

Analyzing Federal Program Overlap is Difficult at Best

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Finding duplicative federal programs in order to combine, consolidate, or eliminate them is next to impossible with current reporting mechanisms according to a recent GAO report.

The GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 calls for the creation of an inventory of all federal programs, along with related budget and performance data, which could make it easier to better manage, reduce, or eliminate overlap and duplication. Over the past four years, GAO has found over 90 areas where the government could benefit from reducing or removing fragmentation and duplication.

However, [GAO's recent report](#) on the status of federal program inventories indicates that inconsistent definitions and information limit their usefulness. OMB's inventory guidance allowed for latitude regarding defining programs and the types of information reported. This has led to non-uniform information across agencies, and made it difficult to spot duplication and overlap.

Something which seems as simple as just defining what constitutes a "program" is a challenge across agencies. OMB's guidance has allowed flexibility in defining programs by allowing agencies to use different approaches based on their missions and programmatic tactics. But because of these differing approaches, identifying similar programs across agencies is a challenge.

As part of GAO's study, they attempted to locate programs across agencies related to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEMS) using the agency inventories released by OMB in May 2013. GAO only found nine programs out of 179 that matched exactly, and 51 others that were identified based on their program descriptions.

GAO attributes the lack of comparability to the fact that the agencies did not work together when developing their inventories. GAO believes collaboration among the agencies on program definitions and inventories would lead to identifying overlap and duplication.

GAO recommends OMB and agencies take the following steps to ensure usefulness of program inventories:

- Present program-level budget information
- Provide complete performance information
- Consult with stakeholders

GAO further recommends that OMB require additional agencies to report inventories. Currently, GPRAMA only requires 24 agencies to report. GAO also suggests that tax expenditures be included in the federal program inventory, as well as web-based sorting capabilities.

Threatening to complicate reporting even further, is the on-going implementation of the 2014 Digital Accountability and Transparency Act (DATA Act) which stipulates more program and budget data be displayed on federal websites.

Rooting out duplication, overlap and waste will be an iterative and on-going process. Contractors need to be aware of advances in identifying overlapping programs, because progress could result in program, project and/or contract consolidations or cuts. On the flip side, opportunities may arise for contractor assistance with program consolidation efforts.