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Comparative Program-Performance Evaluation and Government Accountability in New Mexico—Some Applied Lessons for Intergovernmental Relations

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ABSTRACT

In Strategies for Using State Information: Measuring and Improving Program Performance (2003), Shelley Metzenbaum poses a series of “key questions” about the federal-state performance reporting relationship. Metzenbaum asks whether there should be a uniform accountability system across the American states and whether it should be required of the states by the federal government. Ancillary questions include what uses should be made of state performance information and whether federal agencies should publicly report such information.

These questions are important in light of the burgeoning performance-management movement in contemporary public administration. The extension of performance measurement and reporting systems to state governments is largely due to the impact on states of the federal Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA), and generally to the ascendency of new public management perspectives in governmental practice.

The experience of the State of New Mexico with regard to intergovernmental performance reporting in recent years, under both Republican and Democratic gubernatorial administrations, suggests that closer integration of federal and state performance reporting is necessary, that more comprehensive performance-based systems (that include comparative performance measurement and strategic planning frameworks) are essential, and that new evaluative models are needed to address the sometimes cooperative and sometimes adversarial nature of intergovernmental relations. Lessons from the MPA classroom arising from these interrelated concerns and from the authors’ applied research with state government are addressed at the conclusion of this study.
INTRODUCTION
Recent work bearing directly and indirectly on intergovernmental performance management has begun to provide an analytical framework for comparative performance measurement. Typical of this emerging body of work, in addition to Metzenbaum's Strategies, are the following:

• Agranoff's seminal network-theory research on comparative intergovernmental administration, for instance Agranoff and McGuire, Collaborative Public Management: New Strategies for Local Governments (2004), and Agranoff, "A New Look at the Value-Adding Functions of Intergovernmental Networks" (2003).
• Comparative Performance Measurement, by Elaine Morley, Scott Bryant, and Harry Hatry (2003).

This body of research typically stresses the complex quality of performance accountability in the context of intergovernmental relations (IGR), the mutuality associated with collaborative networks and communities of practice, and the synergies that may be attained through cooperative efforts toward sustained performance and accountability in the public sector.

PERFORMANCE ACCOUNTABILITY IN NEW MEXICO
The authors' experience with intergovernmental issues in New Mexico led them to raise their own questions for the performance accountability literature. These queries arise from Rivera's recent tenure as an advisor on performance management and budgeting to the State's Legislative Finance Committee, and Heady's earlier service as an advisor to New Mexico's Constitutional Revision Commission. Our questions were as follows:

• Is it possible to successfully implement performance-based accountability in state government absent strategic frameworks that are explicitly integrated with federal reporting requirements? Should such requirements be formalized in state statutes or even in amendments to state constitutions?
• Is it possible to adapt collaborative models to IGR when federal-state relations are constrained by asymmetries in information and authority?
• Could the gap between performance measurement and program evaluation be closed by folding evaluation's emphasis on causation into performance measurement?
• Could comparative performance measurement address substantive problems with program design and implementation? Would "comparative program-performance evaluation" (or simply "comparative performance evaluation") or other hybrid constructs help in this regard?
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The authors have been addressing these questions as in Public Administration: A Comparative Perspective (seventh edition, Taylor and Francis, in progress, with Marc Holzer as the third coauthor), particularly as they pertain to the incorporation of comparative performance measurement (CPM) in the corpus of comparative public administration theory and practice. Although performance measurement, and in particular its comparative variant, have matured as analytical tools, serious challenges remain. These include, prominently, the following concerns:

- While CPM stresses evaluative comparison, or comparative evaluation, across divisions or programs of the same or similarly situated organizations, state performance management is most often marked by "stovepipe" assessments conditioned by GPRA and related federal reporting criteria, such as those found, prototypically, in Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) programs. These are themes struck in Metzenbaum's work in particular.

- While the collaborative-network literature, prominently Agranoff's research, highlights the mutualistic quality and synergistic potential of collaboration, the federal-state relationship around performance accountability is inconsistent. That relationship oscillates between the high level of mutuality found in communities of practice to the gaming and resistance typical of an adversarial and politicized relationship.

As already suggested, a hybrid construct emphasizing not only comparison but also evaluation, one addressing causal features of the intergovernmental relationship, might come closer to doing justice to the vicissitudes of the contemporary intergovernmental relationship than mere performance measurement. A hybrid approach might be better able to address the wide range of federal roles Metzenbaum identifies, from prescription (GPRA, WIA, IDEA) to influence, and from adversarial positioning to collaborative partnership.

From 1994 to 1995, Heady, as senior advisor to the State of New Mexico's Constitutional Revision Commission, was among the experts who recommended the enactment of a state counterpart to GPRA. The Accountability in Government Act (AGA) of 1999, amended in 2004, was the eventual result. Upon joining the Legislative Finance Committee (LFC) in 2003 in his own advisory role, Rivera set out address a major shortcoming of the AGA—one that could have been avoided if the State's Legislative Council and the Legislature had more literally replicated essential features of GPRA in New Mexico's AGA. At issue in particular was failure to include a requirement that state performance systems be embedded in strategic planning frameworks.

Although the AGA did call for a statewide performance-based budgeting, measurement, and reporting system, it failed at first to include the extensive strategic planning and reporting requirements that GPRA provides for federal agencies.
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and programs. In its original version, the AGA only required the rudiments of a strategic framework of state executive agencies, and it only required that strategic plans be specified in these executive agencies' first yearly report.

In July 2001, the State's Legislative Finance Committee (the audit staff agency for the legislators' standing committee of the same name) and the Department of Finance and Administration (DFA, the state counterpart to the Office of Management and Budget) entered into deliberations about whether the AGA should be amended to require ongoing reporting of strategic planning frameworks or whether an administrative option might be identified as a stopgap. An inter-agency working group led by then DFA Secretary James Jimenez (now Governor Bill Richardson's chief of staff) met during the fall of 2003 in anticipation of the January-to-February 2004 30-day legislative session (New Mexico alternates between 30- and 60-day annual sessions).

The DFA secretary determined that an administrative directive would fill the gap pending possible statutory amendment, requiring state executive agencies to report performance outcomes quarterly rather than yearly and asking them to characterize their strategic planning frameworks for performance measurement with every performance report to the DFA. The directive also allowed state agencies greater flexibility in reporting formats. During the 2004 legislative session, the AGA was in fact amended to define performance reporting more fully, to specify quarterly reports, and to require a brief annual synopsis of operative strategic frameworks.

In leading or coleading three major performance reviews for the LFC between 2003 and 2005, Rivera identified instances of misalignment between federal and state performance assessment mechanisms for (1) the state's teacher evaluation and licensure; (2) Fire Service performance reporting in relation to both state and federal accountability systems; and (3) the privatization of mental health and substance abuse services, through a newly formed New Mexico Behavioral Health Purchasing Collaborative. In several consultations, Rivera recommended the institution of a statutorily required system of performance assessment that would rely on (1) the amendment of the AGA (albeit a more thoroughgoing one than was enacted in 2004, and one more fully consistent with GPRA and other federal provisions), and (2) performance assessment predicated on mission-based strategic planning across all programs and agencies of the state executive branch.

Though separated by a decade, there were commonalities in the authors' efforts at helping reform accountability systems in New Mexico. Their work coincided in two ways:

1. in favoring statutory change aimed at creating mission-based performance accountability, and
2. in pressing for a more fully delineated model of programmatic and legislative evaluation commensurate with the complexity of the intergovernmental relationship.

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As the authors pursued their work in Santa Fe, they brought their experience to the classroom and learned from their graduate students in the process. These lessons are considered in the concluding section below.

CONCLUSION: APPLICATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

The previously outlined questions concerning IGR and accountability have been posed to master of public administration (MPA) students in the School of Public Administration at the University of New Mexico, especially in two courses: Comparative Public Administration and Performance Measurement. The students are given access on a class Web page (currently www.unm.edu/marivera) to previously noted Legislative Finance Committee studies, to dozens of primary and secondary documents used in their preparation, and to supportive documents from the state legislature, including fiscal impact assessments and drafts of legislation and agency directives. The intent is to provide students with experience in using both primary and secondary research resources. (Two students have in fact gone on to write their capstone professional papers using these extensive research materials.) About 90 percent of the MPA students at the university are practitioners or in-service students who bring considerable experience with state and local agencies and nonprofit organizations to their courses. The questions posed to them in the classroom are the same ones indicated this study, i.e., questions concerning the sufficiency of performance measurement methods and systems to their evaluative function and their adequacy to the full dimensionality of intergovernmental relations today.

One approach taken in these courses has been to focus instruction on strategically based value-added approaches to performance assessment, ones that broaden and deepen the functionality of performance assessment. In response, students have written on various comparative and value-added approaches to program performance evaluation. Typical efforts include assessments—

1. of intergovernmental collaboration in New Mexico, asking (as one student did in a class paper) whether divergent goals "can be brought together in a 'coherent alignment'" by meeting the tests suggested by Mark Moore's 'strategic triangle' (Moore, 1995, 70-71);

2. of the state's Fire Protection Fund, using Web-posted documents, stressing the need to find reconciling aims in the state's funding disbursement formulas;

3. of the state's K-12 education programs (in relation to No Child Left Behind and teacher licensure in New Mexico), with proposals for moving away from scorecards toward substantive evaluation of the causal impact of schools, educational programs, and teachers on learning growth among students;
4. of youth workforce training programs in the state, questioning whether multiple streams of goals, objectives, and performance criteria coming from the federal and state departments of labor, the state legislature, and the Department of Finance and Administration could be made to cohere; and
5. of behavioral health privatization in the state, with its multiple goals and network design, building on process elements of the *evaluability assessment* sequence first developed by Wholey (1983).

In the end, the emphasis on the part of students and faculty in these courses is on movement from the tracking and scoring concerns of performance measurement—comparative performance measurement included—toward more comprehensive questions about (a) intergovernmental alignment of strategic goals and objectives, and (b) the incorporation of causal analysis, traditionally proper to program evaluation, into performance measurement. The recommendation, again, is for hybrid forms of comparative performance evaluation.

These inquiries also consider what would make for movement from (a) conformity to federal performance directives among state legislatures and agencies, toward (b) greater cooperation, greater accountability based on policy and constitutional responsiveness, and more effective leadership. Consistent with criteria for civil service professionalism and leadership proposed by Heady (1996, 220), policy guidance and programmatic intervention on the part of state officials should build, first, on strategic awareness and articulation of mission, and, second, on identification with mission.

Finally, it is here indicated that only the probing questions associated with policy and program evaluation can overcome the limitations of performance measurement in intergovernmental contexts. As with all evaluation, performance assessment is inherently comparative, and more conscious attention to that comparative dimension is necessary in order to attain meaningful accountability.

**REFERENCES**


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