

Agricultural Research Service Administrative and Financial Management Services Follow-Up Assessment

About the Academy

The National Academy of Public Administration is a non-profit, independent organization of top public management and organizational leaders who tackle the nation's most critical and complex public management challenges. With a network of more than 900 distinguished Fellows and an experienced professional staff, the Academy is uniquely qualified and trusted across government to provide objective advice and practical solutions based on systematic research and expert analysis. Established in 1967 and chartered by Congress in 1984, the Academy continues to make a positive impact by helping federal, state and local governments respond effectively to current circumstances and changing conditions. Learn more about the Academy and its work at www.NAPAwash.org

Project Summary

The genesis of this study was a 2017 report for the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) by the National Academy of Public Administration (the Academy). That work was an extensive examination of customer service and customer experience connected with the provision of Administrative and Financial Management (AFM) services to the Research, Education, and Economics (REE) agencies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. AFM services include human resources, information technology, facilities management, financial management and agreements, acquisitions and property, and homeland security. The 2017 report offered 46 recommendations to ARS to address the challenges found during the project.

With an aim to build a culture of continuous improvement at ARS, Agency leaders requested the Academy to prepare a new report as a review of AFM service changes since 2017 and to identify current opportunities to improve service delivery. This study's methodology, similar to that of the 2017 study, serves as a credible benchmark to the previous work, thus allowing for reasonable comparisons on how the AFM enterprise has addressed challenges over time.

Research findings connected to this report reveal a demonstrable improvement in overall AFM performance. Survey and qualitative interview assessments underscore a positive trend and evidence that Agency responses to the 2017 report have been effective.

The report identifies persistent challenges that remain in place, either resulting from changes in federal or Departmental policies since 2017 impacting the work environment or due to lingering or new Agency-specific challenges.

The report contains an AFM division-by-division review and offers 23 actionable recommendations to enhance performance. This report also provides broader commentary, findings, and recommendations to the Agency to focus upon best practices in customer service and communication. It also offers summary insights into how a hybrid workplace is likely to emerge after the COVID-19 pandemic, which has reshaped ARS operations since March 2020.

It is clear that ARS is focused on enhancing its mission performance, and competent support services are a foundational contributor to its performance. The Agency's decision to re-cast a spotlight on how to enhance the provision of AFM services to mission-facing teams reflects a recognition that each division, and every employee both in AFM and AFM customers, are critical actors to this success.

The Academy formed a two-member Expert Advisory Group (EAG) to advise the study team for this eight-month project. Information on the EAG and study team is provided on the next page.

Further information on this Academy report can be obtained by contacting Brenna Isman, Director of Academy Studies, at BIsman@napawash.org.

ABOUT THE AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH SERVICE

The Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and the other Research, Education and Economic (REE) agencies (the Economic Research Service, the National Agricultural Statistics Service, and the National Institute for Food and Agriculture) within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) are research focused agencies with offices located throughout the United States. ARS has adopted a shared services concept for administrative and financial service delivery and created the Administrative and Financial Management (AFM) service organization to manage the delivery of these essential mission support functions.

EXPERT ADVISORY GROUP (EAG) OF ACADEMY FELLOWS

Basil Gooden: Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry, Commonwealth of Virginia. Former State Director, Rural Development, U.S. Department of Agriculture; Chief Deputy Director, Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, Commonwealth of Virginia; Coordinator of Outreach and Community Relations, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University; Extension Specialist, Virginia Cooperative Extension.

John Palguta: Vice President, Policy and Research, Partnership for Public Service; Adjunct Professor, McCourt School of Public Policy, Georgetown University. Former positions with U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board: Director, Policy and Evaluation; Deputy Director, Policy and Evaluation; Supervisory Research Analyst. Former positions with U.S. Office of Personnel Management: Branch Chief, Personnel Office; Personnel Management Advisor, Bureau of Personnel Management Evaluation.

PROJECT STAFF

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