How the Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics Advances Excellence in Federal Statistics

Steven B. Cohen

RTI International, P.O. Box 12194, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-2194

Abstract

The primary goal of the Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics (COPAFS) is to advance excellence in federal statistics. It helps to accomplish this supporting role as a facilitator, coordinator and disseminator serving to connect producers of official statistics with essential stakeholders. These prominent users of federal statistics include policy makers, program planners, researchers, and businesses. It works with those in the federal statistical system to inform stakeholders of issues impacting the federal statistical system and statistical policy initiatives, in addition to recent new data releases, new products, changes, and innovations. It helps advance the quality of federal statistics by its facilitation of information exchanges among its many constituencies.

In this invited session at the Joint Statistical Meetings of the American Statistical Association, I have served as a discussant providing further commentary of the following topics that were given attention: The Role of Policy and Advocacy; Collaboration to Enable the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology Conferences; and Engaging Federal Statistical Agencies with Stakeholders and Users: Roles of COPAFS Quarterly Meetings, Monthly Updates, Workshops, and Seminars. My discussion also identifies several recent challenges confronting the federal statistical system and opportunities that are also presenting themselves to further advance excellence in federal statistics.

Keywords: COPAFS. Federal statistics, statistical policy, FCSM

1. Introduction

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several recent challenges confronting the federal statistical system and opportunities that are also presenting themselves to further advance excellence in federal statistics.

2. The Role of Policy and Advocacy

Katherine Smith Evans, American Economic Association gave a presentation on the role of policy and advocacy, addressing the challenges the federal statistical system is confronting in these areas. One core concern was the need to shine a spotlight on the contributions of the federal statistical system in terms of its outputs and to its vast array of stakeholders. The speaker's assessment of this criterion was that such visibility is currently limited. More knowledge by core stakeholders regarding legislation impacting on statistical programs is needed as well as more widespread knowledge regarding methodological changes and technical innovations. Existing obstacles to establishing meaningful coalitions and effective strategies that serve to advance excellence in federal statistics were also noted. must acknowledge and overcome each of these challenges. Attention was given to summarizing how these challenges act as constraints when planning and executing successful advocacy strategies. Consideration was also given to the actions and efforts undertaken by COPAFS to achieve its organizational goals, including lessons learned, current strategies, and a look towards future policy challenges with potential strategies to help address them.

3. Collaboration to Enable the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology Conferences

Rochelle (Shelly) Wilkie Martinez, Office of Management and Budget gave a presentation on collaborations with COPAFS to enable the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology (FCSM) Conferences. The Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology is an interagency committee dedicated to improving the quality of federal statistics. It was founded in 1975 from the office of the Chief Statistician of the U.S. Its statistical policy and research conferences are well attended, essential large-scale meetings which engage the entire federal statistical community and its partners in academia and the private sector. These events are contributing factors that help advance coordinating the work of the statistical system. Over several decades, it was noted that the Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics (COPAFS) has been a valued and essential partner to FCSM in the conduct and implementation of these statistical policy and research meetings. It was also noted that the sustainability and broad, large-scale participation of these FCSM Conferences have significantly benefited by the role played by COPAFS. The presentation also served to give recognition to the demands the FCSM Conferences have continued to place on COPAFS in light of its own limited resources. Attention was also given to the growing recognition by the federal statistical system and its stakeholders of the benefits of these events. The need to identify creative solutions was noted in order to permit the periodicity, scope, and scale desired to meet needs of a large and diverse statistical system community and its partners.

4. Engaging Federal Statistical Agencies with Stakeholders and Users: Roles of COPAFS Quarterly Meetings, Monthly Updates, Workshops, and Seminars.

Paul Schroeder, Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics gave a presentation on engaging federal statistical agencies with stakeholders and users: roles of COPAFS quarterly meetings, monthly updates, workshops, and seminars. More specifically, it was clarified that its quarterly meeting includes COPAFS members and

representatives from statistical agencies. It prepares a monthly newsletter to inform members of pressing issues confronting the federal statistical system and to disseminate information regarding forthcoming workshops and seminars on special topics that involve statistical agencies with their stakeholders. For the past several decades, COPAFS has used this model to educate users of official federal statistics regarding their capacity and limitations. Their forums have also served to expose leaders of federal statistical agencies to stakeholder perspectives that are not vocalized in other venues. they might not otherwise have heard. These related efforts summarize the roles COPAFS has taken on as a facilitator, coordinator and disseminator serving to connect producers of official statistics with their prominent statistical, research and policymaker user communities.

5. Discussion

In this invited session, attention was given to demands placed on the federal statistical system by its core stakeholders and the interconnected roles played by COPAFS, FCSM and the statistical community at large to advance excellence in federal statistics. The United States is characterized by a decentralized statistical system. It consists of thirteen principal statistical agencies, and includes 100+ programs in centers, institutes, and organizations that conduct program evaluation, research, data collection, policy and program analysis, and the provision of external funding and other support. In this regard, the U.S. Federal Statistical System serves a vital role in generating the data that the public, businesses, and governments need to make informed decisions.

OMB coordinates the U.S. Federal statistical system through the OIRA Administrator. More specifically, OIRA's Office of Statistical and Science Policy responsibilities include advancing the quality of Federal statistical information to facilitate evidence-based policies and programs; establishing standards and guidance for data collection and dissemination; assessing agency standards compliance; coordinating interagency and international statistical activities.

It is recognized that timely, accurate, and relevant statistical data are the foundation of evidence-based decision-making. Federal statistical programs need to be reviewed and assessed continuously to determine that the statistical data being acquired and disseminated are appropriate, accurate, objective, accessible, useful, understandable, and timely. Several responsibilities and expectations need to be satisfied to accomplish these objectives. Ongoing monitoring and assessments of the upholding of ethical federal data practices for the public are necessities. Responsibilities include insuring the implementation of sound data security practices that protect individual privacy, maintain promised confidentiality, and permit appropriate access and use. Comprehensive documentation of processes and products need to be provided to inform data providers and users.

Attention to sound fiscal management of resources is also essential. Existing data should best be tapped to address existing and anticipated research and policy priorities. New data collection efforts should be undertaken after careful reviews and assessments of existing capacities indicate visible gaps in necessary data content. Quality control and assurance efforts may be utilized to identify and facilitate implementation of data collection, analysis, and dissemination task while also allowing ongoing input from users and stakeholders.

In this framework, COPAFS remains devoted to educational activities and to preserving the public good represented by federal statistical collections. Its activities are advanced to help increase the level and scope of knowledge about developments affecting Federal statistics: to encourage discussion within and among professional organizations to respond

to important issues in Federal statistics; and to facilitate the views of professional associations impacting on decisions affecting Federal statistical programs. COPAFS has also worked closely with the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology to assist in the conduct and implementation of the FCSM statistical policy and research meetings. As noted, these meetings serve as contributing factors that help advance coordinating the work of the statistical system with its partners in university settings and the private sector.

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In addition to all the roles and responsibilities the Federal Statistical System to advance excellence in federal statistics, the system is continuously confronting new challenges. Several challenges that are particularly salient and commanding attention include:

COVID-19: To prioritize data assets and projects, the statistical agencies need to address obstacles incurred as a consequence of COVID-19 in order to maintain the function and integrity of our Federal Statistical System.

Maintaining Data Quality and Integrity: Declining levels of participation and trust, addressing conflicting estimates, greater demands for timeliness and efficiencies.

Combining Data Sources While Protecting Privacy: Balancing risks and benefits; identification of models to optimize enhancements and insure adherence to confidentiality provision.

Budget Constraints: Leveraging available funding to best to preserve the availability of relevant, accurate, and objective data to inform crucial decisions that impact on our well-being.

Advancing the Federal Data Strategy: Advancing the principles and best practices in implementing data innovations that drive more value for the public.

Supporting the Advisory Committee on Data for Evidence Building: Reviewing, analyzing, and making recommendations on how to promote the use of Federal data for evidence building.

Attention to Innovations: Artificial Intelligence/Machine Learning, estimation, modeling, and computational advances; Cloud computing; the nexus of Data Science and Statistics

Implementing Enhanced Collaborations: CNSTAT, ASA, AAPOR, ISI, States, Foundations

Development of Innovative Approaches to Data Integration: Building the scientific foundations to consider design integration of non-probability samples in national surveys-

development of "hybrid" designs. Potential to facilitate composite estimation in national surveys, yielding greater precision in estimates at less cost.

Greater Demands to Ensure Data Security: Increased availability of data from other sources (federal, state, commercial). Need to ensure the combination of data does not enable the identification of individuals or other entities through the "*mosaic effect*" – when disparate pieces of information become significant when combined with other types of information.

Advancing Enhancements in Disclosure Avoidance Methodology: Development of improved statistical disclosure control (SDC) procedures that ensure greater levels of privacy protection, while controlling for "mosaic" effects. Advances in methodologies to permit the public release of substantially greater levels of survey data content to meet growing demands for access from the external research

In summary, through their efforts, the Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics (COPAFS) assists professional associations and other stakeholders acquire and disseminate information about developments affecting federal statistical programs. COPAFS also provides a forum for federal agencies to share new and ongoing developments to stakeholders and receive insights regarding client users concerns and priorities. It serves to inform Congressional offices with respect to impending issues affecting the federal statistical system, to help plan hearings related to federal statistical programs, and in the identification of experts to provide testimony. Furthermore, COPAFS serves as a vehicle to brief the public on the activities of the federal statistical agencies, to convey the views of data users concerning Federal statistical activities, and to help clarify the implications and impacts of policy and budget initiatives on the availability of federal statistics.
Acknowledgements

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