



Center for  
Technology in Government

# Open Government and Public Value: Conceptualizing a Portfolio Assessment Tool





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## Acknowledgements

The Center for Technology in Government at the University at Albany worked in partnership with the United States General Service Administration to conceptualize the framework of the *Open Government Portfolio Public Value Assessment Tool* (PVAT). David McClure, Martha Dorris, Darlene Meskell, Sheila Campbell, and Lisa Nelson recognized the potential of the ideas and worked with us to ensure the PVAT was well-informed by the experiences of leading innovators across the federal government.

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We also wish to thank the National Academy of Public Administration for their support of the tool design workshop held at their office in December 2010.

Finally, a special thank you to the National Science Foundation for their support of this important effort, which generated not only a new resource for practitioners but also new insight into the process of opening government.

### **Participating Agencies and Organizations**

National Academy of Public Administration  
New York State Chief Information Officer's Council  
United States Department of Commerce  
United States Department of Health and Human Services  
United States Department of Housing and Urban Development  
United States Department of Transportation  
United States Environmental Protection Agency  
United States Federal Web Managers Council  
United States General Services Administration  
United States Merit Systems Protection Board  
United States Office of Management and Budget  
United States Office of Personnel Management  
United States Office Science and Technology Policy

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## Executive Summary

The Center for Technology in Government (CTG) at the University at Albany received an Early-Concept Grants for Exploratory Research (EAGER) from the National Science Foundation (NSF) to develop a resource for open government leaders and a research proposal to lay out the research questions surrounding emerging technologies, open government, and citizen services. CTG partnered with the United States General Services Administration (GSA) to work with other federal agencies to identify areas of interest and need.

What emerged from numerous meetings, interviews, and workshops with open government leaders was their desire to know how to better understand and articulate the value of open government efforts to a range of stakeholders and interests. More specifically, they wanted a systematic way to understand how open government matters and to whom. The result of this expressed need was CTG's development of an *Open Government Portfolio Public Value Assessment Tool*.

As agencies are developing open government initiatives and moving swiftly to meet the *Open Government Directive*, they are also faced with both long-term and short-term challenges of making choices among investment options. Many face difficulty in comparing, measuring, and subsequently choosing initiatives because there is no common framework for describing where any effort falls in the realm of open government. As such, CTG's value based portfolio assessment tool provides this much needed foundational structure so that agencies have a clear and comprehensive value framework to support valid comparisons across the alternative projects or investments.

This report presents the high level concepts and basic design of the tool. It shows how the goals of open government and the perspective of public value can come together in a portfolio-based approach to support open government decision making.

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## Project Background

The Center for Technology in Government (CTG) at the University at Albany received an Early-Concept Grants for Exploratory Research (EAGER) from the National Science Foundation (NSF) to develop a resource for open government leaders and a research proposal to lay out the research questions surrounding emerging technologies, open government, and citizen services. Done in cooperation with the US General Services Administration (GSA), the approach for this work included a mix of best practices analysis and engagement with federal agency representatives, non profit groups, and other state and local government officials and scholars interested or involved in open government efforts.

The project began in late 2009 and early 2010 with discussions with GSA's Office of Citizen Services. GSA was a logical partner to engage in this project because of their responsibilities to support federal agencies' early initiatives to meet President Obama's *Open Government Directive*. GSA discussions led to conversations with other federal agency leaders. These conversations led to the concept of a portfolio assessment tool.

During the first phase of the research, CTG learned that agency open government leaders wanted to know how to better understand and articulate the value of open government efforts to a range of stakeholders and interests. More specifically, the issue was understanding how open government matters and to whom? Data collection for this phase included current practices research, a March 2010 workshop in Washington, DC with federal agency Web managers, and interviews with White House open government leaders, agency chief information officers and open government program managers, and non-government open government experts. These data gathering sessions revealed the need for a resource that enables open government portfolio assessment, which became the framework in which the tool began to emerge.

CTG developed the tool's preliminary conceptual framework to help agencies systematically identify the public value for each of their initiatives. The framework uses the key concepts from CTG's *Public Value Framework* and draws on CTG's eighteen years of applied research on information and communication technologies and effective forms of cross-boundary collaboration to support government policy making and service delivery.

During the next phase of the project, CTG tested the conceptual design with teams from seven federal agencies in a December 2010 workshop held at the National Academy of Public Administration in Washington, DC. The workshop was designed so that participating federal agency open government teams could offer real-time advice and feedback on the tool. The teams consisted of leading federal practitioners from the US Office of Personnel Management, US Department of Transportation, US Department of Housing and Urban Development, US Merit Systems Protection Board, US Environmental Protection Agency, US General Services Administration, and the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. Throughout the workshop, participants provided suggestions for refinements and enhancements on the process, content, and applicability of the tool. For more information about the workshop see <http://www.ctg.albany.edu/projects/opengov?proj=opengov&sub=scope>.

After the workshop, two agencies took the draft conceptual framework, used it in their current open government planning efforts, and provided valuable feedback about the mechanics of conducting open

government assessments. Using the comments from these agencies, CTG refined the ideas and procedures in the tool. Agency tester's comments also suggested that an electronic version of the tool would improve its usability within agencies.

During all meetings, interviews, workshops, and current practice research, CTG continued to gather ideas about the most challenging research questions to use this information to inform the development of a larger research proposal focused on opening government.

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## Open Government and Public Value

### OPENING GOVERNMENT

The *Open Government Directive* issued on December 8, 2009 moved attention to the principles of transparency, participation, and collaboration to the foreground of public discourse. The Directive instructed federal agencies to implement these three principles by broadening access to government information, improving the quality of government information, and creating and institutionalizing a culture of open government that focuses on involving people with insight and expertise and forming collaborations with researchers, the private sector, and civil society.

In response to the Directive, federal agencies embarked on robust open government initiatives and worked to redefine their relationship with citizens and with each other. These initiatives have the potential to increase these agencies' commitment to and experience in providing better coordinated customer service. Initiatives to increase citizen participation and collaboration in new ways provide opportunity to use emergent technologies to create new collaborative models and make service programs more responsive and effective.

The goal of making government more open is central to a wide span of reforms and improvement efforts. Openness in terms of greater transparency can spur improvements in performance, accountability, and integrity across any aspect of government. Enhanced participation and collaboration with citizens enhances trust and confidence in government and engages stakeholders in creating better, more efficient services. The methods we present here are designed to assist agencies in the pursuit of these open government goals and to make better decisions about designing and implementing open government initiatives that deliver public value.

### PUBLIC VALUE

The creation of public value is foundational to the principles on which democratic governments are founded and organized. Public value, in the most general sense, is linked to individual and societal interests and to the institutional forms and actions of government. Therefore our analysis of the rationale for and effectiveness of open government initiatives centers on the public value proposition. This proposition is implied, for example, in the principles of opening government, increasing transparency, participation, and collaboration, as well as in numerous previous efforts and policies.

But employing the public value proposition in efforts for opening government requires a deeper examination of the overriding assumption—that it is a good idea and that the value and benefits are

largely self-evident. That assumption may be a good starting point, but alone it is a poor foundation for either assessing the results of existing efforts to open government or for planning and implementing new ones. Those activities require answers to the basic assessment questions: Good or valuable in what sense? For whom? By what mechanisms? and Under what conditions?

The public value assessment begins by distinguishing between the *intrinsic value* of government as a societal asset and the *instrumental value* of government actions and policies that deliver specific benefits directly to individuals, groups, or organizations. This distinction extends the idea of public value beyond traditional financial and other private returns and is broader than estimates of aggregate economic or social benefits to a society. This broader view includes public value resulting from greater integrity and transparency of government that leads to increased trust and satisfaction with the government overall. It includes as well the value of government policies and programs that align with citizen's ideological preferences and the promotion of fairness and social justice. The distribution of this latter form of value across different stakeholders will vary according to their particular interests and expectations for government. Because of this distribution, it is not adequate to consider public value as an absolute indicator of government outcomes. To do so misses the variety of interests and possible benefits across many stakeholders. Instead the public value way of thinking presented here treats public value as a set of complex, nonlinear interactions among the operations of a government agency or program, the legitimacy and support for the government in the environment, and how each of these shape and are shaped by public perceptions.

### **Public Value Impacts**

These value impacts can be described in terms of seven general categories that capture the range of possible results of opening government in the ways of interest here.

- **Economic** – impacts on current or future income, asset values, liabilities, entitlements, or other aspects of wealth or risks to any of the above.
- **Political** – impacts on a person's or group's influence on government actions or policy, on their role in political affairs, influence in political parties, or prospects for public office.
- **Social** – impacts on family or community relationships, social mobility, status, and identity.
- **Strategic** – impacts on person's or group's economic or political advantage or opportunities, goals, and resources for innovation or planning.
- **Quality of Life** – impacts on individual and household health, security, satisfaction, and general well-being.
- **Ideological** – impacts on beliefs, moral, or ethical commitments, alignment of government actions or policies or social outcomes with beliefs, moral, or ethical positions.
- **Stewardship** – impacts on the public's view of government officials as faithful stewards or guardians of the value of the government in terms of public trust, integrity, and legitimacy.

Of these, the first four are primarily impacts related to the private interests of individual or groups. The remaining three are more linked to societal or more public value outcomes. From identifying these seven basic types of value impacts, we can move to considering these four questions: Value in what sense? For whom? By what mechanisms? And under what conditions?

Dealing with the mechanism question first provides a way to begin linking the characteristics of open government initiatives with their value impacts. A partial answer to the mechanism question is presented below in terms of six basic kinds of interests.

- **Efficiency** – changes in the outputs or goal attainment with the same resources, or obtaining the same outputs or goals with lower resource consumption.
- **Effectiveness** – changes in the quality and/or quantity of the desired outcome.
- **Intrinsic enhancements** – changing the environment or circumstances of a stakeholder in ways that are valued for their own sake.
- **Transparency** – changes in access to information about the actions of government officials or operation of government programs that enhances accountability or citizen influence on government.
- **Participation** – changes in frequency and intensity of direct citizen involvement in decision making about or operation of government programs or in selection of or actions of officials.
- **Collaboration** – changes in frequency or duration of activities in which more than one set of stakeholders share responsibility or authority for decisions about operation, policies, or actions of government.

Connecting a value type with a mechanism can demonstrate how opening government results in a range of both positive and negative impacts. Financial impacts, for example, can clearly be positive or negative with respect to any individual stakeholder. Enabling a citizen to learn of a toxic chemical release in his neighborhood may result in a lawsuit against the source, imposing serious financial loss on that organization. An interest group that uses access to legislative decision making can be enabled to influence a new law that provides an important advantage over a rival, say an environmental advocacy group versus a real estate developer. The same logic can apply to the other categories. Even such intrinsic improvements as increased transparency and accountability that produce greater integrity in government will likely have negative impacts on corrupt officials or dishonest contractors.

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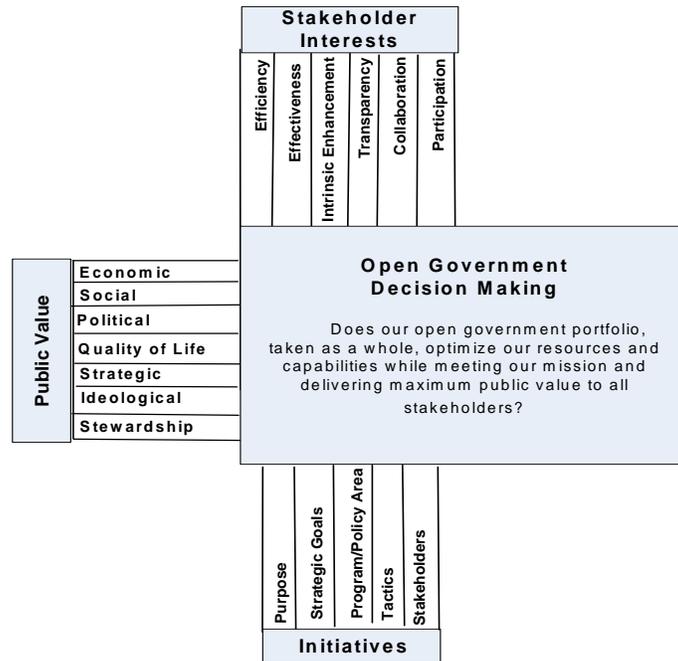
## A Portfolio Perspective for Open Government

While agencies are moving swiftly to meet the *Open Government Directive*, many are faced with both long-term and short-term challenges of making choices among investment options. Many face difficulty in comparing, measuring, and subsequently choosing initiatives because there is no common framework (and as such, no common understanding across the agencies) for describing where any effort falls in the realm of open government. A value based portfolio assessment tool of open government can provide this much needed foundational structure. To do so, a clear and comprehensive value framework is required to support valid comparisons across the alternative projects or investments.

The ultimate goal of any government program or investment can be described in terms of the benefits to individuals, groups, or the society as a whole. The tool identifies a framework of public value dimensions that can be applied across a very wide range of open government activities to identify common value outcomes. The outcomes vary by stakeholders, so the tool includes attention to the distribution of outcomes and benefits across different groups and interests. These common outcomes

then provide a basis for comparison across the parts of a portfolio to assess balance and effective use of resources.

The logic and foundation for this tool is based on CTG's *Public Value Framework* and presents a way of assessing how opening government can yield value in terms of stakeholder interests and overall government performance. In using the framework and looking at the agency as a whole, decision makers can assess where changes can be made and where new efforts are moving the agency closer to its goals. They can move resources among alternative projects to maximize value across stakeholders and agency priorities. The tool provides a common language and way of thinking about open government so that agencies can work from that same understanding. It is a foundational piece that allows agencies to engage in dialogue across departmental and agency boundaries by having a common language and common structure so that they can make more collective and informed decisions.



The figure above shows the concepts in the tool. More specifically, the factors and considerations taken into account when an agency reviews the expected public value across their entire portfolio of open government initiatives.

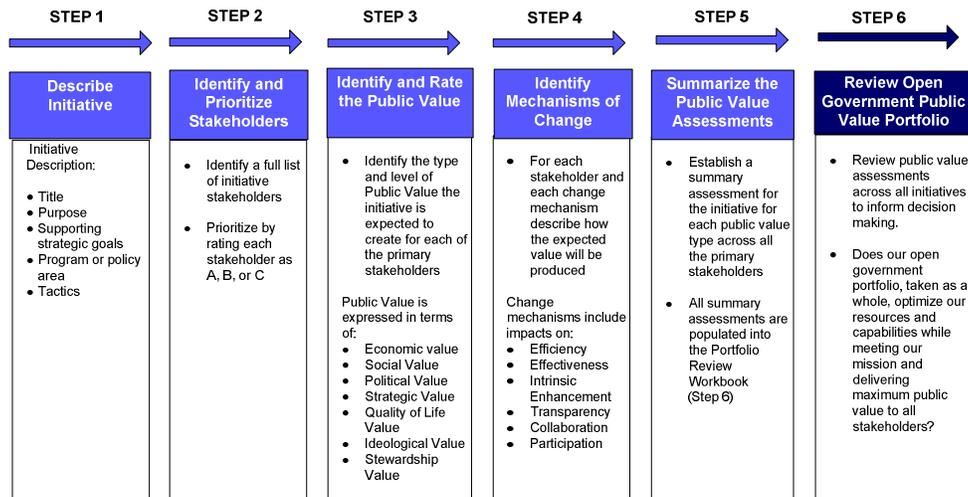
The information generated from using this tool can then support decisions about the mix of initiatives in a portfolio and how to adjust the mix of open government initiatives to enhance public value. It focuses attention beyond individual initiatives to the overall value across an agency's open government programs and projects.

## Portfolio Tool Design

The underlying conceptual design of the tool contains three parts: 1) assessing open government initiatives as parts of a portfolio, 2) basing that assessment on a detailed public value framework (outlined below), and 3) treating the assessment as a group process of deliberation. In the current context, any particular agency or level of government is likely to have multiple open government initiatives in place or under consideration. Treating those initiatives as a portfolio allows both for an overall assessment and for a way to consider tradeoffs of lower value for higher value components. Such an assessment requires a value framework that includes a range of social and political returns beyond the usual financial metrics so that these broad value results can be taken into account. Due to the complex information requirements for such a process and the need to accommodate diverse interests and perspectives, the tool employs a group process for portfolio assessment and decision making.

Based on these ideas, the tool yields a way to look at an open government portfolio in terms of the public value expected from each initiative. The design is such that those doing the assessment identify each initiative's relevant stakeholders and their interests, then the value the initiative can produce for those stakeholders. Using a common value framework across the initiatives illuminates opportunities to shift effort and investment among initiatives to increase the overall value of the portfolio.

The Figure below presents the steps in conducting an initiative assessment and then a portfolio review.



More specifically, the steps in the tool present a systematic approach to conducting initiative level assessments and subsequently assembling those results to create a portfolio view of value ratings for their open government efforts.

The steps are detailed as follows:

- **Step 1** creates a portfolio-view of each open government effort and describes each initiative considered part of or related to the agency's open government priorities. The information requested may already be in planning and other related documents. By pulling together this information in one place, the team can confirm their common judgments.
- **Step 2** identifies and prioritizes a full and comprehensive list of internal and external stakeholders. Since the stakeholder perspective is the cornerstone of the assessment, identifying and prioritizing stakeholders is a critical step. A comprehensive list will increase the opportunity to make useful assessments about the relative impact potential of each initiative.
- **Step 3** identifies and rates the public value by stakeholder for the initiative. Since the interests of stakeholders can vary greatly, assessing a portfolio of initiatives in terms of public value requires mapping stakeholder interests to the possible outcomes of each initiative. This step involves making judgments about the nature and extent of public value created for each stakeholder for each value type.
- **Step 4** identifies the expected impact of the initiative on the interests of the selected stakeholder groups in terms of six basic interests (efficiency, effectiveness, intrinsic enhancements, transparency, participation, and collaboration).
- **Step 5** creates a summary assessment on each public value type for individual initiatives by combining the ratings of the primary stakeholders.
- **Step 6** combines the summary public value assessments into a portfolio view for the purposes of informing decision making on questions such as:
  - Are some stakeholders getting more value than others?
  - Are we serving the right combination or mix of stakeholders?
  - Does our portfolio address all types of impacts?
  - Are we satisfied with the balance of value in the portfolio?
  - Does the review by stakeholder or value show the portfolio as meeting our agency's strategic interests and mission?
  - Do the types of open government projects in our portfolio provide the balance of the *Open Government Directive* categories (transparency, participation, collaboration) we envisioned or planned for?
  - Does our open government portfolio, taken as a whole, optimize our resources and capabilities while meeting our mission and delivering maximum public value to all stakeholders?

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## Conclusion

Agencies are working to increase openness by spearheading new efforts each day and, because of resource realities, working to ensure the greatest value for the investment. The *Open Government Portfolio Public Value Assessment Tool* helps agencies inform their decision making by providing a structured way to assess the public value of each effort and for each stakeholder while presenting a comprehensive portfolio view of what value to expect from their agency's overall effort.

The tool is not a silver bullet. The results it produces are only as good as the knowledge, insight, effort, and commitment of the government professionals and analysts who work on the assessment. The tool is designed to structure the work of assessing value in a way that assists and supports analysis and portfolio decision making. Using the tool effectively depends on those who know the most about the open government goals and initiatives in each agency as well as their stakeholder environment. The results can be a highly useful part of the overall effort of planning and implementing ways to open government in new, more effective ways.

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## APPENDIX A: Additional Information

### Links:

Advancing Return on Investment Analysis for Government IT: A Public Value Framework

[http://www.ctg.albany.edu/publications/reports/advancing\\_roi](http://www.ctg.albany.edu/publications/reports/advancing_roi)

Return on Investment In Information Technology: A Guide for Managers

<http://www.ctg.albany.edu/publications/guides/roi>

Open Government Portfolio Public Value Assessment Tool

<http://www.ctg.albany.edu/publications/online/pvat/>

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