

IRS Statistics of Income Gets Good News

ASA monitors other agencies' progress on autonomy, stature, leadership

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Employees in the IRS Statistics of Income (SOI) Division, one of 14 primary federal statistical agencies, received encouraging news in mid-December via an email saying their IT resources would remain under the control of their umbrella organization: Research, Analysis, and Statistics (RAS). As readers may recall from my July 2009 column, the IRS seemed to be moving toward absorbing SOI's IT into the much larger IRS IT infrastructure as part of a move to make their IT system more secure.

The ASA, together with members of the SOI Advisory Panel, worked hard to forestall such plans because of the ramifications for SOI's effectiveness and efficiency and will continue to monitor the situation as details unfold.

In their email to SOI and other RAS employees, IRS Chief Technology Officer Terence V. Millholland and Acting RAS Director Patricia H. McGuire said the plan was largely to move most RAS servers to a secure facility in a separate location from other IT systems, have RAS employees continue to administer all RAS systems and applications, and keep RAS IT staff in the RAS organization.

Many details remain to be worked out, but most individuals familiar with the situation regard this as a positive step. Thomas Petska, ASA Fellow and retired SOI director, said, "I think that this is the best outcome we could envision, so I am cautiously optimistic, although a memorandum of understanding to document this in writing is still needed." Other SOI Advisory Panel members concurred, adding it is important to remain vigilant as the plan is developed.

Hints of the change in IRS plans for SOI's IT resources were in the air at the fall meeting of the SOI Advisory Panel. A representative from the IRS IT services reported there was a shift when they realized the uniqueness of SOI. More than once, I heard the metaphor of "having to break the mold" when considering SOI's IT resources.

The challenge of IT control was also a factor in the principle "strong position of independence" being elevated this year in the National Academies' *Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency* (fourth edition). The timing was excellent, as the ASA used this document in its meetings on the SOI issue. I understand the USDA's National



Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) leadership also used *Principles and Practices* when discussing their IT centralization scheme with USDA IT officials.

To recap the reason why control of its IT resources is so important to a statistical agency, I quote 2009 ASA President Sally Morton from a letter she wrote to John Holdren, President Obama's science advisor:

First, for a statistical agency to keep the trust of its data providers, it must be seen as insulated from other entities. Such insulation is lost without control of IT resources. Second, to provide timely reports and respond nimbly to requests, statistical agencies must have ready, direct access to their data, which would not be the case if employees have to access their data through a centralized IT office that

Visibility and Impact

Workgroup wants to hear your thoughts

Climategate, mammograms, Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), employment and financial sector issues ... How can the ASA be prepared to speak about an emerging issue? ASA President Sastry Pantula has appointed a workgroup to address this aspect of the ASA strategic plan. Chaired by 2009 ASA President Sally Morton, the group is interested in hearing your thoughts.

The group's charge is to "standardize the process for identifying emerging issues and for providing timely response in the areas of public policy and science policy in collaboration with the ASA director of science policy and the other statistical associations."

One could classify emerging issues as those that can be anticipated in a relatively straightforward manner and those that are more difficult to anticipate. ESEA would fit into the former category, Climategate into the latter, and mammograms into both.

Commenting on difficult-to-anticipate topics is important and would help raise the profile of statistics. However, because any such ASA statement would require significant input from members—all of whom have busy schedules—and ASA Board consideration, it would be difficult to produce a statement quickly enough to be relevant. Therefore, I suggest the ASA concentrate on a process for developing statements for easier-to-anticipate topics. Concentrating on such topics also would help build the ASA's capacity to tackle the difficult-to-anticipate topics.

What process should the ASA follow to anticipate what the science policy topics will be six to eight months out? With 18,000 members spread throughout industry, academia, and government and working on a vast array of topics in many environments, the ASA is well positioned to anticipate up-and-coming issues.

A science colleague of mine likes to quote Wayne Gretsky: "A great hockey player plays where the puck is going to be." Members of the workgroup would appreciate your help in determining where the policy puck will be. If you have suggestions, please share them with me or any of the following workgroup members:

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may have different priorities. Finally, the greatest strength of a statistical agency is its personnel, who consist of multidisciplinary project teams that work successfully hand-in-hand with years of institutional knowledge, training, and experience. Dismantling these teams would undermine the effectiveness and efficiency of a statistical agency and greatly lessen its ability to maintain sustainable human capital.


While this news is certainly important to ASA members at SOI and across the federal government, I think the issue is relevant to all members. The federal statistical agencies' products represent perhaps the highest-profile applications of statistics, as they are widely reported and have an influence on policy and the financial markets. Therefore, it is vital for the ASA to help ensure the federal statistical agencies have the resources they need to do their jobs effectively and efficiently.

Autonomy, Stature, Leadership

Control of IT resources is just one of the federal statistics issues the ASA has been monitoring. Morton also wrote letters to key administration officials on autonomy and stature issues for the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) and National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). For both, the principal requests were for the agency heads to have sufficient stature within the host department and final authority over all agency products, including press releases.

The final authority on agency products was withdrawn for BJS in the Patriot Act and subsequent legislation. For NCES, this authority was made ambiguous in the 2002 Institute of Education Sciences (IES) legislation and subsequent implementation.

Sufficient stature within the host department is important for several reasons. First, as detailed in a November letter from Morton to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, direct access by the agency head (e.g., BJS director or NCES commissioner) to a department head (e.g., attorney general or secretary of education, respectively) and participation in policy meetings of senior department officials would help better inform the department's policies, which is especially important in this administration with its emphasis on data-driven decisionmaking. The statistics agency head also could contribute to informing department-wide decisionmaking because of his or her command of an extraordinary array of information.



Second, as Morton further discussed in her letter, by hearing first-hand the senior-level policy discussions, the statistics agency head would be better equipped to direct agency resources that provide data for informing new policy.

Finally, sufficient stature within a department is necessary for the agency head to speak for the integrity of the agency's products, protect against outside infringement, and ensure adequate budgeting.

ASA staff will continue to work on these issues, as Congress is expected to undertake legislation on the Department of Justice and Department of Education IES in the coming year.

Ensuring leadership at federal statistics agencies is also a priority. Morton wrote letters to members of the Obama administration urging quick appointment of heads for the U.S. Census Bureau, BJS, and NCES and listing qualities the nominees should possess. Upon the nomination of Robert M. Groves to head the U.S. Census Bureau, Morton signed letters in support of his quick confirmation. Morton also sent a letter of support for James P. Lynch, nominee for BJS director, who is a former chair of the ASA Committee on Law and Justice Statistics. The administration has yet to nominate a NCES commissioner.

Budgets and Other Issues

The ASA also has been supportive of the budgets for the federal statistics agencies, where much of the news for fiscal year 2010 (FY10) was positive. Many agencies received double-digit percentage increases. As Keith Crank, ASA's research and graduate education manager, reports in his column on Page 19, the U.S. Census Bureau was funded at \$7.325 billion, nearly the level requested by the administration and well above the FY09 level of \$4.1 billion, largely to provide for the 2010 census.

BJS saw its budget increase by \$15 million to implement redesigned methodology for the National Crime Victimization Survey. NCES received a 10% increase to \$108.5 million, and the National Center for Health Statistics received an increase of 10% to \$138.7 million.

The budget for the Bureau of Economic Analysis, on the other hand, was increased by only \$3.5 million to \$93.5 million, with Congress funding just two of the four proposed initiatives. The Energy Information Administration's budget was held constant at \$110.6 million, having received none of its \$22 million requested increase.

ASA Science Policy Actions

ASA president sends letter to NIH Director Francis Collins on the need to train and support more biostatisticians

ASA president sends letters to senior Michigan education officials urging more statistics in new curriculum standards

BLS, NASS, and the Economic Research Service were all funded near their requested amounts: \$611.4 million (an increase of approximately 2%), \$161.83 million (6%), and 82.5 million (2%), respectively.

The ASA also responded to an amendment to a Senate appropriations bill by Sen. David Vitter (R-LA) and Sen. Bob Bennett (R-UT) that would add a question on immigration status to the decennial census questionnaire. Concerned about the impact of an untested question added at the 11th hour, the ASA, in coordination with other census stakeholders, contacted the staff of senators regarded as swing voters and asked members in Louisiana and Utah to communicate their concerns to Vitter and Bennett.

With the ASA's science policy activities still ramping up, I see room for expanding upon the efforts reported here. I also would emphasize that we rely on input from our members on how to act and on what to act. If you have suggestions, please contact me at pierson@amstat.org. ■

Judges Wanted for ASA Project Competition

The ASA/NCTM Joint Committee on Curriculum in Statistics and Probability is seeking judges for the ASA Project Competition. Judging takes place via email during the summer and requires about four hours. If interested, email Megan Mocko at mmeece@stat.ufl.edu or call (352) 273-2975.