

# Taking Your First Steps Toward a Learning Agenda

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In [an earlier article](#), we shared some practical tips to help you prepare for your learning agenda journey. These tips include having a clear theory of change in place, identifying your program's stakeholders and gaining their buy-in for your learning agenda, and focusing on key decision points related to your program to help you understand your evidence needs. In this article, we provide some guidance on identifying and prioritizing your learning agenda questions, taking stock of the data you already have on your program, and setting realistic expectations for this work.

## WHAT IS A LEARNING AGENDA?

To recap, an agency's learning agenda is a roadmap for building evidence that expands and augments ongoing strategic planning. Through a process of clear prioritization and stakeholder engagement, the learning agenda focuses an agency on its most important needs, the questions that are most vital to answer, and a strategy for developing corresponding evidence.

## WHAT ARE THE FIRST STEPS TO DEVELOPING A LEARNING AGENDA?

We know that developing and implementing a learning agenda can seem daunting. A powerful strategy for tackling large complex tasks like this is to break things down into more manageable pieces. We hope the initial steps we lay out below will help you do that. And remember, the whole purpose of a learning agenda is to answer important questions you have about your program and help you make informed decisions about its design and implementation.

## IDENTIFY YOUR QUESTIONS

As Bruce Britton (formerly of Framework) explains, learning agendas are designed around a broad set of short- and long-term questions about an agency's work that, when answered, enable the agency to use evidence to work more effectively. Your program's theory of change is a helpful starting point for you and program stakeholders to think about what you *already know* about your program and what you still *need to know*. You may have already identified what needs to happen for your program to achieve its goals, as

**Trewon Technologies** has been at the forefront of assisting government clients in prioritizing evidence needs. We have decades of experience conducting evaluations across the federal spectrum and have helped senior leadership prioritize data needs for program improvement and accountability. Most recently, Trewon assisted the National Science Foundation in implementing the early stages of the Evidence Act and developing learning agendas for the Office of Evaluation and Assessment Capability, the Office of International Science and Engineering, and the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES). We have developed the practical tips shared here to assist other agencies on their learning agenda journeys.

we recommended in our first article. This exercise of thinking backward from goals to outcomes and activities can also help identify some of the questions you have.

There are also several kinds of questions you'll want to ask about your program. You may want to test the assumptions of your theory of change: does your program work the way it was intended? Or maybe your stakeholders have identified an implementation-related challenge that you want to understand better and problem solve. Questions can come from a wide range of sources, including a review of program documents, formal and informal discussions with program staff and stakeholders, and feedback you've received about your program. In the beginning, don't worry about getting the questions exactly right. You'll have the opportunity to decide which questions will define your learning agendas in the next step.

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## **DETERMINE YOUR PRIORITIES**

**Prioritize questions that will have the greatest impact on your program's success.**

Once you identify your program's learning agenda questions, you'll want to prioritize answering the questions that will have the greatest impact on your program's success. This will make your learning agenda a more manageable and powerful tool.

As USAID advises, you ultimately want a learning agenda that is flexible, realistic, inclusive, and actionable so keep those qualities in mind as you narrow down your list of questions. For example, some questions may be more central to your program goals than others or may take priority due to key decision points coming up. Other questions may not be feasible to answer because the data are unavailable or are too difficult to collect. You'll have different questions about a new program than a program that's more established. You'll also want to make sure your questions reflect the perspectives of multiple stakeholders.

## **LEVERAGE EXISTING DATA**

Evidence comes from a variety of sources, including previous evaluations or analyses, research performance progress reports (RPPRs), Government Performance and Results Modernization Act (GPRMA) data, literature reviews, interviews, and program documents. Chances are, you already have a foundation for the essential work of evidence building and won't need to build your evidence plan from the ground up.

**Build on existing data to establish the foundation for your evidence.**

We recommend an evidence mapping exercise: review the data you already have as they relate to your learning agenda questions to understand what questions you can already answer, either fully or in part, where you have gaps in knowledge, and what strategies you can use to fill those gaps. Some existing data will serve as direct evidence for your learning agenda questions, while other data may require additional analyses to answer your questions. This exercise will also help you identify where new data collection or analyses are needed.

## **SET A REALISTIC TIMELINE**

We know that you probably have more questions about your program than the time and resources to answer them all. We also know that it takes time and resources to identify and engage your program's stakeholders, identify and prioritize your learning agenda questions, review the data you already have,

and collect the data you need but don't have, all while running your program. That's why we think it's important to not only prioritize your learning agenda questions but be realistic about what you can achieve based on and external factors, and envision your learning agenda as a living document that will change and grow along with knowledge about your program.

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Knowing your key decision points and mapping your existing evidence to your learning agenda questions will help you understand what's feasible to accomplish. To establish a realistic timeline, work backward from your key decision points to identify what data are needed to inform decision making and

when. Include your evidence-building activities in this timeline. For example, determine whether you will need OMB clearance and plan accordingly, allow your team sufficient time to collect and analyze the data, and take advantage of the data you already have, even if it only partially answers your questions. Some questions may require a long-term plan to address.

## RESOURCES

Raue, K., Rodick, W., & Baldi, S. (2021). *Ready, set, go! Practical tips for your learning agenda journey*. Trewon Technologies. <https://trewon.com/ready-set-go-practical-tips-for-your-learning-agenda-journey/>

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Britton, B., & Thakali, S. (2012). *Learning questions*. Framework. [https://www.globalfokus.dk/images/Kapacitetsudvikling/indsatser/SOL\\_ressourcedatabase/1\\_Toolbox/Article\\_Learning\\_Questions\\_Tool\\_Bruce\\_Britton.pdf](https://www.globalfokus.dk/images/Kapacitetsudvikling/indsatser/SOL_ressourcedatabase/1_Toolbox/Article_Learning_Questions_Tool_Bruce_Britton.pdf)

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## Research and Evaluation at Trewon

Trewon's Research and Evaluation team is comprised of a range of experts with decades-long experience supporting government clients in all aspects of research and evaluation support services, such as developing learning agendas and evidence maps, facilitating stakeholder engagement, designing valid and reliable quick turnaround studies, collecting and analyzing data, providing technical assistance, developing engaging reports, and fostering a culture of learning and continuous improvement. Our clients include the National Science Foundation, the Department of State, the Department of Justice, the Department of Defense, City Gate Foundation, and the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services.