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Pairing Program Administration with Evaluation to Build Evidence: The Health  
Profession Opportunity Grants Program and Federal Evaluation Portfolio in  
**Pathways to Careers in Health Care**

Hilary Bruck  
*Administration for Children and Families,  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*

Amelia Popham  
*Administration for Children and Families,  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*

Kim Stupica-Dobbs  
*Administration for Children and Families,  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*

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# **Pathways to Careers in Health Care**

Christopher T. King  
Philip Young P. Hong  
*Editors*

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W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research

300 S. Westnedge Avenue

Kalamazoo, Michigan 49007-4686

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## **Pairing Program Administration with Evaluation to Build Evidence**

### **The Health Profession Opportunity Grants Program and Federal Evaluation Portfolio**

Hilary Bruck

Amelia Popham

Kim Stupica-Dobbs

*Administration for Children and Families,  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*

The programs funded by the Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) are based on a career pathways framework of postsecondary education, which posits that instruction should be organized as a series of manageable and well-articulated steps, accompanied by strong supports and connections to employment (Fein 2012).

The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) administers the HPOG program. ACF is one of 11 operating divisions of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and is composed of 21 offices, each of which supports a variety of initiatives that further the ACF mission “to foster health and well-being by providing federal leadership, partnership and resources for the compassionate and effective delivery of human services” (ACF 2016a). This mission and OFA’s history of administering federal grant programs that foster family economic security and stability, including the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, rendered OFA a good fit for managing the HPOG program.

The HPOG program was authorized as a demonstration program with a mandated federal evaluation to assess the success of the initiative. The ACF Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) leads these evaluation efforts in close coordination with OFA. OPRE’s primary duty is to study ACF programs and the populations they serve

through rigorous research and evaluation projects. OPRE has a strong history of sponsoring rigorous research on the effectiveness of employment and training strategies for low-income populations. The HPOG research and evaluation studies have become a key component of this expansive and ongoing portfolio of work.

When HPOG was authorized in 2010, the career pathways framework was gaining attention as a promising strategy to promote education, training, and workforce advancement among low-income or low-skilled individuals. At that time, the framework was relatively new, and its effectiveness had not been rigorously evaluated. However, OPRE was in the initial stages of its Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education (PACE) project, a multisite, random-assignment evaluation of programs following the career pathways framework. HPOG provided OPRE with an opportunity to build on this portfolio of research and evaluation around the career pathways approach. HPOG expanded PACE by adding three sites to the six already participating in the evaluation. It also enabled OPRE to design and implement a comprehensive, multipronged research and evaluation portfolio specific to HPOG. With this broad portfolio of studies, OPRE has become a national leader in the rigorous evaluation of postsecondary career pathways programs (ACF 2016b).

In April 2012, the U.S. Departments of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services formed a federal partnership and issued a letter of joint commitment to promote the use of career pathways and the coordination of activities in this area across agencies. In 2016, an updated letter was circulated that indicated the federal partnership had grown to include the White House National Economic Council, the Office of Management and Budget, and 10 additional federal agencies. The HPOG program, including OPRE's rigorous evaluation of it, is one of a handful of initiatives highlighted in the letter. This underscores both the relevance and significance of HPOG and OPRE's robust career pathways research and evaluation portfolio. The knowledge developed under and evidence generated by HPOG and the portfolio stand to inform and advance the broader research, practice, and policy fields.

The HPOG University Partnership Research Grants (HPOG UP) are a notable component of this portfolio. The grants complement the national implementation and impact evaluations of HPOG by supporting university-led studies tailored to and developed in partnership with

individual HPOG programs. This partnership is intended to build the research capacity of the local program partners and increase the utility and effectiveness of the applied research work.

This chapter provides context for the funding of the HPOG UP studies by presenting an overview of the HPOG program—its administration, goals, and strategy—and the federal research and evaluation portfolio within which the studies reside. The chapter also discusses the broader goals of the HPOG research and evaluation portfolio and offers reflections on lessons learned from its implementation thus far. This discussion might be useful for practitioners engaged in administering programs with an evaluation component, as well as researchers and federal staff evaluating career pathways programs or conducting other large-scale, federal evaluation efforts.

## **THE HPOG PROGRAM**

### **Authorization and Administration**

The Affordable Care Act authorized funds to develop demonstration projects that provide TANF recipients and other eligible low-income individuals with the “opportunity to obtain education and training for occupations in the health care field that pay well and are expected to either experience labor shortages or be in high demand.” The Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 extended the HPOG program through fiscal year 2019, allowing the programs to operate through September 29, 2020, and complete the five-year grant cycle. HPOG’s appropriation has been \$85 million per year, with \$10 million of this amount set aside for evaluation activities.

OFA administers federal grant programs that foster family economic security and stability, including the TANF program, the Tribal TANF program, Native Employment Works, Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grants, Tribal TANF-Child Welfare Coordination grants, and HPOG.

In administering the HPOG discretionary grant program, OFA awards the grants, monitors grantee program progress, provides programmatic technical assistance directly and through contractors, and

coordinates with other ACF offices to ensure HPOG is meeting its intended purpose. Additionally, OFA shares lessons learned through HPOG, such as how TANF agencies can partner more strongly with sector training programs, with other OFA grantees, and with stakeholders.

In September 2010, OFA awarded the first round of five-year HPOG grants, referred to as HPOG 1.0. OFA awarded approximately \$67 million in funding, distributed each year, to 32 organizations located across 23 states. There was significant variation among the HPOG grantees in their location, program size, and organizational characteristics. Grantees were located across the country: 9 in the Northeast, 6 in the South, 11 in the Midwest, and 6 in the West. Grantees included 2 community-based organizations, 4 state government agencies, 9 workforce system agencies, 12 higher education institutions, and 5 tribal organizations (of which 4 were tribal community colleges and 1 was a nonprofit tribal social service organization).

In part because grantees had different participant enrollment goals, the amount of funding for HPOG 1.0 grants also varied. During the first year of funding, HPOG 1.0 grants ranged between \$1 million and \$5 million, with most grantees (18 of 32) receiving awards between \$1 and \$2 million. Another 9 were awarded between \$2 and \$3 million, and 5 had grants between \$3 and \$5 million. After the first year, annual amounts received by each grantee varied somewhat based on program needs. Over the course of its five-year grant period, HPOG 1.0 served 38,891 individuals, of whom 36,548 enrolled in HPOG programs implemented by nontribal grantees, and 2,343 enrolled in HPOG programs implemented by tribal grantees.<sup>1</sup>

In September 2015, OFA awarded a second round of grants, known as HPOG 2.0. These grant awards went to 32 organizations across 21 states, with approximately \$72 million disbursed each year. A little more than half of the HPOG 2.0 grantees (17 of 32) had previously received funding through HPOG 1.0; the rest were new grantees. Grantees are located across the country: 9 in the Northeast, 7 in the South, 9 in the Midwest, and 7 in the West. Grantees include 10 higher education institutions, 5 tribal organizations, 7 workforce system agencies, 4 state government agencies, and 6 community-based organizations. Grants range from approximately \$1 million to \$3 million annually.

## **HPOG Program Intent and Strategy**

The HPOG program addresses two related issues: the shortfall in the supply of qualified health care professionals in the face of expanding demand, and the increasing requirement for a postsecondary education in order to secure a job with a living wage for families. Low-income individuals, including TANF recipients and recipients of other public benefits, often face significant barriers in obtaining the skills, education, and training needed for jobs that provide self-sufficiency and family-sustaining wages.

HPOG thus is structured to meet the dual goals of demonstrating new ways to increase the supply of health care workers while creating vocational opportunities for low-income, low-skilled adults. This is achievable in part because the health care industry has great flexibility. Multiple points of entry exist for low-skilled individuals to find jobs after attaining short-term training credentials. They then can move up the career ladder through additional education and work experience.

More specifically, HPOG aims to

- prepare participants for employment in the health care sector in positions that pay well and are expected to either experience labor shortages or be in high demand;
- target skills and competencies demanded by the health care industry;
- support career pathways, such as an articulated career ladder;
- result in employer- or industry-recognized, portable educational credentials (which can include a license, third-party certification, postsecondary educational certificate or degree, or Registered Apprenticeship certificate);
- combine support services with education and training services to help participants overcome barriers to employment; and
- provide training services at times and locations that are easily accessible for targeted populations (ACF 2010, 2015).

Of these objectives, those pertaining to career pathways, combining support services with training, and connections to employment are most fundamental to the HPOG strategy, distinguishing it from more traditional workforce development strategies.



The HPOG 1.0 Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA)<sup>2</sup> required HPOG programs to “support career pathways” and to include activities that “support participants’ advancement along a defined career pathway, such as an articulated career ladder, if such a pathway exists in the health care industry, or that involve developing such pathways where they do not currently exist” (ACF 2010). The FOA for HPOG 2.0 more carefully defined the career pathways model, stating, “Well-defined career pathways include the specific education and employment steps for the career pathway and how those steps are connected and associated with student supports. They show how training connects to specific employer-recognized credentials; what competencies are required for each step; how credentials stack on each other to lead to higher-paying jobs; and how the noncredit training is connected to credit-bearing education.” The FOA also described specific strategies for helping participants progress along a career pathway (ACF 2015).

HPOG grantees create career pathways in accordance with the guidance given above and connect participants to occupational training along those pathways that meets employer demand and requirements. Basic skills training is included in these career pathways and the HPOG program, as it is an important strategy in creating on-ramps in the health care field. In many cases the career pathway begins with those basic skills and then progresses to entry-level health care training, such as home health aide or certified nursing assistant. The participant can then be linked to employment and/or the next training along the chosen career pathway. HPOG grantees vary widely in regard to the health care occupational training being offered, but the most common training programs include those for nurse aides, home health aides, licensed and vocational nurses, registered nurses, medical assistants, pharmacy technicians, and phlebotomists.

In addition to its support for career pathways, another distinctive component of the HPOG program is its emphasis on providing support services to participants to help ensure that they successfully complete their training and secure employment in their field. HPOG’s authorizing legislation requires HPOG programs to “provide eligible individuals with financial aid, child care, case management, and other supportive services.”<sup>3</sup> Almost all HPOG grantees cover at least part of participants’ tuition costs, and virtually all employ case managers who work intensively with program participants. In addition, most HPOG grant-

ees offer other supports, such as transportation vouchers or child care assistance. And nearly all grantees provide a wide variety of employment assistance services to help participants secure a job upon training completion.

In many cases, HPOG grantees partner with a wide variety of agencies to provide support services and, more broadly, to design and implement their programs. Partners may assist with recruiting applicants, delivering training and support services, and placing participants with employers.

HPOG's authorizing legislation requires grant applicants to demonstrate that they have consulted and will coordinate with the state TANF program, the local Workforce Investment Board, the state Workforce Investment Board, and the state apprenticeship agency.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the HPOG 1.0 and 2.0 FOAs strongly encouraged applicants to form strategic partnerships with additional organizations that could provide resources or expertise to the project, particularly health care employers (ACF 2010, 2015).

HPOG's connection to employers and employment also distinguishes it from traditional workforce development programs. As noted above, most programs provide participants with employment assistance services, and many partner with health care employers in the design and delivery of services and supports. In addition, HPOG participants are connected to work in various ways—through clinical rotations built into training courses (staffing hospitals or nursing homes, for example); job shadowing during training; working a full- or part-time job while also taking classes; or cycling back and forth between positions in the health sector and their training courses, as they advance up their career ladder. Many HPOG grantees integrate activities such as soft skills training, résumé and interview preparation, and career readiness classes in order to provide employers with qualified candidates to fill positions. HPOG grantees may employ job navigators and/or partner with workforce agencies in order to communicate with employers about in-demand jobs and connect participants directly to those jobs.

### **Programmatic Training and Technical Assistance**

OFA provides extensive programmatic training and technical assistance to HPOG grantees. These efforts aim to support the goals of

HPOG's authorizing legislation by sharing innovative practices, creating a community of learning among grantees, and supporting continuous quality improvement among programs. Training and technical assistance are provided to grantees in several ways. OFA continually assesses and addresses grantees' training needs as they develop and provides ongoing technical assistance. OFA contractors provide additional support where more intensive technical assistance is needed. Modes of programmatic training and technical assistance include the following:

- Providing HPOG grantees with research publications, tool kits, reports, and other materials relevant to their programs.
- Hosting in-person meetings for HPOG grantees, including an annual meeting and a small number of additional in-person meetings, to address grantees' group technical assistance needs and foster collaboration.
- Offering virtual technical assistance through webinars and virtual learning cohorts, which bring small groups of HPOG grantees together with a subject matter expert to work together over several months to improve a specific aspect of their programs.
- Conducting one-on-one technical assistance with HPOG grantees, which can include coaching, expert assistance, on-site training, or assistance connecting to and building partnerships with local employers and other stakeholders.

OFA has used these training and technical assistance methods to assist HPOG grantees in a wide variety of areas such as career pathways, partnerships, and employer engagement. Other topics of programmatic training and technical assistance have included participant recruitment, assessment, support services, case management, instructor engagement, and the future of health care. OFA regularly explores emerging issues relevant to grantees and new methods of delivering training and technical assistance. Thus, the training and technical assistance provided by OFA continues to grow and change according to the needs of its grantees.

## THE HPOG RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PORTFOLIO

Given the scope of activities being conducted under the HPOG program, it is evident that there is much to learn from the initiative's implementation. Fortunately, HPOG was authorized as a demonstration program with a mandated federal evaluation. OPRE is utilizing a multipronged research and evaluation portfolio to assess the success of the HPOG program. OPRE studies ACF programs and the populations they serve through rigorous research and evaluation projects, including evaluations of existing programs, evaluations of innovative approaches to helping low-income children and families, research syntheses, and descriptive and exploratory studies. OPRE also works to improve the analysis of data and coordinate performance management for ACF (ACF 2017).

The ACF evaluation policy, published on the OPRE website in 2012 and in the *Federal Register* in 2014 (79 FR 51574), confirms ACF's commitment to conducting evaluations and to using evidence to inform policy and practice. The evaluation policy identifies five evaluation principles: rigor, relevance, transparency, independence, and ethics. The policy discusses how each of these principles guides ACF's evaluations and culture as a learning organization. The five principles, briefly described below, inform not only OPRE's HPOG portfolio but also all of the research and evaluation activities OPRE undertakes.

- 1) **Rigor.** ACF is committed to using rigorous methods that are appropriate to the evaluation questions and feasible within budget and other constraints. Rigor is not restricted to impact evaluations but is also necessary in implementation evaluations, descriptive studies, and outcome evaluations, among other types of approaches.
- 2) **Relevance.** ACF evaluations should address legislative requirements and reflect the needs and interests of stakeholders, including Congress and federal, state, tribal, and local partners.
- 3) **Transparency.** ACF will make information about planned and ongoing evaluations easily accessible and release results regardless of the findings. Reports will present comprehensive results, including favorable, unfavorable, and null findings.

- 4) **Independence.** Key stakeholders should participate actively in setting evaluation priorities, identifying evaluation questions, and assessing the implications of findings. However, it is important to insulate evaluation functions from undue influence and from both the appearance and the reality of bias. To promote objectivity, ACF protects independence in the design, conduct, and analysis of evaluations.
- 5) **Ethics.** ACF-sponsored evaluations will be conducted in an ethical manner and safeguard the dignity, rights, safety, and privacy of participants (ACF 2012).

While much of ACF's evaluation activity is overseen by OPRE, sometimes other ACF offices also sponsor evaluations. The evaluation policy describes OPRE's role in working with the other ACF offices to promote quality, coordination, and usefulness of evaluations undertaken across ACF. As discussed later in this chapter, even when OPRE is responsible for overseeing an evaluation, it works closely with other relevant ACF offices in designing and conducting evaluations related to programs administered by those offices.

OPRE includes four divisions: the Division of Economic Independence, the Division of Child and Family Development, the Division of Family Strengthening, and the Division of Data and Improvement. The HPOG research and evaluation portfolio resides within the Division of Economic Independence (DEI), which focuses on welfare, employment, and family self-sufficiency. DEI's research in these areas is designed to expand knowledge about effective programs to promote employment, self-sufficiency, and economic well-being among low-income families. DEI's research focuses on five major areas: TANF, employment and the labor market, education and training, behavioral science, and cross-cutting and other safety net research (ACF 2016b).

When the HPOG program was authorized in 2010, DEI already had a strong history of sponsoring rigorous research on the effectiveness of employment and training strategies for improving employment and earnings for TANF recipients and other low-income individuals. Additionally, DEI was leading the field in evaluating career pathways programs with the launch of its PACE evaluation in 2007.<sup>5</sup> Given that the HPOG program's authorizing legislation mandated a comprehensive federal evaluation, DEI partnered with OFA from the beginning to design and launch the HPOG research and evaluation portfolio.

## **Portfolio Purpose and Design**

As noted, HPOG was authorized as a demonstration program. Generally, the purpose of such programs is to develop and test effective program approaches and models. Accordingly, HPOG's authorizing legislation requires that a federal evaluation be undertaken to assess HPOG's effectiveness. Specifically, the legislation tasks the evaluation with determining whether and how HPOG supports "successful activities for creating opportunities for developing and sustaining, particularly with respect to low-income individuals and other entry-level workers, a health professions workforce that has accessible entry points, that meets high standards for education, training, certification, and professional development, and that provides increased wages and affordable benefits, including health care coverage, that are responsive to the workforce's needs."<sup>6</sup>

By establishing the HPOG program as a demonstration, its authorizing legislation underscored the importance of coupling program operations with evaluation. Further, it signaled to grant applicants that the evaluation is a fundamental component of the HPOG initiative, not an afterthought; hence, grant award is contingent on participation in the evaluation. This enables ACF to delineate evaluation requirements in the HPOG grant FOAs, so that anyone applying for an HPOG grant understands the expectation of participation in federal evaluation activities and what it will likely entail.

By explicitly linking program and evaluation, HPOG's authorizing legislation also set the stage for the way in which OPRE and OFA operate in partnership to administer the program and to design, execute, and apply learning from the evaluation efforts. Through this partnership, OPRE and OFA strive to capitalize on the significant learning opportunity that HPOG affords. The legislative mandate for the evaluation, paired with the resources to carry it out, presents an opportunity for rigorous evaluation of wide scope and rich depth. It is an opportunity to learn whether and how this program model achieves its dual goals of meeting the health care sector's demand for qualified workers and low-income individuals' need to secure jobs that support self-sufficiency. It is an opportunity to promote the use of evidence to inform programmatic decisions at the federal and local levels. And it is an opportunity to advance the broader employment and training research, practice, and

policy fields regarding the effectiveness of sector-based, career pathways programs serving low-income populations. The HPOG research and evaluation portfolio endeavors to pursue and achieve these expansive learning goals.

OPRE's and OFA's selection of the primary research questions for the portfolio was driven by the specific Congressional evaluation requirements and ACF priorities. These questions were then supplemented with additional questions to address existing knowledge gaps in the postsecondary education and training research and practice fields. At the same time, OFA considered what information was essential for program performance monitoring and management. OPRE and OFA intentionally coordinated the identification of this information with the evaluation to ensure that the needs of both efforts were met in a manner that also produced useful, accessible information for the grantees at the lowest possible burden to them in terms of participating in these efforts.

The result was a research and evaluation portfolio comprising several individual projects or studies, each with a distinct purpose: to examine HPOG program implementation, systems change, and participant outcomes; to assess impacts; or to support the collection of program administrative data. OPRE designed the projects to employ the most appropriate and rigorous methods to accomplish their specific aims, per the ACF evaluation policy, while also coordinating them to avoid duplicative efforts, maximize the reuse of information, and promote cross-project learning.

There are two phases of the research and evaluation portfolio. The first phase comprises projects and studies specific to the HPOG 1.0 grants, including the HPOG UP grants that are the subject of this publication. The second phase comprises projects and studies specific to the HPOG 2.0 grants. Table 3.1 presents an overview of the components of the HPOG 1.0 portfolio. The components of the HPOG 2.0 portfolio are discussed in the concluding section of this chapter.

### **Research and evaluation specific to HPOG 1.0**

OPRE's research and evaluation portfolio for HPOG 1.0 includes eight projects, each focused on a set of core research questions. Each of the 32 HPOG 1.0 grantees participated in one or more components of the portfolio (see Table 3.1).

Some components of the HPOG 1.0 portfolio ended when or shortly after the HPOG 1.0 grants concluded in 2015, whereas other components are ongoing and seek to assess longer-term outcomes and impacts. Final reports from the National Implementation Evaluation and the Evaluation of Tribal HPOG are available on the OPRE website, and subsequent chapters in this book describe these studies in more detail.<sup>7</sup> The HPOG 1.0 short-term impact report and site-specific short-term impact reports for all nine programs participating in PACE are also available on OPRE's website.<sup>8</sup> Reports on HPOG and PACE intermediate and longer-term impacts are expected in 2019/2020 and 2021, respectively. All these findings will be published on the OPRE website as they become available.

The HPOG UP grants are an important component of OPRE's research and evaluation portfolio. OPRE staff considered the set of grants an opportunity to complement its research and evaluation portfolio by supporting studies tailored to and developed in partnership with individual HPOG programs. The grants required applicants to demonstrate a partnership with one or more of the HPOG programs as an integral part of the research plan development and execution. In this way, the studies could tailor the research questions to specific programs, in contrast to the other portfolio components, which focus largely on research questions applicable to the full set of nontribal or tribal grantees in the HPOG program. OPRE staff viewed the HPOG UP grants as a way to emphasize the importance of developing true working research partnerships with HPOG programs and other relevant entities within the community, thereby increasing the effectiveness of the applied research work. OPRE staff hope that the findings from the HPOG UP studies not only inform the HPOG program partner's program implementation and service delivery but also benefit the education, training, and employment research field more broadly (ACF 2011).

In 2011, OPRE awarded the first round of HPOG UP research grants through a competitive grant review process. The five grants examined specific program components, models, or contexts, such as a two-generation approach or serving special populations, in partnership with one or more HPOG 1.0 programs. Table 3.2 provides an overview of these grants.

Subsequent chapters of this publication describe in depth the studies conducted under these grants and offer insights based on their find-



**Table 3.1 Components of the HPOG 1.0 Research and Evaluation Portfolio**

Project title	Primary research questions	Participating HPOG 1.0 grantees	Status of reports <sup>a</sup>
HPOG Implementation, Systems and Outcomes Project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What grantee-, program-, and participant-level data measures are required for ACF performance management and the evaluation?</li> </ul>	All 32 HPOG 1.0 grantees	Released: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literature reviews</li> <li>• Annual reports</li> </ul>
HPOG National Implementation Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How are HPOG programs implemented?</li> <li>• What changes to the service delivery system are associated with HPOG program implementation?</li> <li>• What individual-level outputs and outcomes occur?</li> </ul>	All 27 nontribal HPOG 1.0 grantees	Released: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design report</li> <li>• Systems change analysis report</li> <li>• Interim implementation &amp; outcomes report</li> <li>• Final implementation &amp; outcomes report</li> </ul>
HPOG Impact Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What short-term impacts (those assessed 15 mo. after random assignment) did HPOG programs as a group have on participant outcomes?</li> <li>• To what extent did those impacts vary across selected subpopulations?</li> <li>• Which locally adopted program components influenced average impacts?</li> <li>• To what extent did participation in a particular HPOG component(s) change the impact?</li> </ul>	23 HPOG 1.0 grantees <sup>b</sup>	Released: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design report</li> <li>• Analysis plan</li> <li>• Program implementation and short-term impact report</li> </ul>

Pathways for Advancing Careers and Education

- What short-term impacts (*those assessed 15 mo. after random assignment*) did each program have on key indicators of progress in career pathways–relevant training?
- What short-term impacts did each program have on entry to career-track employment and earnings?
- What is the basic design, underlying logic, and institutional and community context of each program?
- To what extent was the intervention delivered as planned?

Three HPOG 1.0 grantees:<sup>c</sup> Pima Community College, San Diego Workforce Partnership, and Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County

Released:

- Design report
- Analysis plan
- Program profiles
- Participant experience briefs
- Program implementation and short-term impact reports

Career Pathways Intermediate Outcomes Study

- What are the intermediate impacts (*those assessed 36 mo. after random assignment*) of the HPOG and PACE programs on their populations of interest?
- How do effects of career pathways programs vary over time, across outcomes or domains, by occupational sector, by program model, and by participant characteristics?
- Do different models, strategies, or components lead to different impacts for participants?
- How can career pathways models be adjusted to promote longer-term outcomes for participants?

Aggregate impacts for all HPOG 1.0 grantees who participated in HPOG Impact and PACE  
Site-specific impacts for sub-set of selected HPOG 1.0 grantees

Released:

- Analysis plans for the HPOG and PACE intermediate follow-up study
- Cost-benefit analysis plan

Forthcoming:

- Cost-benefit reports (expected 2019/2020)
- Intermediate impact reports (expected 2019/2020)
- Cross-site synthesis brief (expected 2020)

(continued)

**Table 3.1 (continued)**

Project title	Primary research questions	Participating HPOG 1.0 grantees	Status of reports <sup>a</sup>
Career Pathways Long-Term Outcomes Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the longer-term impacts (<i>those assessed 72 mo. after random assignment</i>) of the HPOG and PACE programs on their populations of interest?</li> <li>• How do effects of career pathways programs vary over time, across outcomes or domains, by occupational sector, by program model, and by participant characteristics?</li> <li>• Do different models, strategies, or components lead to different impacts for participants?</li> <li>• How can career pathways models be adjusted to promote longer-term outcomes for participants?</li> </ul>	<p>Aggregate impacts for all HPOG 1.0 grantees who participated in HPOG Impact and PACE</p> <p>Site-specific impacts for subset of selected HPOG 1.0 grantees</p>	<p>Forthcoming:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysis plans for the HPOG and PACE long-term follow-up study (expected 2020)</li> <li>• Cost-benefit analysis plan (expected 2020)</li> <li>• Cost-benefit reports (expected 2021)</li> <li>• Long-term impact reports (expected 2021)</li> </ul>
Evaluation of Tribal HPOG	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What frameworks and relationships did the Tribal HPOG grantees create to implement their programs?</li> <li>• How were training and support services delivered?</li> <li>• What were participant outcomes?</li> <li>• Was health care workforce capacity enhanced in tribal communities?</li> </ul>	<p>All five Tribal HPOG 1.0 grantees</p>	<p>Released:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practice briefs</li> <li>• Interim report</li> <li>• Final report</li> </ul>

HPOG University  
Partnership  
Research Grants

- Specific inquiries regarding: developing a diverse workforce; empowerment-based workforce development models; the recruitment and retention of American Indians into professional nursing programs; effects of a two-generation program; and effects of participant networks and community context.

Five HPOG 1.0 grantees

Released:

- Summary brief

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<sup>a</sup>Most projects also released special topics papers. Additional analyses and reports may be available as funding allows.

<sup>b</sup>Inclusive of data from the three HPOG 1.0 grantees in PACE. Nontribal grantees collecting individual-level data as part of another portfolio project were not required to participate in the Impact Study; all the rest were.

<sup>c</sup>Instituto del Progreso Latino is one of the nine sites in the PACE evaluation and implemented one of the HPOG 1.0 grantee's six HPOG programs. Instituto is not reflected in the count of HPOG 1.0 grantees participating in the PACE evaluation in the table above; however, data collected from Instituto under PACE is included in the HPOG Impact Study's analytic sample.

SOURCE: OPRE (n.d.).

**Table 3.2 HPOG UP Research Grants Awarded in 2011**

Grantee	Project title	Project summary	HPOG 1.0 program partner
Northwestern University, in partnership with University of Texas at Austin	<i>CareerAdvance</i> : A Dual-Generation Program's Effects on Families and Children	Examined two-generation program effects on family, parent, and child outcomes	Community Action Project of Tulsa County, Inc. (Tulsa, OK)
Temple University	Building Capacities/Making Connections: A Multi-Year Study of Human and Social Capital Development through the Health Information Professions Career Pathways Initiative	Examined how participant networks and community contexts facilitate or impede success in workforce development programs	Temple University, Center for Social Policy and Community Development (Philadelphia, PA)
Brandeis University	Study of Employment and Advancement of Racial, Ethnic, and Linguistic Minorities for New Hampshire Health Profession Opportunity Project	Assessed best practices for developing a diverse workforce and related career mobility pipeline	New Hampshire Office of Minority Health and Refugee Affairs (Concord, NH)
Loyola University of Chicago	Evaluation of Empowerment Pathways to Self-Sufficiency in Health Professions Career Development for Low-Income Individuals	Evaluated the extent to which psychological self-sufficiency affects employment placement and outcomes in health professions	Gateway Technical College (Kenosha, WI); Southland Health Care Forum (Chicago Heights, IL); Instituto del Progreso Latino (Chicago, IL)
North Dakota State University	Sustaining Career Pathways for American Indian Health Professionals in North Dakota: Building Apprenticeship and Workforce Options with the Next Steps HPOG Project	Explored the recruitment and retention of American Indians into professional nursing programs	Cankdeska Cikana Community College (Fort Totten, ND)

SOURCE: OPRE (2017).

ings. Additionally, OPRE's website contains a brief that presents an overview of these studies.<sup>9</sup>

## **Overarching Goals of the Portfolio**

As described earlier, through the design of the research and evaluation portfolio, OPRE and OFA intend to capitalize on the expansive learning opportunities that HPOG affords. These opportunities can be viewed as the principal goals of the portfolio—assessing the effectiveness of HPOG; promoting the use of evidence to inform programmatic decisions at the federal and local levels; and advancing the broader employment and training research, practice, and policy fields. Individual elements of the portfolio, and the sum of its parts, contribute in different ways to realizing these goals.

### **Assessing HPOG's effectiveness**

In order to rigorously assess HPOG's effectiveness, the portfolio includes impact evaluations. These evaluations use an experimental design, where eligible individuals are randomized to a treatment group, which is given access to HPOG, or to a control group, which is not given access to HPOG but may access any other services available in the community. Randomization ensures that the two groups have no systematic differences at baseline, making it possible to interpret subsequent differences in average outcomes between the groups as the impact of access to the HPOG intervention, with confidence that this attribution is accurate (Peck et al. 2014).

In addition to answering questions about overall HPOG program effectiveness, the HPOG 1.0 impact study experimentally tested three specific program components, aiming to identify which elements of career pathways programs contribute most to advancing the labor market success of participants. This is the first large-scale impact study of career pathways to test the impact of specific program components (Peck et al. 2014). In this way, the study not only enhances the assessment of HPOG's effectiveness but also advances the research field.

OPRE staff recognized that robust descriptive information was critical for fully understanding HPOG's effectiveness. The portfolio therefore included comprehensive, rigorous evaluations to assess program

implementation, systems change, outputs, and outcomes, and projects that support the collection of program administrative data.

### **Promoting the use of evidence**

The HPOG research and evaluation portfolio promotes the use of evidence at both the federal and local levels. It advances the former via OPRE's close coordination with OFA and participation in federal interagency activities, and the latter via activities intended to boost the research capacity of HPOG grantees.

As described above, OPRE and OFA work in partnership to administer the HPOG program and its attendant research and evaluation portfolio. This partnership facilitates the generation and application of evidence to inform OFA's administration of the HPOG program. For example, OPRE and OFA jointly developed the list of required uniform data measures and definitions that are used for both evaluation and performance management purposes. During the development process, OPRE supported OFA in considering the goals and needs of program monitoring and what they wanted to learn through the evaluation, and identifying the types of measures that would reliably meet these purposes. The HPOG 1.0 and 2.0 management information systems that collect the uniform data automatically generate the Performance Progress Reports grantees must submit to OFA on a semiannual and annual basis. This ensures OFA receives comprehensive, reliable information from each grantee in order to monitor program performance. Further, federal staff can access the management information systems to conduct queries or run reports to assess the progress of grantees or respond to an external request for information.<sup>10</sup>

OFA applied what it learned from the HPOG 1.0 research and evaluation portfolio to inform its drafting of the HPOG 2.0 FOA. The program components they determined important to the HPOG approach reflected lessons learned and emerging findings from the HPOG 1.0 evaluation. For example, as described earlier in the chapter, OFA more carefully defined the career pathways model in the HPOG 2.0 FOA, having learned under HPOG 1.0 that many participants completed only one, entry-level training. Additionally, OFA encouraged applicants to consider offering supportive service activities that, based on the existing body of evidence and past performance of HPOG programs, were

likely to improve program outcomes. These activities included basic skills education and work readiness activities.

OPRE participates in several interagency work groups to share information about and findings from the HPOG research and evaluation portfolio with fellow federal agencies. These activities are described in more detail later in this chapter, but they are important to note here because they help promote federal agencies' awareness and application of emerging evidence from HPOG to inform their own work.

The portfolio also seeks to build the capacity of local program operators in participating in, understanding the results of, and applying the learning from the HPOG research and evaluation efforts. For example, the federal evaluation teams provide training and technical assistance around evaluation-related issues such as collecting informed consent, configuring intake processes to accommodate random assignment, conducting random assignment, and monitoring sample buildup. Grantees are provided with intensive technical assistance around the use of the HPOG management information systems, such as resources and training sessions regarding collecting and entering data, understanding the data, using the data to track participant progress and service delivery and inform programmatic decisions, and manipulating the data to create products (such as lists, graphs, and charts) to share program progress with stakeholders. Additionally, OPRE and its evaluation contractors attend OFA's annual meeting for grantees to lead sessions on evaluation-related topics. Finally, as described earlier in the chapter, OPRE intentionally funded the HPOG UP research grants to help build the research capacity of programs by requiring that the research grantees partner with an HPOG program to design and execute the study. OPRE staff hope that these capacity-building efforts translate more generally to enhance the grantees' participation in and inform their consumption of other research and evaluation efforts.

### **Advancing the broader research, practice, and policy fields**

The HPOG research and evaluation portfolio also strives to advance the broader employment and training research, practice, and policy fields. Chiefly, it seeks to accomplish this by supporting and executing a comprehensive set of rigorous studies, and disseminating the resulting information and findings.



When HPOG was authorized in 2010, there was only limited evidence on career pathways programs and their effectiveness. OPRE's PACE evaluation was one of the first, large-scale random-assignment evaluations of programs following a career pathways framework. The HPOG research and evaluation portfolio, established three years after PACE launched, expanded the number of impact evaluations under way and integrated a comprehensive set of rigorous descriptive studies. Each study in the HPOG portfolio employs the most rigorous methods applicable to its inquiry, per the ACF evaluation policy.

Many studies in the portfolio are using and/or developing and testing new methods. For example, the HPOG 1.0 National Implementation Evaluation conducted a systems change analysis that represents one of the first efforts to comprehensively evaluate the systems that support career-pathways-based training programs for low-income adults. The exploratory analysis offered lessons for future research as well as policy implications (Bernstein et al. 2016). The HPOG 1.0 Impact Study considered a new method, called Cross-Site Attributional Model Improved by Calibration to Within-Site Individual Randomization Findings, or CAMIC, to reduce bias in analyses that researchers use to understand how a program's structure and implementation leads its impact to vary. The study conducted a simulation of the method, published the results, and encouraged fellow researchers to advance the methodology by applying it to other settings (Bell et al. 2017).

The portfolio also pushes forward the research and practice fields by evolving based on its own experiences and findings. As described earlier in the chapter, there are two phases of the research and evaluation portfolio, with the first phase focused on the HPOG 1.0 grants and the second phase pertaining to the HPOG 2.0 grants. The design and execution of, and emerging findings from, the first phase informed the blueprint for the second phase. For example, the uniform data that grantees are required to collect, data collection protocols and instruments, and analytic methods were all reviewed, reflected on, and sharpened where needed for the HPOG 2.0 efforts, based on the HPOG 1.0 experience. In this way, the portfolio maintains relevance—keyed to the most recent research findings and programmatic experiences—which, in turn, advances OPRE's portfolio and the career pathways research and practice fields more broadly.

The ability to translate and disseminate findings from the HPOG portfolio to relevant stakeholders in a way they can understand and apply the knowledge is critical for informing the broader field. Fortunately, to this end, OPRE has an array of tools at its disposal. Foremost, as described earlier, the ACF evaluation policy upholds the principle of transparency, committing OPRE to making information about evaluations (e.g., questions, methods, designs, time line) easily accessible on the web and other platforms; releasing findings regardless of whether they are positive, negative, or null; and archiving evaluation data for secondary use by interested researchers. When drafting reports and briefs, OPRE evaluation contractors are expected to adhere to the Federal Plain Language Guidelines, which impart strategies for achieving clear communication.<sup>11</sup> OPRE has also supported the development of various resources on dissemination of human services research, including the Value-Added Dissemination Framework, to inform project dissemination activities (Macoubrie and Harrison 2013). Additionally, OPRE employs a full-time dissemination strategist who provides counsel regarding effective dissemination approaches, and prepares information for distribution via the OPRE website and social media.

The HPOG research and evaluation portfolio strives to utilize all these dissemination tools to ensure the knowledge it generates is intentionally and strategically shared. In all its HPOG evaluation contracts, OPRE calls for detailed reporting and publication of evaluation designs, analysis plans, and findings using vehicles tailored to the target audience, including technical reports, special topics papers, and short, visually appealing briefs. OPRE also supports its HPOG evaluation contractors in presenting study information and findings via conference presentations, webinars, blog posts, and social media, among other channels. In addition to the information contained on OPRE's website about the portfolio and its component studies, OPRE also supports one of its contractors in hosting and maintaining a career pathways website, which is intended to compile and disseminate information related to career pathways programs, research, and evaluation in one designated site, with a particular focus on the PACE and HPOG initiatives.<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, coordination with fellow federal agencies is critical to the portfolio's objective of advancing the broader employment and training research, practice, and policy fields. As noted earlier, OPRE participates in a range of federal interagency working groups, through which

it shares information from its HPOG research and evaluation portfolio and seeks to coordinate its career pathways work with relevant efforts at other federal agencies. The joint letter expressing federal commitment to support the use of career pathways, described at the beginning of this chapter, led to the formation of the Interagency Working Group on Career Pathways. Staff from more than 10 federal agencies participate in the working group, including OPRE and OFA staff. This group shares information about ongoing work related to career pathways and identifies opportunities for coordination and collaboration across agencies. Given that the joint letter explicitly references HPOG as an example of a career pathways initiative, working group members regularly ask about the status of and findings from the HPOG portfolio, for their general awareness and to inform their own work.

OPRE also leads the Federal Employment, Training, and Education Research and Evaluation Working Group. Launched in 2009, this ongoing working group seeks to promote ongoing exchanges between agencies about their research and evaluations in various stages of development, and explore possibilities for jointly funding and supporting research. Staff from five federal agencies, including the Departments of Health and Human Services, Labor, Education, Agriculture, and Housing and Urban Development, regularly attend meetings. Thus, the working group serves as another vehicle through which OPRE can disseminate information about its HPOG portfolio and identify opportunities for coordinating with other federal agencies in this work.

## **HPOG RESEARCH AND EVALUATION: CURRENT REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE PATHS**

### **Next Steps for the Portfolio**

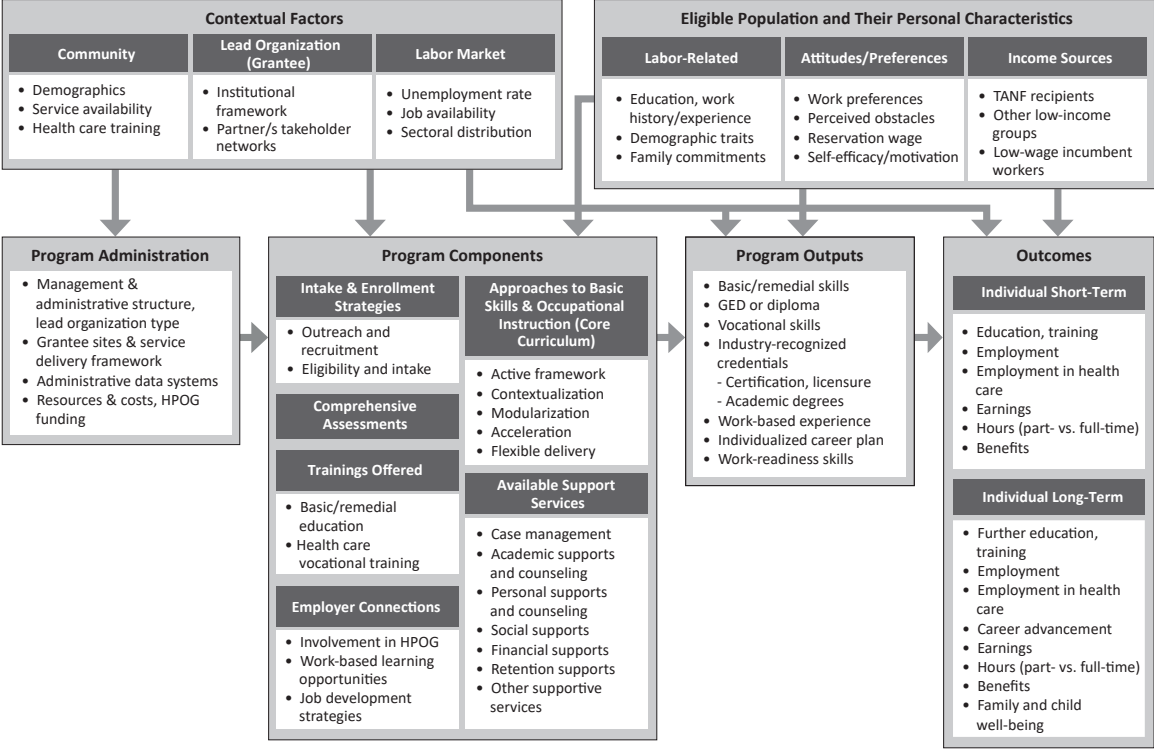
The research and evaluation portfolio for HPOG 1.0 remains active. Several HPOG 1.0 portfolio components are ongoing to assess intermediate and longer-term outcomes and impacts. This is in keeping with the career pathways theory of change and HPOG program logic model. Career pathways organize postsecondary education and training as a series of manageable steps leading to successively higher creden-

tials and employment opportunities in growing occupations. They are designed to allow entries, exits, and reentries at each step, depending on skill levels and prior training, employment, and changing personal situations. Thus, for participants in career pathways programs, outcomes related to educational progress, employment, and earnings are expected to manifest over a period of time. Similarly, as depicted in Figure 3.1, HPOG's logic model reflects the expectation that receipt of vocational training and support services will lead to vocational skills and industry-recognized credentials, among other outputs; these outputs should then result in educational progress, employment, higher earnings, and other employment-related outcomes over a period of time (Harvill, Moulton, and Peck 2015).

Therefore, OPRE considers the impact findings assessed at 15 months after random assignment as preliminary, or short term. At the outset of the HPOG 1.0 Impact Study, educational progress was designated as the confirmatory outcome at this first follow-up point.<sup>13</sup> OPRE and the evaluation team based this decision on the HPOG logic model described above, theorizing that it may take more than 15 months for participants to make substantial progress toward major postsecondary training credentials and move into and advance in career-track employment. OPRE and the evaluation teams anticipate that employment and earnings-related impacts will more fully emerge by 36 and 72 months after random assignment. Consequently, for these intermediate and long-term studies in OPRE's HPOG evaluation portfolio, earnings will be a confirmatory outcome, in addition to educational progress, and employment and other outcomes will also be assessed. Examining findings at all three points—short-term, intermediate, and long-term—will permit OPRE to thoroughly assess whether and how career pathways programs advance individuals toward self-sufficiency.

At the time of drafting this chapter, the HPOG 2.0 Program is in its fourth year of grants. Given the extension of the HPOG program, the HPOG 2.0 grantees will be able to complete the full five-year grant period, and the corresponding research and evaluation portfolio will continue. As noted earlier in the chapter, the HPOG 2.0 portfolio was informed by and is building off knowledge being generated by the HPOG 1.0 portfolio. Table 3.3 presents a summary of the specific components of the HPOG 2.0 portfolio.

Figure 3.1 HPOG Program Logic Model



SOURCE: Harvill, Moulton, and Peck (2015).

**Table 3.3 Components of the HPOG 2.0 Research and Evaluation Portfolio**

Project title	Project purpose	Participating HPOG 2.0 grantees
HPOG 2.0 Evaluation Design and Performance Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide recommendations for the design of an evaluation to assess implementation, outcomes, systems change, and impacts</li><li>• Design and maintain a management information system to collect data for ACF performance management and evaluation</li><li>• Provide intensive technical assistance to grantees around the use of the management information system</li></ul>	All 32 HPOG 2.0 grantees
HPOG 2.0 National Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Design and conduct an impact study to assess the effectiveness of HPOG 2.0</li><li>• Design and conduct a descriptive study that includes implementation, outcomes, and systems change studies</li><li>• Design and conduct a study to assess the costs and benefits of a standard HPOG 2.0 program</li><li>• Provide evaluation-related technical assistance to enhance grantees' research capacity</li></ul>	All 27 nontribal HPOG 2.0 grantees
HPOG 2.0 Tribal Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Design and conduct a comprehensive implementation and outcome evaluation of the tribal grantees</li><li>• Provide evaluation-related technical assistance to enhance the tribal grantees' research capacity</li></ul>	All five Tribal HPOG 2.0 grantees
HPOG 2.0 University Partnership Research Grants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conduct specific studies in partnership with an HPOG 2.0 program</li><li>• Support studies pertaining to: career advancement in health care; empowerment-based workforce development models and employer engagement; and effects of a two-generation program</li></ul>	Three HPOG 2.0 grantees <i>(The WorkPlace, Inc.; Chicago State University; the Community Action Project of Tulsa County)</i>

SOURCE: OPRE (n.d.).

So, in addition to the status of HPOG reauthorization, next steps for OPRE's career pathways portfolio are also contingent on how the full set of findings from the HPOG 1.0 and 2.0 portfolios develop. From these findings, OPRE hopes to learn about the implementation and short-term, intermediate, and long-term impacts of the career pathways models included in HPOG and PACE. Further, we hope to learn whether the effects vary in systematic ways (over time, across outcomes, by occupation, by program model, or by participant characteristics); whether specific models, strategies, or components lead to different impacts; and whether and how models can be adjusted to promote longer-term outcomes for participants. This comprehensive array of findings will help reveal where there are still gaps in knowledge that merit further research efforts.

OPRE also anticipates coordinating future research efforts with other federal agencies conducting work around career pathways. Specifically, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act requires the U.S. Department of Labor to conduct a study to build on career advancement models and practices in the health care and early education and child care arenas.<sup>14</sup> Findings from OPRE's career pathways portfolio have informed the Department of Labor's assessment of evaluation design options to address critical gaps in knowledge. As both agencies move forward with portfolios of work in this area, they intend to leverage information from and coordinate closely with each other.

## **Reflections and Lessons Learned**

This chapter shows that HPOG is a multifaceted initiative with significant goals, and that its research and evaluation portfolio is equally comprehensive, with wide-ranging learning objectives. Taking a step back to reflect on the HPOG initiative and experience thus far brings to the surface several notable lessons learned.

### **Importance of legislation**

As ACF's evaluation policy states, "For new initiatives and demonstrations in particular, evaluations will be more feasible and useful when planned in concert with the planning of the initiative or demonstration, rather than as an afterthought" (ACF 2012). This alignment is precisely what HPOG's authorizing legislation achieved. By establish-

ing HPOG as a demonstration and mandating and providing specific parameters for an evaluation, the legislation established rigorous evaluation as a fundamental component of the initiative and set the precedent for OPRE's and OFA's partnership in executing both the program and the evaluation. The scope and duration of the HPOG research and evaluation portfolio likely would not be possible without this legislative support. At numerous briefings and convenings, HPOG has been called a model for legislation in terms of pairing programmatic activities with evaluation to support evidence building.

### **Importance of establishing an evaluation policy**

ACF's evaluation policy serves as the underpinning for the HPOG research and evaluation portfolio and has been instrumental to the work. For example, in keeping with the policy's principle of rigor, each study in the portfolio was designed to employ the most rigorous methods appropriate to accomplish their specific aims, and experimental approaches are used where possible to assess causal questions about HPOG's effectiveness. To ensure relevancy, the portfolio's primary research questions were driven by HPOG's authorizing legislation, ACF priorities, and the interests of relevant stakeholders, and the portfolio is coordinated with and informed by OFA's programmatic efforts. To promote transparency, detailed study information and findings are widely disseminated by multiple platforms, and analysis and design plans are published in advance of the study's execution and assessment of findings. Lastly, the portfolio also upholds the evaluation policy's tenets of independence and ethics—all research and evaluation efforts are conducted by external, highly qualified entities, who are awarded the work through competitive grants or contracts, and who comply with regulations governing human subjects research. These are just some of the ways in which the ACF evaluation policy has guided the design, content, and execution of the HPOG research and evaluation portfolio. In addition, the policy serves as an authoritative resource for OPRE to stand on and refer to when providing recommendations for evaluation efforts, around HPOG and more broadly.

The report recently released by the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking underscores the importance of having formally established evaluation policies.<sup>15</sup> The commission references the establishment of departmentwide evaluation and research policies that encour-



age rigor, credibility, independence, and transparency as one way to strengthen the program evaluation function within the federal government, and a step toward expanding evidence building. Further, that the commission's report identifies OPRE as one of a few strong evaluation units currently existing across government reinforces the value and significance of our evaluation policy.

### **Importance of relationships**

Another lesson gleaned from the HPOG portfolio is the importance of relationships—chiefly, those with the program office (i.e., OFA) and the local grantees—to successful evaluation efforts. As the chapter describes in detail, OPRE and OFA maintain a close, collaborative partnership to coordinate the execution of the HPOG program and research and evaluation efforts. This partnership has been crucial for ensuring that these undertakings learn from and inform each other; it strengthens the relevancy of the research and evaluation efforts and applicability of resulting findings. However, in keeping with the ACF evaluation policy's principles of independence and ethics, OPRE staff are careful to actively monitor the nature of the partnership with OFA, and to fund independent entities to conduct the evaluation activities, to protect the evaluation portfolio from undue influence or bias.

As noted, the portfolio also helps local program operators participate in, understand the results of, and apply the learning from the research and evaluation efforts. Intentionally incorporating activities to address this aim not only benefits the grantees, it also benefits the evaluation efforts by supporting grantee buy-in. If the grantees understand how the data and eventual findings can inform and enhance their own work (for example, by providing information to guide program improvements or share with stakeholders to demonstrate progress), their cooperation in and enthusiasm for participating in the evaluation efforts strengthen. This in turn facilitates grantees' collection of high-quality data and smoother operations on the ground in carrying out the evaluation activities. However, it is important to consider the burden placed on grantees in terms of participating in the evaluation and capacity-building efforts. Layering on too many demands can have a negative effect, leading to grantee burnout or frustration. OPRE and OFA therefore strive to balance grantees' information collection activities and evaluation requirements with the practicality of carrying them

out. We also consider whether and how the data grantees are asked to collect will be useful to them, so they recognize and capitalize on the value in collecting it, and so the evaluation maintains applicability to program operations on the ground.

This segues to lessons learned from HPOG around the importance of uniform data—how it can affect relationships and how it serves program and evaluation purposes. As described earlier, OPRE and OFA decided to require that the HPOG grantees collect a uniform set of data measures and enter the data into a management information system created exclusively for HPOG. In jointly developing the list of uniform data measures, OPRE and OFA considered what data would meet the needs of OFA for performance monitoring, the HPOG grantees for program management, and OPRE for research and evaluation. We aimed to arrive at a set of measures that would meet this range of needs, could be collected reliably, and whose collection wouldn't overburden the grantees.

Having uniform data across grantees has imparted many benefits. The HPOG 1.0 and 2.0 management information systems were designed to automatically aggregate the data entered by the grantees into the performance progress reports they submit to OFA. This supplies OFA with detailed and reliable information on which to base program performance monitoring. For each grantee, OFA receives data on a range of program activities, including participant enrollment in and completion of health care training by occupation, participation in basic skills activities, receipt of support services, employment, and average wages. This level of information enables much more informed and active monitoring of performance than simple narrative summaries of progress would support. OFA can engage with the grantees on a deeper level to understand program operations and offer support. In terms of benefiting the evaluation, the uniform data measures are defined at the grantee, program, and individual levels, which enables the aggregation and analysis of data in different ways to assess outputs and outcomes meaningfully across grantees, programs, and participant subgroups. It also enables the evaluation to link to administrative data, since the individual-level data include participant social security numbers.

That said, collecting uniform data has not been without challenges. The management information systems developed to support the data collection have been costly. Significant financial resources and time

have been required to develop, test, and maintain the systems, and remain in compliance with federal regulations pertaining to data safety and security. Significant resources have also been needed to support the provision of intensive technical assistance to the HPOG grantees around using the systems, ranging from the development of guidance manuals, to establishing a help desk, providing training webinars, and offering one-on-one assistance. While this assistance has strengthened the evaluation team's interaction and relationship with the grantees, it has also stressed it in times when the systems have encountered technical difficulties, or the grantees have struggled with data entry tasks. So, while collecting uniform data via management information systems can be an invaluable tool, one must be prepared for the time, effort, financial resources, and user support required for the effort.

OPRE is particularly mindful of the need to establish positive relationships with the Tribal HPOG grantees and their stakeholders, including tribal leaders, community members, and others. At the onset of the portfolio, OPRE established its expectations that the tribal evaluation team work closely with the tribal grantees to ensure the tribes are comfortable with the evaluation efforts and that the efforts meet not only ACF's needs but also each tribe's needs while respecting tribal sovereignty. OPRE emphasized the importance of establishing relationships that were mutually beneficial and promoted bidirectional learning between the grantees and the evaluation team. Maintaining these relationships requires ongoing engagement and discussions with the tribal grantees throughout the evaluation efforts.

As noted, ACF's evaluation policy states that key stakeholders should actively participate in setting evaluation priorities, identifying evaluation questions, and assessing the implications of findings; at the same time evaluations should maintain transparency and independence and ensure neither the appearance nor the reality of bias. Across both rounds of HPOG, the tribal evaluation team actively engaged with tribal leadership for each awarded Tribal HPOG grantee, as appropriate, and other local stakeholders to ensure that the evaluation efforts were firmly anchored in questions meaningful to the tribes and that assist local service providers in better serving their communities. The evaluation team discussed the goals with the tribal grantees before, during, and after the development of the evaluation design plans. The grantees reviewed the data collection instruments and methods to ensure that information

collected is culturally relevant and appropriate. They were also asked to review and offer comments about the interpretation of findings. Ultimately, findings are analyzed and shared objectively; however, the evaluation team also recognizes that data, particularly qualitative data, may be interpreted differently by the evaluation team than a member of the community. Confirming the accuracy of interpretations strengthens the rigor and relevance of the findings.

### **Importance of dissemination**

Lastly, the HPOG research and evaluation portfolio elevates the importance of systematically and strategically integrating plans for dissemination. Any evidence generated by the HPOG portfolio will lie dormant unless it is translated and disseminated to relevant stakeholders in a way they can understand and apply it. Therefore, dissemination planning occurred in tandem with the design of each research and evaluation activity, so that the dissemination goals, strategies, audiences, and products were appropriately matched to effectively communicate the information to be generated. OPRE staff also found it important to be creative with dissemination. Too often studies only produce long, technical reports that are not accessible to many stakeholders. While these types of reports are necessary and valuable to produce, for transparency and for advancing the research field, shorter briefs, blogs, social media posts, webinars, and other methods have been useful for sharing information in innovative ways to reach a wider range of audiences. OPRE and OFA hope this publication will serve as one such innovative way for sharing information on HPOG.

### **Notes**

1. These data were drawn from the Performance Reporting System, the performance management system for HPOG 1.0, by OPRE's evaluation contractor, Abt Associates, on July 18, 2017. Note that of the 36,548 participants enrolled, close to 30,000 consented to participate in the research and evaluation efforts. Therefore, HPOG evaluation reports on the OPRE website reflect varying samples. For more information about the characteristics and outcomes of the HPOG 1.0 participants, see the findings from the National Implementation Evaluation and the Evaluation of Tribal HPOG described in subsequent chapters of this book.
2. ACF issues Funding Opportunity Announcements to announce the availability of funds for specific activities and request applications for these funds.

3. Public Law 111-148, 124 Stat. 119, March 23, 2010, sect. 5507(a), “Demonstration Projects to Provide Low-Income Individuals with Opportunities for Education, Training, and Career Advancement to Address Health Professions Workforce Needs,” adding sect. 2008(a) to the Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. 1397g(a).
4. The HPOG authorizing statute mandates that entities applying for a grant engage in consultation and coordination with a number of organizations (42 U.S.C. 1397g(a) (2)(B)). Specifically, it stipulates that they “shall demonstrate in the application that the entity has consulted with the State agency responsible for administering the State TANF program, the local workforce investment board in the area in which the project is to be conducted (unless the applicant is such board), the State workforce investment board established under section 111 of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, and the State Apprenticeship Agency recognized under the Act of August 16, 1937 (commonly known as the National Apprenticeship Act) (or if no agency has been recognized in the State, the Office of Apprenticeship of the Department of Labor) and that the project will be carried out in coordination with such entities.”
5. For more information on the PACE evaluation, see <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/pathways-for-advancing-careers-and-education> (accessed March 1, 2019).
6. Public Law 111-148, 124 Stat. 119, March 23, 2010, sect. 5507(a), “Demonstration Projects to Provide Low-Income Individuals with Opportunities for Education, Training, and Career Advancement to Address Health Professions Workforce Needs,” adding sect. 2008(a) to the Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. 1397g(a).
7. For more information, see the Evaluation Portfolio for the Health Profession Opportunity Grants Program webpage, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/evaluation-portfolio-for-the-health-profession-opportunity-grants-hpog> (accessed March 1, 2019).
8. To access these reports, see <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/health-profession-opportunity-grants-hpog-impact-studies> and <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/pathways-for-advancing-careers-and-education> (accessed March 1, 2019).
9. To access the brief, see <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/the-hpog-university-partnership-research-grants> (accessed March 1, 2019).
10. The HPOG 1.0 and 2.0 management information systems are designed to automatically mask any personally identifiable information for federal staff and other users not authorized to view it.
11. See Plain Language Action and Information Network website, <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/guidelines/FederalPLGuidelines/FederalPLGuidelines.pdf> (accessed January 17, 2018).
12. For more information, see Career Pathways: <http://career-pathways.org> (accessed March 1, 2019).
13. Confirmatory outcomes are the main indicators of the extent to which the program is making progress toward its goals. See Harvill, Moulton, and Peck (2015).
14. 29 U.S. Code § 3224(b)(4)(I)
15. To access the full report, see <https://www.cep.gov/cep-final-report.html> (accessed June 12, 2019).

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