PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY FOR STATISTICAL AGENCIES—

FINDINGS FROM AN ASSESSMENT

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Defines “professional autonomy” as—

An agency’s ability to act independently from political or other undue external influence with regard to its operations, such as data collection and analysis, staffing, and publications.

What Is It Not?

- Statistical agencies of course operate within framework of congressional and executive oversight.
- Professional autonomy does not mean that agencies wall themselves off from/hold themselves above direction/criticism.
- Agencies must keep in close touch with the information needs of the nation and various user constituencies.
- Agencies must seek outside expert advice to keep up to date with latest methods and to contribute to same.
### 6 Elements of Professional Autonomy

| Statistical Policy Directive No. 1/ Evidence Act Protections for All Agencies | Additional Statutory Protections for Specific Agencies |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | BTS | EIA | BJS | Census |
| (1) Data Collection & Analysis | YES | STRONG | STRONG |
| (2) Systems | YES | INTER-MEDIATE |
| (3) Publication | YES | STRONG | STRONG |
| (4) Staffing | YES (HIRING); NO (STAFFING LEVELS) | WEAK (HIRING) | STRONG | WEAK |
| (5) Budget | NO | WEAK |
| (6) Contracting | NO | WEAK | | STRONG |

Five agencies (BEA, ERS, NASS, ORES, SOI) lack even basic enabling legislation, and most agencies’ legal authorization does not address autonomy.
YES, statistical agencies need *credibility* with data users and stakeholders and *trust* of data responders—perception and reality of professional autonomy are critical to credibility and trust.

An object lesson – CDC was in part politicized under the previous administration, and it is not trusted by half the population.

Stat agencies not in that dire straits—indeed, NYTimes documented resistance of Census Bureau career staff to attempted politicization of the 2020 census, and ERS/USDA built back up its staff after forced move to Kansas City—but the system would be naive to rest on its laurels.
Is It (Can It Be) Threatened?

- YES, previous administration was egregious, but other administrations have tried to influence timing/content of statistical publications, retaliated against agencies/staff, etc.

- Agencies have remarkably little legislative protection against undue external influence
Recommendations

- **LEGISLATION** (based on blue-ribbon panel) to authorize all principal statistical agencies and strengthen their professional autonomy

- **STRENGTHENED** role of **CHIEF STATISTICIAN** and **PERIODIC ASSESSMENTS** of health and performance of statistical agencies
Is Legislation Fool-Proof? What Else Can Help?

- Of course, norms/laws can be broken, but without authorization/protections in law, agencies don’t have a leg to stand on.
- “Informal” protection is also key—namely, user/stakeholder community that trusts an agency and will rise to its defense.

  ✓ Requires transparency, adherence to standards, good documentation at different levels.
  ✓ Requires strong two-way relationships with users.
Building User Relationships

- Agencies (understandably) focus on data collection/production/release
- Often don’t sufficiently prioritize/internalize user needs/documentation/et al.
  - Detail staff to users (e.g., states, businesses)
  - Get user input well ahead of proposed changes; respond to user feedback
  - Do crosswalks, parallel series
  - Elevate/empower user viewpoint in agency
Strengthened Laws/Stakeholder Relationships << Stronger Agencies

THANK YOU!

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