Session 6

Benefits and Challenges of the Funding Opportunity

General Discussion: Benefits and Challenges of the Funding Opportunity

Brian A. Harris-Kojetin
U.S. Office of Management and Budget

I find myself in the unenviable position of attempting to add something to what has already been expressed here today and trying to follow Fritz, who is always a tough act to follow. Fortunately, my task is not to contribute substantively to the technical discussion, but rather to discuss the benefits and challenges of the Funding Opportunity in Survey Research. Certainly some of the benefits of this program have become quite obvious to everyone here today.

I will briefly address what I see as some of the major benefits of the Funding Opportunity, and then talk about some challenges and opportunities we have in the Federal statistical system that future proposals may help us address.

Benefits

One of the most immediate benefits is the dialogue that we have had here today and the interactions we will continue to have. Certainly one of the goals of this enterprise is to foster greater interaction of the Federal statistical and academic communities about topics of mutual interest and concern. We Feds can benefit and learn about innovations in other sectors, while they learn more about the applied problems we are faced with. Our hope is to push their interest and thinking into areas and applications related to work they are already pursuing, or perhaps even to spark an interest in a new area of research that would be of real benefit to us.

In the process we hope to foster more long-term benefits and lasting relationships that may lead not only to the potential for agencies funding further work but also to new ideas for additional projects and fostering student knowledge of issues and opportunities in the Federal statistical system. There are many interesting problems and challenges we face in Federal statistics, and we need to attract the future talent to deal with these. In some sense, this program becomes one way for us to advertise ourselves and our issues to the next generation through their faculty mentors. NSF considers student support in its decisions and many Federal agencies strongly support this as well.

Looking at the structure of the program itself, the Funding Opportunity provides a valuable mechanism for multiple agencies that don't have access to a grants process and may not have broad contact with academics and others working on similar issues. Although statistical agencies frequently contract out data collection and perhaps some related methodological and statistical research, most agencies do not on their own have the ability to fund investigator-initiated grants, and could not, on their own muster the resources necessary to fund, manage, and maintain such a program.

The Funding Opportunity is an excellent example of cooperation among statistical agencies for the greater good of the whole Federal Statistical System. Since coming to OMB, I have seen that

coordinating and effectively communicating across more than 70 agencies that do some kinds of statistical work is an enormous task. Statistical agencies have frequently been at the forefront of innovation and coordination across government, and the Funding Opportunity is an excellent example of effective use of government resources.

Much of the credit for this success goes to the efforts of Monroe Sirken and Nancy Kirkendall and the collaboration they established between the ICSP and the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology (FCSM). The FCSM, which consists of about two dozen senior statisticians, methodologists, economists, and managers, is an excellent platform for promoting this research program. The FCSM is perhaps best known for our Working Paper series, which are available on our web site: http:\\www.fcsm.gov and biennial conferences on statistical policy (last November) and the upcoming Research Conference this November. In addition to these forums, the committee is currently engaging in new efforts to reach out and facilitate communication and sharing of expertise across agencies, and to leverage the experience across agencies to provide technical assistance to the Federal statistical system as a whole, and smaller agencies in particular. We are also striving to involve more agencies in the Funding Opportunity to be able to expand the scope and number of projects that we can fund as well as improve communication and collaboration within the statistical system.

This morning Monroe described the history of the Funding Opportunity, and I would like to take a few minutes to talk about its future. The Interagency Council on Statistical Policy (ICSP) has embraced the recommendations of the FCSM research subcommittee to continue funding this program for the next three years. The funding formula was altered slightly to a tiered structure to enable more agencies to contribute in line with their means, but we will achieve approximately the same overall total as before, with some agencies contributing a little more and some a little less. I want to point out that this sets a minimum base of funding. In the past, some agencies have contributed additional money to specific projects that were of direct interest and benefit to them and several have expressed similar sentiments this year.

Unfortunately, for 2003, our description of the Funding Opportunity was not included in time to make NSF's main announcement. Consequently, this fiscal year we saw fewer relevant projects, but still enough of high quality and interest that we anticipate funding. I think it is a real credit to the agency heads and an indication of their commitment that they voted to contribute to this year's program even though we did not have the announcement and did not receive as many proposals as previous cycles. It would have easy for them to opt out this year and perhaps harder to get started back again next year. We strongly encourage you to reach out to colleagues to apply next year and future funding cycles to keep this program alive and vital. The long-term future of this program will be driven by the quality of the projects we are able to fund and the contributions they make to the Federal statistical system.

Challenges and Opportunities

Although I'm very optimistic about the future of this program, I think it's important to balance this with some appropriate cautions. It's not likely that agencies will be feeling that they have much extra room in their budgets in the next few years, so the kinds of projects that are funded and their results will likely impact the long-term future of this endeavor. One strength of the program is that it

draws funds from many agencies; however, there are also potential drawbacks when there are diverse stakeholders with different interests and needs. If we fund only projects that appeal to the majority of agencies, there may be some that will be consistently left out, and over time will not see the payoff for their continued participation in the program. We need to carefully consider the breadth of the proposals we fund, but clearly we need proposals that cover the diversity of issues facing the many agencies in the Federal statistical system.

To do this, it's not sufficient just to post announcement on the NSF website—although we have clearly seen this is helpful through an unintended natural experiment. But we also need to reach out to colleagues at forums such as ASA, AAPOR, ISI, AAAS, and other venues to encourage them to apply their expertise to Federal problems or try to help us with issues we are facing. I think we have the opportunity to make this program thrive and involve a growing number of Federal statistical agencies. The challenge will be to attract a diversity of quality projects that will meet a wide variety of needs across these agencies.

Promising Areas

I can't resist this opportunity to put in a pitch for proposals to deal with what I see as some of the pressing problems we face in the Federal statistical system. This is certainly not a representative sample, nor are any of these really surprising.

You didn't need to attend the AAPOR meeting a few weeks ago, to know that there are real concerns about the future of telephone survey methodology, and RDD surveys in particular. However, if you attended the conference, you certainly couldn't have missed the focus on response rates, much of it focused on RDD surveys. Although RDD surveys are not the mainstay of Federal government survey data collections in most statistical agencies, there are a number of Federal RDD surveys across a variety of departments that provide critically important information that is tied to policy making and, in some cases, even quite directly to the distribution of government funds. In addition to concerns about response rates, issues of coverage and the growing impact of cell phones constitute an evolving landscape we need to understand and deal with. We have funded one project in this area, you will hear about at the next seminar, but more work is needed in this area.

There are also growing uses of electronic data collection, spurred on by the Government Paperwork Elimination Act (GPEA). More and more frequently this means using the internet for data collection, rather than just CATI or CAPI. There are certainly many promises in using the web for data collection, but there are also perils. Some government web surveys have certainly been featured in presentations and classes that Roger and his colleagues use to illustrate "what not to do." In addition to the nuts and bolts of doing better web surveys, there are certainly some situations where these kinds of applications are appropriate and others where they are not, at least not as the only mode. A broader framework backed by empirical results to enhance understanding and guide decision-making on how and when to use web-based collections and how to deal with issues of response rates, coverage, and respondent preferences would be very useful to agencies. As Cleo noted in her remarks, web and paper do often need to work together.

Another area I think many statistical agencies would like to see more attention given to is establishment surveys, which I will define quite broadly to include not only private businesses, but

also institutions such as hospitals and schools. Compared to demographic or household-based surveys, establishment surveys tend to receive less attention outside government, yet there are many of the general issues are the same with specific variations for this context. For example, we see increasing efforts being required to do effective recruiting and handle nonresponse. Part of the problem is that it is often requiring more and more levels of approval to obtain cooperation. In local areas, we are seeing school districts requiring approval before allowing us to contact schools. Presentations to school boards and even local IRBs are becoming more common. Increased testing required by the No Child Left Behind legislation is, of course, putting more burdens on schools, and our research studies may suffer for it. Likewise, businesses have long complained of the burdens of multiple collections from different agencies. It strikes me, perhaps naively, that a principal investigator funded under this program could learn a great deal about the burdens being placed on organizations, and could perhaps provide some valuable insights that will aid us when agencies are allowed to share data, such as sample frames, and even in cases where they are not.

Finally, confidentiality concerns don't appear to be diminishing anytime soon. In addition to the good technical work on disclosure limitation that has been funded, we could also use more work on respondent perceptions of confidentiality: both from the household and establishment perspectives. In particular, it would be helpful to understand respondent's perceptions of use of data by outside researchers. How much do we tell respondent's about this possibility and how do we tell them to make it clear the protections we have built in? We now have new legislation, the Confidential Information Protection and Statistical Efficiency Act of 2002 (CIPSEA) that allows us to provide a consistently high level of protection to statistical data gathered under a pledge of confidentiality. We need to be able to effectively communicate this to our respondents and make them feel more assured rather than more concerned as some previous research has shown.

To conclude, I think the need for the Funding Opportunity is greater than ever, and I appreciate your active participation. I would like to thank not only the authors and discussants for their excellent work and thoughtful remarks, but also those sponsors who made this possible, and all of you for attending and carrying this back to your agencies, and out to your colleagues. I look forward to the next round of proposals and our next seminar.

Reports Available in the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology's Statistical Policy Working Paper Series

1. ***Report on Statistics for Allocation of Funds***, 1978 (NTIS PB86-211521/AS)
2. ***Report on Statistical Disclosure and Disclosure-Avoidance Techniques***, 1978 (NTIS PB86-211539/AS)
3. ***An Error Profile: Employment as Measured by the Current Population Survey***, 1978 (NTIS PB86-214269/AS)
4. ***Glossary of Nonsampling Error Terms: An Illustration of a Semantic Problem in Statistics***, 1978 (NTIS PB86-211547/AS)
5. ***Report on Exact and Statistical Matching Techniques***, 1980 (NTIS PB86-215829/AS)
6. ***Report on Statistical Uses of Administrative Records***, 1980 (NTIS PB86-214285/AS)
7. ***An Interagency Review of Time-Series Revision Policies***, 1982 (NTIS PB86-232451/AS)
8. ***Statistical Interagency Agreements***, 1982 (NTIS PB86-230570/AS)
9. ***Contracting for Surveys***, 1983 (NTIS PB83-233148)
10. ***Approaches to Developing Questionnaires***, 1983 (NTIS PB84-105055)
11. ***A Review of Industry Coding Systems***, 1984 (NTIS PB84-135276)
12. ***The Role of Telephone Data Collection in Federal Statistics***, 1984 (NTIS PB85-105971)
13. ***Federal Longitudinal Surveys***, 1986 (NTIS PB86-139730)
14. ***Workshop on Statistical Uses of Microcomputers in Federal Agencies***, 1987 (NTIS PB87-166393)
15. ***Quality in Establishment Surveys***, 1988 (NTIS PB88-232921)
16. ***A Comparative Study of Reporting Units in Selected Employer Data Systems***, 1990 (NTIS PB90-205238)
17. ***Survey Coverage***, 1990 (NTIS PB90-205246)
18. ***Data Editing in Federal Statistical Agencies***, 1990 (NTIS PB90-205253)
19. ***Computer Assisted Survey Information Collection***, 1990 (NTIS PB90-205261)
20. ***Seminar on Quality of Federal Data***, 1991 (NTIS PB91-142414)
21. ***Indirect Estimators in Federal Programs***, 1993 (NTIS PB93-209294)
22. ***Report on Statistical Disclosure Limitation Methodology***, 1994 (NTIS PB94-165305)
23. ***Seminar on New Directions in Statistical Methodology***, 1995 (NTIS PB95-182978)
24. ***Electronic Dissemination of Statistical Data***, 1995 (NTIS PB96-121629)
25. ***Data Editing Workshop and Exposition***, 1996 (NTIS PB97-104624)
26. ***Seminar on Statistical Methodology in the Public Service***, 1997 (NTIS PB97-162580)
27. ***Training for the Future: Addressing Tomorrow's Survey Tasks***, 1998 (NTIS PB99-102576)
28. ***Seminar on Interagency Coordination and Cooperation***, 1999 (NTIS PB99-132029)
29. ***Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology Research Conference (Conference Papers)***, 1999 (NTIS PB99-166795)
30. ***1999 Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology Research Conference: Complete Proceedings***, 2000 (NTIS PB2000-105886)
31. ***Measuring and Reporting Sources of Error in Surveys***, 2001 (NTIS PB2001-104329)
32. ***Seminar on Integrating Federal Statistical Information and Processes***, 2001 (NTIS PB2001-104626)
33. ***Seminar on the Funding Opportunity in Survey Research***, 2001 (NTIS PB2001-108851)
34. ***Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology Research Conference (Conference Papers)***, 2001 (NTIS PB2002-100103)
35. ***Seminar on Challenges to the Federal Statistical System in Fostering Access to Statistics.*** 2004 Forthcoming.

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