/2008	3.8 years
8	Responses to Personal Reemployment Accounts (PRAs): Findings from the Demonstration States — Final Evaluation Report	2008-07	6/6/2008	8/11/2008	2 months
9	Navigating the U.S. Labor Market: Trends and Prospects for Workers	2003-09	9/22/2003	8/14/2008	4.10 years
10	Review of Recent Pilot, Demonstration, Research, and Evaluation Initiatives to Assist in the Implementation of Programs under the Workforce Investment Act	2003-10	9/22/2003	8/14/2008	4.11 years
11	Net Impact Estimates for Services Provided through the Workforce Investment Act	2005-06	10/1/2005	8/14/2008	2.10 years
12	Review of Alternative Methodologies for Employment and Training Research	2003-11	9/22/2003	8/15/2008	4.9 years
13	Anatomy of a One-Stop: Baltimore City East Side Career Center	2006-07	8/20/2008	8/29/2008	9 days
14	Anatomy of Two One-Stops: Camdenton and Columbia, Missouri	2006-08	8/20/2008	8/29/2008	9 days
15	Youth Offender Demonstration Project Evaluation Final Report – Volume One	2006-06	6/1/2006	9/4/2008	2.3 years

**Appendix II: Dissemination Time Frames for
ETA's Research Products Published in 2008**

Publication title	ETAOP#	Date of final submission to ETA/OPDR	Date posted on ETA publication database/Web site	Time frames between submission and dissemination^a
16 Workforce Development in Rural Areas - Changes in Access, Service Delivery and Partnerships	2005-07	6/30/2005	9/4/2008	3.2 years
17 Unemployment Insurance and Reemployment among Older Workers	2006-09	7/1/2006	9/4/2008	2.2 years
18 Youth Offender Demonstration Project Process Evaluation Final Report - Round Two	2004-10	1/30/2004	9/8/2008	4.2 years
19 Evaluation of Labor Exchange in the One-Stop Delivery System Environment	2004-09	2/1/2004	9/11/2008	4.7 years
20 Use of Experimental Methods in Workforce Evaluations	2005-08	4/18/2005	9/16/2008	3.5 years
21 On the Use of Administrative Data for Workforce Development Program Evaluations	2005-09	4/18/2005	9/16/2008	3.5 years
22 Immigration and the Effects on the US Labor Market	2005-10	4/18/2005	9/16/2008	3.5 years
23 The Labor Market Effects of Globalization and TAA	2005-11	4/18/2005	9/16/2008	3.5 years
24 Systemic Disincentive Effects of the UI Program	2005-12	4/18/2005	9/16/2008	3.5 years
25 Older workers and the Labor Market/Labor Market Policies for Older Workers	2005-13	4/18/2005	9/16/2008	3.5 years
26 Programs to Support Out-of-School Youth	2005-14	4/18/2005	9/16/2008	3.5 years
27 Community College Training and the Workforce Investment System	2005-15	4/18/2005	9/16/2008	3.5 years
28 Project GATE	2008-08	5/1/2008	9/17/2008	4.5 months
29 Flexible Learning Options for Adult Students	2008-09	4/1/2008	10/16/2008	6.5 months
30 Implementation Analysis of High Growth Job Training Initiative (HGJTI)	2008-10	6/1/2008	10/16/2008	4.5 months
31 Literature Review: Intermediaries and FBCOs Working Together	2008-11	10/2/2008	10/29/2008	27 days
32 Youth Opportunity Grants Initiative (YO)	2008-12	12/1/2005	12/23/2008	3.0 years
33 What's Known About the Effects of Publicly-Funded Employment and Training Programs	2006-10	4/21/2006	12/15/2008	2.8 years
34 Competency Models - A Review of the Literature and the Role of the Employment and Training Administration (ETA)	2008-13	1/29/2008	12/23/2008	11 months

Source: Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration and GAO analysis of data.

Note: The information presented in this table was provided by ETA officials.

^aTime frames were calculated using the date each research product was submitted to ETA and the date it was posted on ETA's Web site.

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Labor

U.S. Department of Labor

Assistant Secretary for
Employment and Training
Washington, D.C. 20210



JAN 12 2010

Mr. George A. Scott
Director
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G. Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Scott:

The Employment and Training Administration (ETA) is in receipt of the draft Government Accountability Office (GAO) draft report number 10-243 entitled, "*Employment and Training Administration: Increased Authority and Accountability Could Improve Research Program.*" We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the draft.

Responses to Recommendations

On page 5 and slide 50, GAO makes five recommendations regarding ETA's research program. Following is ETA's response.

Recommendation #1: Organizational Structure

Take steps to clarify ETA revised organizational structure and ensure that OPDR reports directly to ETA's Assistant Secretary.

The most recent organizational structure for the Employment and Training Administration (ETA) has the Office of Policy Development and Research (OPDR) reporting directly to the Assistant Secretary for Employment and Training. See <http://www.doleta.gov/pdf/OrgChart.pdf>. Consistent with the Essential Elements of a Sound Research and Evaluation Program¹, under the most recent organizational structure, the Administrator for ETA's research and evaluation center has direct access to and reports to the Assistant Secretary for Employment and Training. The center, lead by the OPDR Administrator, is placed organizationally within ETA's leadership structure to have influence and input to the organization's ultimate decision maker, the Assistant Secretary.²

Recommendation #2: Decision-Making Authority

Provide sufficient decision-making authority to ETA's research and evaluation center to plan, conduct, and disseminate research.

¹ GAO Draft Report titled "Employment and Training Administration: Increase Authority and Accountability Could Improve Research Program", GAO-10-243, page 21 (slide 15).

² Ibid; page 25 (slide 19).

ETA's research and evaluation center currently provides recommendations to the Assistant Secretary regarding plans for conducting and disseminating research. Meetings with ETA's decision-makers are scheduled to discuss such plans and decisions are communicated with all relevant parties within the agency for implementation. ETA's research and evaluation center develops the agency's plans for conducting research collaboratively with the relevant program offices. This ensures that research and evaluation efforts are coordinated and aligned with agency programmatic priorities. In addition, program offices participate in the dissemination decision-making process by reviewing and commenting on final draft reports.

Recommendation #3: Establish Specific Time Frames

Direct ETA's research and evaluation center to establish more specific processes, including time frames for dissemination of research to promote transparency and accountability.

ETA's process improvement steps, developed in 2007 and finalized in 2008 in agreement with the Office of Management and Budget, provide set time frames for the dissemination of research. The time frames are based on ranges in order to accommodate the variance in reviewing and finalizing reports. This iterative process involves the Federal project officer, OPDR staff, the relevant program offices, and contractor staff. The time frames can range from one week to one month, or one month to several months to show the ideal review schedule but allows for a realistic schedule that takes into consideration the workload of staff serving as project officer, the availability of program office staff and other OPDR staff in reviewing reports, and the contractor's completion schedule of a final draft report.

ETA is committed to publishing reports that disseminate evidence-based knowledge of what works and what does not on a timely basis to assist policymakers with policy and programmatic decisions. ETA has shared and disseminated research and evaluation findings at the agency's national conferences that showcases research. Recently, ETA's commitment to dissemination was evidenced at the recent Recovery and Recemployment Research Conference which featured findings from many Department-funded research and evaluation projects and engaged a broad spectrum of communities, including workforce investment, research, education, oversight agencies, non-profit organizations, and public policy makers.

In addition, ETA has sponsored a series of briefings titled Coffee House Briefing Series that featured findings and results from ETA-funded research. These briefings are announced on the agency's Intranet website. The briefing announcements have also been shared with colleagues in other Department of Labor agencies such as the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy and the Veterans Employment and Training Service as well as with other Federal agencies, including the Departments of Health and Human Services and Education. These agencies and departments have attended several of the briefing sessions. These briefing sessions are well attended by ETA staff from different program offices.

Lastly, in keeping with the Department's commitment to the President's Open Government philosophy, ETA's research will also be disseminated as part of the Department's efforts to make all DOL agencies' research products available through its Open Government Web site.

Recommendation #4: Track Research

Create an information system to track research projects at all phases to ensure timely completion and dissemination.

Currently, ETA research projects are tracked by individual project officers who report any significant delays to their Team Leaders and the Division Director. A departmental research inventory is produced semi-annually which updates the status of all projects, however, this inventory has only limited project management value. Therefore, ETA is planning to implement a centralized, electronic tracking system for its research projects. The new system will track major project milestones during the course of the study and steps in the review and dissemination of reports, once reports have been completed. The project officers will be responsible for updating the system as events occur.

Recommendation #5: Involve Outside Experts

Instruct ETA's research and evaluation center to develop processes to routinely involve outside experts in setting its research agenda and to the extent required, do so consistent with the Federal Advisory Committee Act.

ETA has in the past, and most recently, increased its efforts to involve outside experts in setting its research agenda. Under Section 171 of the Workforce Investment Act, ETA is required to develop a Five-Year Strategic Research Plan in consultation with states, localities and other interested parties. The strategic plan provides guidance on projects for pilots, demonstrations, research and evaluations. The plan provides information on the types of research topics and projects that should be taken into consideration. The first plan transmitted to the Congress covered the years 2000-2005. For the years covering 2002-2007 and 2004-2009, the strategic plans remained in draft form and were not transmitted to the Congress since they did not pass Departmental clearance as they were compendiums of various research papers rather than a plan to help guide the agency's pilots, demonstrations, research and evaluations. The most recent strategic research plan for 2007-2012, was transmitted to the Congress on July 20, 2007. All of these plans were developed in consultation with outside experts.

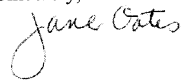
In addition, ETA has engaged informally in dialogues with outside experts through conferences as well as through interagency collaborations in the development of the research and evaluation agenda. For instance, ETA has collaborated with the research and evaluation centers of the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services on areas of shared interest. These efforts are designed to identify ways each agency's resources and expertise can be leveraged in support of each agency's research agenda. Another informal, however routine, method for leveraging input from programmatic and research experts on ETA's research agenda has been through the sponsorship of the Research Showcase annually at the past Workforce Innovations Conferences and the

**Appendix III: Comments from the Department
of Labor**

most recent Recovery and Reemployment Research Conference. These venues afford ETA opportunities to engage in a dialogue with research and program experts on completed research and evaluation projects and discuss opportunities for future research.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this report. Attached you'll find technical comments on report and slides.

Sincerely,



Jane Oates
Assistant Secretary

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

George A. Scott, Director (202) 512-7215 or scottg@gao.gov

Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact listed above, Dianne Blank (Assistant Director) and Kathleen White (Analyst-in-Charge) supervised the development of this product. Linda Stokes, Amy Sweet, and Ashanta Williams made significant contributions to all aspects of this report. In addition, Stephanie Shipman assisted with the conceptual development of our study; Amanda Miller assisted with design and analyses; James Bennett provided graphic assistance; Susan Bernstein provided writing assistance; Alex Galuten provided legal support; and Karen Brown and Melissa Jaynes verified our findings.

Related GAO Products

Workforce Investment Act: Labor Has Made Progress in Addressing Areas of Concern, but More Focus Needed on Understanding What Works and What Doesn't. [GAO-09-396T](#). Washington, D.C.: February 26, 2009.

Federal Research: Policies Guiding the Dissemination of Scientific Research from Selected Agencies Should Be Clarified and Better Communicated. [GAO-07-653](#). Washington, D.C.: May 17, 2007.

Data Quality: Expanded Use of Key Dissemination Practices Would Further Safeguard the Integrity of Federal Statistical Data. [GAO-06-607](#). Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2006.

Workforce Investment Act: Substantial Funds Are Used for Training, but Little Is Known Nationally about Training Outcomes. [GAO-05-650](#). Washington, D.C.: June 29, 2005.

Program Evaluation: An Evaluation Culture and Collaborative Partnerships Help Build Agency Capacity. [GAO-03-454](#). Washington, D.C.: May 2, 2003.

Workforce Investment Act: Improvements Needed in Performance Measures to Provide a More Accurate Picture of WIA Effectiveness. [GAO-02-275](#). Washington, D.C.: February 1, 2002.

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