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Labor Department

PANEL ADVISES ETA ON HOW TO WOO RESEARCH COMMUNITY

Greater transparency and a collaborative approach could regain the trust of the research community the Employment and Training Administration lost over the last decade, according to specialist stakeholders and an expert panel.

Congress should also consider establishing a Workforce Development Institute along the lines of the Institute for Education Sciences at the Department of Education, state the findings of a newly released paper prepared for ETA by the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development.

The compiled advice of 665 stakeholders from state and local workforce agencies, professional and labor associations and community groups, as well as a 20-member National Expert Advisory Panel that included a veritable scholarly who's who in workforce development, is gathered in *Identifying Gaps and Setting Priorities for Employment and Training Research* by Carl Van Horn, Rutgers professor of public policy and director of the Heldrich Center, Christopher King, Director of the Ray Marshall Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and Tara Smith, research associate at the Marshall Center.

The paper's release coincides with ETA's request for comments on its Five-Year Research and Evaluation Strategic Plan for 2010-2015 in the *Federal Register* (see p. 000). In the request, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Employment and Training Jane Oates identifies the Heldrich paper as a "critical source" for the development of its plan.

Yet all was not always sunny between researchers and ETA. The authors note "concerns" of the research community about "major shortcomings" with the way the Department of Labor agency selected, funded, published and disseminated the findings from its research program.

"Concerns were raised about delays in approving and then publishing research, diverting funds for other non-research projects, and inadequate strategies for disseminating research to policymakers, program managers, and the research community," the authors state (ETR 12/8/08, p. 177).

In particular, the Government Accountability Of-

fice noted in one report, ETA delayed the "multi-site control-group evaluation" required under the Workforce Investment Act until 2008, even though it was legally due by 2005. Now known as the WIA Gold Standard Evaluation, being conducted by the New York City-based research firm MDRC, its results are not expected until 2014, the authors state.

Instead, ETA paid the bulk of its money for examinations of "non-program-related" pilot, demonstration and research discretionary projects, including the High Growth Job Training Initiative, Workforce Innovations in Regional Economic Development, Community-Based Job Training Initiative and the never-implemented Personal Reemployment Accounts.

Ironically, although the writers state that these problems "have largely been addressed since 2008," their report is dated "July 2011," even though the public release did not occur until Oct. 31.

Meanwhile, they note, ETA's research funding pot has yo-yoed from \$140 million in fiscal year 2002 to just under \$20 million in FY 2007 and back up to about \$100 million under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in FYs 2009 and 2010. These funds "are unlikely to remain high in the future as increasing attention is given to reducing federal deficits" in the judgment of the authors.

Looking into that dim future, the panel of experts emphasized that "rigor" and "timeliness" should trump any other criterion "necessary for all research supported by ETA."

What Is to Be Researched

As for what research needs to be done, the groundswell gathered by Heldrich suggested that ETA fund study into

- the changing dynamics of labor markets and the services needed to address them;
- the effectiveness of strategies, including the economic effect of unemployment insurance, comparisons of training options, credentials, certifications, apprenticeships, contextualized learning for adults and sectoral programs;
- the effectiveness of waivers in local and state management of the workforce development system;
- the needs of "special populations," including long-term unemployed, dislocated, younger, older and low-wage workers, ex-offenders, English-language

learners, persons with disabilities, low-skilled and disconnected men, Native Americans, Hispanics, immigrant populations and veterans; and

- the relationship between education and workforce systems and their outcomes and the effects of coordination between these systems, particularly for low-skilled, low-wage and dislocated workers.

In the process of pursuing such knowledge, “ETA should improve access, use, and confidentiality of administrative records for research and evaluation, and create and distribute more public-use datasets for analysis.”

Given the predictable fiscal constraints in the future, the Heldrich paper identifies, in its extensive

travelogue through the major works of 2005 to 2010, nine federal agencies that ETA could work with to leverage resources. In addition, the authors point to eight major foundations that have supported research related to workforce development.

✓ *Identifying Gaps and Setting Priorities for Employment and Training Research* by Carl Van Horn, Christopher King and Tara Smith is available from the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, 30 Livingston Avenue, New Brunswick, N.J. 08901; phone: (732) 932-4100; Web: www.heldrich.rutgers.edu.

—Cecilio Morales

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