CSREES Portfolio Review Expert Panel Report

Portfolio 2.1 – Expand Economic Opportunities in Rural America
CY 2000 – 2004

SUMMARY

External Review Completed: January 26, 2006

Portfolio Description

Portfolio 2.1 represents the efforts of CSREES to "expand economic opportunities in rural America by bringing scientific insights into economic and business decision-making." Activities in this portfolio include investments in new knowledge to inform stakeholders about a community's capital; the rural economy - poverty, jobs, farms, and firms; rural infrastructure and services; in order to improve the governance, leadership, planning, and civic engagement; and response to accelerating changes in technology, demography, and the global economy. The portfolio consists of the following knowledge areas (KAs):

KA 608—Community resource planning and development
KA 134—Outdoor recreation
KA 602—Business management, finance and taxation
KA 609—Economic theory and methods
KA 901—Program and project design, statistics
KA 902—Administration of projects and programs
KA 903—Communication, education, and information delivery

Summary of Comments and Recommendations

In late January 2006, a panel comprised of independent experts in relevant disciplines was convened to assess and score the current state of the economic opportunities and business decision-making portfolio. A discussion of the panel's specific comments, concerns, and recommendations, related to each of the dimensions of the three Office of Management and Budget (OMB) research and development criteria (relevance, quality, and performance) is provided below.

Relevance

Overall, the review panel finds the portfolio to represent a highly relevant body of work.

While a few of the KAs may be somewhat limited in scope, others are appropriately broad and effective, resulting in an overall balance deemed to be exceptional. When focus is considered to be the portfolio's ability to meet the strategic objectives of portfolio 2.1 (i.e., to enhance economic and business decision-making in rural America), the panel would describe such focus as satisfactory. The panel finds a number of important emerging issues that only received limited attention in this portfolio, although satisfactory documentation was provided for the emerging issues that were covered. The panel thinks the integration of the portfolio is exceptional. The portfolio also presents evidence of sufficient multi-disciplinary balance to accomplish the strategic objectives of the Agency.

Scope: While several of the KAs may be somewhat limited in scope, others are appropriately broad and effective, resulting in an overall balance deemed to be exceptional.

Focus: The panel found the definition of focus provided to be problematic. When focus is considered to be the portfolio's ability to meet the strategic objectives of portfolio 2.1

Contemporary and/or Emerging Issues: The panel recognizes a number of important emerging issues that appear to receive limited attention in this portfolio, although satisfactory documentation was provided for the emerging issues that were covered.

Integration: Integration of the portfolio is exceptional. This exceptional integration is especially evident in the risk management education work, the SARE program, and the regional rural development centers.

Multi-disciplinary Balance: The portfolio presents evidence that there is sufficient interdisciplinary balance to accomplish the strategic objectives as laid out by the Agency.

Quality

The panel found the work performed by CSREES and the land-grant partnership to be of exceptionally high quality.

The significance of the work and the accomplishments reported in portfolio 2.1 are very high. Stakeholder input into the work of the partnership also appears to be very strong. Alignment was satisfactory. The scientific rigor and appropriateness of methodologies are very high.

Significance of Findings: It is the perception of the review panel that the significance of the work and the accomplishments reported in portfolio 2.1 are very high. The self-examination report provides evidence that the outputs from this work have been used by farmers, small towns, and community governments from across the country.

Stakeholder/Constituent Inputs: Overall, stakeholder input into the work of the partnership appears to be very strong. Evidence of this is particularly persuasive when the research, education, and extension activities are clearly tied to needs, and when those activities result in tangible outputs and outcomes for end-users.

Alignment with Current State of Science: Alignment was, overall, satisfactory in this report. However, opportunities exist to improve this measure in the future. Some important areas of knowledge identified by the panelists seem to be insufficiently represented in the portfolio.

Appropriate and/or Cutting Edge Methodology: Scientific rigor and appropriateness of methodologies are very high. Peer reviews in competitive grant programs and the disciplinary journals and books have sustained high standards for methodology and appropriate analyses. However, the panel felt quasi-experimental and other designs that are well respected in social science should be featured more in the work of this portfolio.

Performance

While overall portfolio performance with regard to productivity and comprehensiveness was rated highly, the panel found it difficult to have an informed judgment about timeliness. The panel also gave agency guidance (during the period covered) the lowest score of their Review.

The panel considers the productivity of the portfolio to be high. Moreover, documentation of outputs and outcomes describes a highly comprehensive portfolio with respect to the goals of the portfolio. The panel finds it difficult to address timeliness because no evidence related to this was provided. However, it sees no evidence to indicate exceptional or inadequate performance either, and thus believe the portfolio's timeliness is adequate. The panel observed examples of exceptional strength in specific areas as related to program guidance. In other areas, leadership absences were not addressed by the agency in a timely manner, and the review team felt that the overall guidance was not adequate. Accountability was considered satisfactory.

Portfolio Productivity: The nature of the land grant system and the CSREES mission with their natural emphasis on integrating research, extension, and education programs appears to have led to extremely productive blending of programs across disciplines and organizations in this portfolio.

Portfolio Comprehensiveness: Documentation of outputs and outcomes describes a highly comprehensive portfolio with respect to the goals of the portfolio. The panel did find however, that quantitative documentation of outputs and outcomes is often less than optimal, but overall the comprehensiveness is very good.

Portfolio Timeliness: The panel finds it difficult to address timeliness because no evidence related to this was provided. However, we see no evidence to indicate exceptional or inadequate performance either, and thus believe the portfolio's timeliness is adequate.

Agency Guidance: The panel observed examples of exceptional strength in specific areas as related to program guidance. In other areas, leadership absences were not addressed by the agency in a timely manner.

Portfolio Accountability: Accountability in this portfolio was considered to be satisfactory during the reporting period. The panel strongly endorses the current direction of the Planning & Accountability, and in particular, their efforts to improve the systematic reporting of research, education and extension efforts.

General Comments

Recommendations to ensure a thorough evaluation of this portfolio include a review of the KAs, updating planning and reporting systems, and adequately capturing research, extension, and teaching program accomplishments. The panel is concerned about the increasing reliance given to KA taxonomy because of the inherent problems of the reliability of its classification. Given the language of the KAs, another concern involves the rigidity of this system and its ability to recognize and address emerging issues. The challenges for CSREES will be to overcome inherent weaknesses related to: self-reporting; developing accounting systems that handle projects funded directly as well as leveraged accomplishments; and applying new performance measures to determine the efficacy of programs where outcomes are indirect. CSREES should also pursue greater efforts to make people aware of its accomplishments.

Comments and Recommendations on Future Directions

Funding - The lack of accountability for the outcomes related to the total investment in this portfolio hampers the agency's ability to communicate successes. The panel also felt Congressional earmarks clearly contributed to this portfolio's success and demonstrate Congressional commitment to programs and projects in this area. While competitive funds are clearly important to this portfolio, equally important are base and matching funds because of their role in providing funds for the development of junior research and extension faculties.

Information and Dissemination - The panel believes this portfolio and its review would be enhanced through the creation of a more detailed, common template and organization of documentation about KAs. CSREES is also encouraged to continue consultative and collaborative approaches to goal setting that engage the partnership as demonstrated by the SARE and regional development center organizational models. These are helpful in defining programs, providing leadership for this portfolio as well as communicating portfolio successes.

Approach to Issues in Rural America - Continued attention needs to be paid to the interactions of globalization, entrepreneurship and work force development. The issue of new technologies and their effect on distance and place-bound education should also be addressed more thoroughly. Finally, a broader definition of agriculture community success should be applied that includes the health and environment as well as the economy.

Comments & Recommendations on Data & Evaluation Issues

Data Issues - The lack of quantitative and detailed information about projects and programs constrained the panel's ability to have a fully informed evaluation. The portfolio documentation failed to present a complete picture of all the inputs, outputs and outcomes. Furthermore, data on sub-awards need to be classified within the knowledge area system.

Evaluation Issues - The data collected on KAs are self-reported, so the precision of these classifications is not quality controlled in practice. The crosswalks between the KAs were helpful.

The panel thinks CSREES should exhibit leadership by working with the land-grant system in fostering the development of better evaluation tools and measurable outcomes. It further believes that Higher Education (KA 903) should have its own panel.

Portfolio Score: Portfolio 2.1 received a total score of 84. This score places the portfolio in the category of "moderately effective in supporting CSREES objectives."