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Results-Based Accountability and Results First Discussion Brief

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This handout provides an overview of the Population-Level Outcomes (a.k.a. Results-Based Accountability)[1] and the Pew-MacArthur Results First (Results First)[2] initiatives in Vermont. It describes how the two initiatives function, overlap, differ, and seek to improve the effectiveness of government programs.

Overview

Both Results Based Accountability (RBA) and Results First offer an in-depth look at state programs, with a focus on achieving successful outcomes. That being said, they each have specific areas of focus. RBA targets *program* effectiveness, allowing us to understand program accomplishments relative to the investment. Act 186 requires that RBA performance measures also be tied to the budgets. Results First uses evidence-based research to target *cost* effectiveness, helping us determine the most cost-effective programs available to achieve desired results.

Together the two results-based initiatives can help ensure that Vermont is using funds wisely to achieve desired program results through goal-setting, strategic investment, and improved outcomes. Results First offers powerful tools and a road map that will help build a strong and successful RBA system. Together the programs provide a holistic approach: identifying outcomes, determining a path to achieve desired results, and assigning a dollar value to the benefits the state hopes to achieve.

The Overlap

RBA and Results First are complementary initiatives. They have a shared purpose of ensuring government funded programs operate in an efficient way, achieve their intended outcomes, and increase program capacity without increased budget investment. Both encourage data-driven, transparent decision-making and promote action to improve government programs and services. As opposed to viewing them as separate and distinct projects, Results First can be seen as an integral component of a successful RBA system.

Results-Based Accountability

RBA is a broad approach to measurement that encourages stakeholders to identify results that they would like to achieve and establish a means for reaching those goals. RBA starts with desired results, the "end", and works backward, towards the strategies used to get there, the "means". Along the way, RBA utilizes performance measures to gauge success

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[1] Vermont Act 11 and Vermont Act 186 use this terminology in the Acts:
http://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Documents/2016/Docs/ACTS/ACT011/ACT011%20As%20Enacted.pdf;
http://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Documents/2014/Docs/ACTS/ACT186/ACT186%20As%20Enacted.pdf

[2] The Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative in Vermont. http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2014/05/20/the-pewmacarthur-results-first-initiative-in-vermont

or failure against the baseline. To get at the most important performance measures, RBA asks three basic questions:

- How much did we do?
- How well did we do it?
- Is anyone better off?

RBA involves identifying performance measures for a range of programs, and can help policymakers determine if the program is meeting its desired results. Once performance measures have been identified, RBA provides a step-by-step process to get from the ends to the means of improving outcomes. The following chart can be used to identify program performance measures.

	Quantity	Quality
Effort	How much did we do?	How well did we do it?
Effect	Is anyone better off?	
	#	%

Vermont's approach encourages a language of comparison, reporting, and accountability within and across state agencies. It details a set of performance measures to gauge progress and aims to align state accountability systems and to move away from traditional data silos.[3]

Another tool employed by RBA is the "Turn the Curve Exercise" where stakeholders collaborate on what works and identify low-cost or no-cost ideas that "Turn the Curve" to achieve the desired outcome. While incredibly valuable, RBA does not always delve deeply into alternative operational approaches to achieving outcomes but does offer a critical framework for ensuring programs are effective in achieving their intended objectives, through tracking performance measures.

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[3] A key issue with RBA is the development of effective measurement tools to evaluate the extent to which performance measures can be achieved. State data collection is often designed around fund or grant related reporting needs and not program evaluation goals or against key metrics. In addition, the measurability may require passage of time or other factors.

July 22, 2015

In order to optimize this RBA approach, it is helpful that:

- Current and prospective programs already have an evidence base, so that there is a higher likelihood that they will be effective and thus show positive performance measures.
- Meaningful performance measures (as opposed to broad outputs that may not reflect true progress toward program goals) can easily be identified and tracked.

Results First

The Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative addresses both of the above points. It offers an interactive clearinghouse that categorizes programs by their evidence base, coding them by how effective they are based upon national research. The initiative also implements an innovative benefit-cost model that uses the best available research on program effectiveness and Vermont's unique populations and cost data to predict the benefits, or outcomes, a given program is expected to produce over the long term. For example, in adult criminal justice, Vermont can use the Results First model to identify programs that are most effective at producing the desired outcome: recidivism reduction.[4] It can also estimate the expected level of this reduction and its monetized benefit, based on state specific cost and population data. Because Results First incorporates benefit-cost analysis, it not only measures a program's effectiveness, but also its efficiency, by comparing a program's expected benefits to its costs.

The Results First model gives RBA a head start by identifying programs to expand, replace, or implement that are most likely to yield high results based on existing evidence from other users of the program. Additionally, by aligning the outcome measures used by Results First (such as reduced recidivism) with RBA performance measures, such metrics can be tracked to ensure a program is actually achieving the expected outcomes that the research suggests.

Successful use of the RBA and Results First initiatives requires the development of performance measures that can be used to arrive at successful programmatic outcomes. They each have their strengths: RBA emphasizes clarity of outcomes and performance to achieve desired results and Results First looks to build on evidenced-based programs as a way to achieve intended outcomes in a cost-effective manner. Together they offer the range of tools necessary to achieve desired results. Importantly, though, they both require a commitment by agencies, individual programs, and the legislature to work together to develop and utilize these evaluative systems in the decision making process.
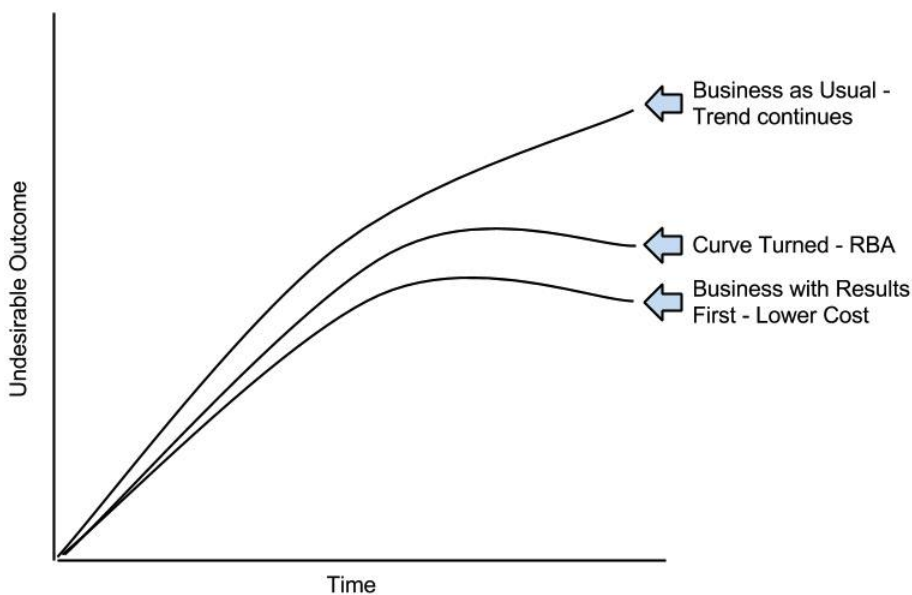
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[4] Vermont Act 61:
http://legislature.vermont.gov/assets/Documents/2014/Docs/ACTS/ACT061/ACT061%20As%20Enacted.pdf

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Turn the Curve Exercise
Conceptual Illustration Only – Actual Results Will Vary

Results-Based Accountability helps identify performance measures and outcomes for a range of programs, and can determine if the program is meeting its desired results by "turning the curve."

The top line of the chart depicts "business as usual." RBA helps identify if programs are "turning the curve" and improving outcomes compared to "business as usual." The middle curve shows the improvement recognized when a program is achieving its goals.

In conjunction with RBA, it is helpful to use Results First to establish the cost effectiveness of the strategy that is being used to "turn the curve." RBA looks at improving outcomes; Results First goes a step further and takes the cost effectiveness of a program or strategy into account. Adding the use of Results First, represented by the lowest line on the chart, further turns the curve and shows both improved outcomes and lower costs.

Programs in the Results First model are evidence-based, and help Vermont "turn the curve" to produce better results.