

Setting a Research Agenda

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By consulting with each of the operational program areas, upper level administrators can begin to identify the organizational needs that should drive a research agenda. What problems, if any, are perceived to be present with the current methods? Are there particular survey instruments that are associated with those problems? Is it a problem of identifying more appropriate personnel for the task, or is it something more, perhaps the sample frame, the sample design, or the methods being used for data editing or to obtain estimates? If it is something more, then the potential for research exists. Seldom are resources available to work on all of the identified research problems at one time. Instead, priorities must be set. The problems that have the potential to lead to the greatest improvement or that address the largest concerns in the organization should be given the higher priorities. Examples will be drawn from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS).

Once the research areas have been identified the research may be conducted either by individuals or by teams. First, consider the individual researcher. Unless the problem is already well focused, the researcher can benefit from replicating the results obtained from the current methods because, until results can be replicated, the current methods are not fully understood. In the process of replication, the researcher should consider whether an alternate approach might be better. Once the areas for improvement have been identified, literature reviews help the researcher assess whether a viable solution exists. If not, then identifying the most appropriate approach and extending it to the current problem is often a good strategy. After solutions have been found and validated, the researcher needs to present the results in both in written and oral form. Young researchers often find it difficult to move through these steps alone, and proper mentoring can be critical to their success.

Teams can also be used to address research needs. Teams are helpful if the problem is especially complex, perhaps requiring diverse sets of knowledge, and they can help build research capacity. From identifying the team leader to ensuring that the right set of talents are present, establishing the team is an important part of the process. Once the team is identified, the team leader needs to work to create an environment where every team member feels comfortable participating fully in all discussions, trying things that are not standard, and making mistakes with the realization that from these a deeper understanding often results that will eventually lead to the solutions. Then the team moves through the research process, much as an individual would. However, by building on the individual strengths of the team members, a team should be able to make more rapid progress toward the solution. Again, communicating the results both orally and in written form is important.