

# **RACE TO THE TOP: Integrating Foresight, Evaluation, and Survey Methods**

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## **Public Sector Foresight Network**

**July 11, 2014  
Orlando, Florida**

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## U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO)

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- Independent, nonpartisan agency of Congress
- **Core Values:** Accountability, Integrity, Reliability
- Conducts policy analysis and evaluates federal agency operations, typically upon request from Congress
- GAO's work focuses on questions of importance to the federal government and federal policymakers
- 14 mission teams in Washington, DC and 11 field offices
  - Education, Workforce, and Income Security

# GAO's Traditional Audit Portfolio

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- **Insight:** “What programs and policies work. . .sharing (of) various best practices and benchmarking information. . . looking horizontally across the silos of government and vertically between the levels of government.”
  - **Oversight:** “Government entities are doing what they are supposed to do. . . funds are being spent for the intended purpose. . .applicable laws and regulations are being complied with.”
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# Comptroller General Highlights Foresight for the GAO Portfolio

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## Foresight studies:

- Recognize the long-term implications of today's decisions and current performance
  - Identify key trends and emerging challenges before they reach crisis proportions
  - Provide a return on investment potentially much greater than for other GAO work
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## Race to the Top

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- Between 2010 and 2012, the Department of Education (Education) awarded over \$4 billion in Race to the Top (RTT) funds to 19 states through a competitive grant process.
- These states had to demonstrate a commitment to reforming four core areas of K-12 education:
  - (1) adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college, the workplace, and the global economy;
  - (2) building data systems that measure student growth and success, and help improve instruction;
  - (3) recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals; and
  - (4) turning around the lowest-achieving schools.

## Race to the Top

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- GAO's prior work on Race to the Top mirrors GAO's traditional audit portfolio - primarily "insight" and "oversight"
  - *Race to the Top: Reform Efforts Are Under way and Information Sharing Could Be Improved*, GAO-11-658 (Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2011)
  - *Race to the Top: Characteristics of Grantees' Amended Programs and Education's Review Process*, GAO-12-228R (Washington, D.C.: December 8, 2011)
  - *Race to the Top: States Implementing Teacher and Principal Evaluation Systems despite Challenges*, GAO-13-777 (Washington, D.C.: September 18, 2013)
- Current request offers blend of insight and oversight with an unique opportunity to conduct "foresight"
  - House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies

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## Race to the Top - Study Objectives

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- 1) What obstacles, if any, do states and districts face regarding their capacity to implement RTT reform efforts? (INSIGHT)
  
- 2) What have states and districts done to build their capacity and what, if any, plans do they have to sustain their efforts? (INSIGHT)
  
- 3) What steps, if any, has the U.S. Department of Education taken to support states and districts in building the capacity necessary to implement and sustain RTT initiatives? (OVERSIGHT)
  
- 4) What implications could capacity challenges have on RTT reform efforts and future competitive grants? (FORESIGHT)

# Methodology – Applying a Grounded Foresight Approach to Race to the Top

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**Internal methodology developed by GAO in 2004** to examine future implications by identifying key trends, emerging challenges, and opportunities to inform government's future role and responsibilities

➤ **Strong factual-conceptual base**

- Document, recognize, and understand relevant trends and occurrences related to capacity issues and competitive grants

➤ **Futures method**

- Determine possible implications of capacity issues using one of a diverse range of quantitative and qualitative methods for rationally anticipating the future

➤ **Transparent communication**

- Foresight reporting

# Grounded Foresight



## GROUNDING FOR FORESIGHT STUDIES

1  
A strong factual-  
conceptual base

2  
A methodological  
“safety-net”

3  
Transparent  
communication  
re: uncertainty

Foresight Work Strategies

Foresight Reporting



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## Grounded Foresight Anchored in GAO's Culture

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- Inform policy decisions with long-range implications to realize **ACCOUNTABILITY**
- Ground in factual/conceptual base and safety net for futures methods to achieve **INTEGRITY**
- Ground using transparent communication to ensure **RELIABILITY**

Therefore, resolves tension between traditional audit culture and the uncertainty of looking into the future

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# Elements of Grounding



## GROUNDING FOR FORESIGHT STUDIES

**1**

**A strong factual-conceptual base**

**2**

A methodological "safety-net"

**3**

Transparent communication re: uncertainty

**Foresight Work Strategies**

Foresight Reporting

## Methodology – Strong Factual Conceptual Base

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Requires the collection of relevant, fact-based material on capacity issues and competitive grants in a systematic way

- **Prospective Evaluation Synthesis** to review and analyze existing literature and data\*
- **Survey of state officials** in all 19 Race to the Top states
- **Survey of a representative sample of school district officials** within the Race to the Top states
- **Interviews** with interested parties (e.g., educational organizations, researchers)

## Methodology – Prospective Evaluation Synthesis (PES)

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- **PES** is a systematic method for providing the best possible information on, among other things:
  - Likely outcomes of proposed programs
  - Proposed legislation
  - Adequacy of proposed regulations
  - Top-priority problems

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## Methodology – Prospective Evaluation Synthesis (PES)

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- Types of Questions answered by PES:
  - How well has the administration projected or estimated the future needs, costs, and consequences?
  - What is the potential for the success of a congressional or administration proposal?
  - What are future needs, costs, consequences?
  - What course of action should we recommend as most likely to succeed in addressing problems we identify?

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# Methodology – Prospective Evaluation Synthesis (PES)

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## Six Key Steps in Conducting a PES:

1. Defining the Problem
2. Selecting the options or alternatives to evaluate
3. Analyzing the conceptual underpinnings of selected alternatives\*
4. Analyzing the operational logic of the selected alternatives\*
5. Testing the key conceptual and operational assumptions against existing evidence (assessing quality of information)\*
6. Presenting the results in relation to the key assumptions

## **Methodology – Prospective Evaluation Synthesis (PES)**

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**To operationalize steps 3-5 of the PES for the Race to the Top study, we developed the following objectives :**

- (1) How do the design features of Race to the Top shape its ability to provide the information needed to support federal policy decisions?
- (2) What information exists about capacity challenges related to Race to the Top and other competitive education grants?
- (3) How effective have these programs been in achieving their objectives, despite capacity challenges?
- (4) What factors should be considered in future decision- and/or policy-making related to Race to the Top and other competitive education grants?

# Methodology – Prospective Evaluation Synthesis (PES)

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## Methodology for PES steps 3-5:

- Examined the features of the Race to the Top grant to describe (a) the nature of the problem the grant is intended to address, (b) the activities and operations of the grant, and (c) the assumptions in the grant about how its strategies are intended to achieve its policy objectives.
- Reviewed and summarized relevant and timely published work to determine whether and how capacity issues affected the implementation, operation, and management of the grant.
- Summarized suggestions, implications, and lessons learned from the published work that would inform future rounds of Race to the Top or other federal competitive education grants.

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# Examples of Methods

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## **Qualitative patterns/analyses**

Models of change, bellwethers, historical analogies, precursors, pilot program evaluation results

## **Quantitative techniques**

Statistical models, multiple regression, time series/extrapolation, micro-simulation

## **Scenarios**

Chains of events hypothesized representing “images of how the future might unfold”

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# Methodology – Futures Component

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## “Expert” Panel of Race to the Top Stakeholders

- 7-10 panelists
- Diverse range of knowledge, expertise, and experience
  - RTT, federal competitive grants
  - Federal and state government
  - School districts
  - Academics
  - Non-profits
  - Consultants

# Elements of Grounding



## GROUNDING FOR FORESIGHT STUDIES

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A strong factual-conceptual base

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A methodological "safety-net"

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**Transparent communication re: uncertainty**

Foresight Work Strategies

**Foresight Reporting**

# Methodology – Foresight Reporting

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## GAO's approach to transparent communication:

- Scope and methodology appendix in GAO reports
- Public dissemination of GAO products
- E-supplement for survey results
- Compelled by Congress
- FOIA requests for information

## Methodology – “Real Life” Considerations

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Considerations for implementing grounded foresight with PES:

- Issues of scope
- Choice of futures methods
- Views of multiple stakeholders
- Reporting “uncertainty”

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**QUESTIONS??**

**Thank you!**

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