



United States Government Accountability Office

By the Comptroller General of the
United States

April 2021

GOVERNMENT AUDITING STANDARDS

2018 Revision

Technical Update April 2021

Accessible Version



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The 2018 revision of *Government Auditing Standards* is effective for financial audits, attestation engagements, and reviews of financial statements for periods ending on or after June 30, 2020, and for performance audits beginning on or after July 1, 2019. Early implementation is not permitted. The 2018 revision of *Government Auditing Standards* supersedes the 2011 revision (GAO-12-331G, December 2011), the 2005 *Government Auditing Standards: Guidance on GAGAS Requirements for Continuing Professional Education* (GAO-05-568G, April 2005), and the 2014 *Government Auditing Standards: Guidance for Understanding the New Peer Review Ratings* (D06602, January 2014). The 2018 revision should be used until further updates and revisions are made. An electronic version of this document can be accessed on GAO's Yellow Book web page at <http://www.gao.gov/yellowbook>.

2021 Technical Updates to the 2018 Revision of Government Auditing Standards

The following technical updates have been made to the 2018 revision of *Government Auditing Standards (known as the Yellow Book)*. **These technical updates to the 2018 revision of *Government Auditing Standards* are effective upon issuance.**

2018 Revision of <i>Government Auditing Standards</i>	2021 Technical Updates
<p>1.02 The concept of accountability for use of public resources and government authority is key to our nation’s governing processes. Management and officials entrusted with public resources are responsible for carrying out public functions and providing service to the public effectively, efficiently, economically, and ethically within the context of the statutory boundaries of the specific government program.</p>	<p>1.02 The concept of accountability for use of public resources and government authority is key to our nation’s governing processes. Management and officials entrusted with public resources are responsible for carrying out public functions and providing service to the public effectively, efficiently, economically, ethically, and equitably within the context of the statutory boundaries of the specific government program.</p>
<p>1.03 As reflected in applicable laws, regulations, agreements, and standards, management and officials of government programs are responsible for providing reliable, useful, and timely information for transparency and accountability of these programs and their operations. Legislators, oversight bodies, those charged with governance, and the public need to know whether (1) management and officials manage government resources and use their authority properly and in compliance with laws and regulations; (2) government programs are achieving their objectives and desired outcomes; and (3) government services are provided effectively, efficiently, economically, and ethically.</p>	<p>1.03 As reflected in applicable laws, regulations, agreements, and standards, management and officials of government programs are responsible for providing reliable, useful, and timely information for transparency and accountability of these programs and their operations. Legislators, oversight bodies, those charged with governance, and the public need to know whether (1) management and officials manage government resources and use their authority properly and in compliance with laws and regulations; (2) government programs are achieving their objectives and desired outcomes; and (3) government services are provided effectively, efficiently, economically, ethically, and equitably.</p>
<p>1.23 Examples of program effectiveness and results audit objectives include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> f. determining whether a program provides access to or distribution of public resources within the context of statutory parameters; 	<p>1.23 Examples of program effectiveness and results audit objectives include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> f. determining whether a program provides equitable access to or distribution of public resources within the context of statutory parameters;
<p>3.83 Auditors who previously provided nonaudit services for an entity that is a prospective subject of an engagement should evaluate the effect of those nonaudit services on independence before agreeing to conduct a GAGAS engagement. If auditors provided a nonaudit service in the period to be covered by the engagement, they should (1) determine if GAGAS expressly prohibits the nonaudit service; (2) if audited entity management requested the nonaudit service, determine whether the skills, knowledge, and experience of the individual responsible for overseeing the nonaudit service were sufficient; and (3) determine whether a threat to independence exists and address any threats noted in accordance with the conceptual framework.</p>	<p>3.83 Auditors who previously provided nonaudit services for an entity that is a prospective subject of an engagement should evaluate the effect of those nonaudit services on independence before agreeing to conduct a GAGAS engagement. If auditors provided a nonaudit service in the period to be covered by the engagement, they should (1) determine if GAGAS expressly prohibits the nonaudit service; (2) if audited entity management requested the nonaudit service, determine whether the skill, knowledge, or experience of the individual responsible for overseeing the nonaudit service was sufficient; and (3) determine whether a threat to independence exists and address any threats noted in accordance with the conceptual framework.</p>
<p>8.42 If internal control is significant to the audit objectives, auditors determine which of the five components of internal control and underlying principles are significant to the audit objectives, as all components of internal control are generally relevant, but not all components may be significant to the audit objectives. This determination can also identify whether specific controls are significant to the audit objectives. Determining which internal control components and principles and/or specific controls are significant to the audit objectives is a matter of professional judgment.</p>	<p>8.42 If internal control is significant to the audit objectives, auditors determine which of the five components of internal control are significant to the audit objectives, as all components of internal control are generally relevant, but not all components may be significant to the audit objectives. This determination can also identify the underlying principles, control objectives, or specific controls that are significant to the audit objectives. Determining which internal control components, principles, control objectives, and/or specific controls are significant to the audit objectives is a matter of professional judgment.</p>

8.49 If internal control is determined to be significant to the audit objectives, auditors should assess and document their assessment of the design, implementation, and/or operating effectiveness of such internal control to the extent necessary to address the audit objectives.

8.49 If internal control is determined to be significant to the audit objectives, auditors should plan and perform audit procedures to assess internal control to the extent necessary to address the audit objectives.

9.30 If some but not all internal control components are significant to the audit objectives, the auditors should identify as part of the scope those internal control components and underlying principles that are significant to the audit objectives.

9.30 When reporting on the scope of their work on internal control, auditors should identify the scope of internal control assessed to the extent necessary for report users to reasonably interpret the findings, conclusions, and recommendations in the audit report.

9.32 Control components and underlying principles that are not considered significant to the audit objectives may be identified in the scope if, in the auditors' professional judgment, doing so is necessary to preclude a misunderstanding of the breadth of the conclusions of the audit report and to clarify that control effectiveness has not been evaluated as a whole. Auditors may also identify and describe the five components of internal control so that report users understand the scope of the work within the context of the entity's internal control system.

9.32 Auditors may identify the control components, underlying principles, control objectives, or specific controls assessed in describing the scope of their work on internal control. Auditors may also identify the level of internal control assessment performed, as discussed in paragraph 8.50. Control components and underlying principles that are not considered significant to the audit objectives may be identified in the scope if, in the auditors' professional judgment, doing so is necessary to preclude a misunderstanding of the breadth of the conclusions of the audit report and to clarify that control effectiveness has not been evaluated as a whole. Auditors may also identify and describe the five components of internal control so that report users understand the scope of the work within the context of the entity's internal control system.

Conforming changes have been made to the figures to reflect the technical updates.

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Abbreviations

AICPA	American Institute of Certified Public Accountants
AR-C	<i>AICPA Codification of Statements on Standards for Accounting and Review Services</i>
AT-C	<i>AICPA Codification of Statements on Standards for Attestation Engagements</i>
AU-C	<i>AICPA Codification of Statements on Auditing Standards</i>
CPA	certified public accountant
CPE	continuing professional education
GAGAS	generally accepted government auditing standards
IAASB	International Auditing and Assurance Standards Board
IT	information technology
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
PCAOB	Public Company Accounting Oversight Board
SAS	Statements on Auditing Standards
SSAE	Statements on Standards for Attestation Engagements

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Audits provide essential accountability and transparency over government programs. Given the current challenges facing governments and their programs, the oversight provided through auditing is more critical than ever. Government auditing provides the objective analysis and information needed to make the decisions necessary to help create a better future. The professional standards presented in this 2018 revision of *Government Auditing Standards* (known as the Yellow Book) provide a framework for performing high-quality audit work with competence, integrity, objectivity, and independence to provide accountability and to help improve government operations and services. These standards, commonly referred to as generally accepted government auditing standards (GAGAS), provide the foundation for government auditors to lead by example in the areas of independence, transparency, accountability, and quality through the audit process.

This revision contains major changes from, and supersedes, the 2011 revision. These changes, summarized below, reinforce the principles of transparency and accountability and strengthen the framework for high-quality government audits.

- All chapters are presented in a revised format that differentiates requirements and application guidance related to those requirements.
- Supplemental guidance from the appendix of the 2011 revision is either removed or incorporated into the individual chapters.
- The independence standard is expanded to state that preparing financial statements from a client-provided trial balance or underlying accounting records generally creates significant threats to auditors' independence, and auditors should document the threats and safeguards applied to eliminate and reduce threats to an acceptable level or decline to perform the service.
- The peer review standard is modified to require that audit organizations comply with their respective affiliated organization's peer review requirements and GAGAS peer review requirements. Additional requirements are provided for audit organizations not affiliated with recognized organizations.
- The standards include a definition for waste.
- The performance audit standards are updated with specific considerations for when internal control is significant to the audit objectives.

Effective with the implementation dates for the 2018 revision of *Government Auditing Standards*, GAO is also retiring *Government Auditing Standards: Guidance on GAGAS Requirements for Continuing Professional Education* (GAO-05-568G, April 2005) and *Government Auditing Standards: Guidance for Understanding the New Peer Review Ratings* (D06602, January 2014).

This revision of the standards has gone through an extensive deliberative process, including public comments and input from the Comptroller General's Advisory Council on Government Auditing Standards (Advisory Council). The Advisory Council consists of experts in financial and performance auditing and reporting from federal, state, and local government; the private sector; and academia. The views of all parties were thoroughly considered in finalizing the standards.

The 2018 revision of *Government Auditing Standards* is effective for financial audits, attestation engagements, and reviews of financial statements for periods ending on or after June 30, 2020, and for performance audits beginning on or after July 1, 2019. Early implementation is not permitted.

An electronic version of this document can be accessed at <http://www.gao.gov/yellowbook>.

I extend special thanks to the members of the Advisory Council for their extensive input and feedback throughout the process of developing and finalizing the standards.



Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States

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Chapter 1: Foundation and Principles for the Use and Application of Government Auditing Standards

1.01 This chapter provides guidance for engagements conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards (GAGAS). This chapter also

- a. explains the types of auditors and audit organizations that may employ GAGAS to conduct their work,
- b. identifies the types of engagements that may be conducted in accordance with GAGAS, and
- c. explains terminology that is commonly used in GAGAS.

Introduction

1.02 The concept of accountability for use of public resources and government authority is key to our nation's governing processes. Management and officials entrusted with public resources are responsible for carrying out public functions and providing service to the public effectively, efficiently, economically, ethically, and equitably within the context of the statutory boundaries of the specific government program.

1.03 As reflected in applicable laws, regulations, agreements, and standards, management and officials of government programs are responsible for providing reliable, useful, and timely information for transparency and accountability of these programs and their operations. Legislators, oversight bodies, those charged with governance, and the public need to know whether (1) management and officials manage government resources and use their authority properly and in compliance with laws and regulations; (2) government programs are achieving their objectives and desired outcomes; and (3) government services are provided effectively, efficiently, economically, ethically, and equitably.

1.04 “Those charged with governance” refers to the individuals responsible for overseeing the strategic direction of the entity and obligations related to the accountability of the entity. This includes overseeing the financial reporting process, subject matter, or program under audit, including related internal controls. Those charged with governance may also be part of the entity’s management. In some audited entities, multiple parties may be charged with governance, including oversight bodies, members or staff of legislative committees, boards of directors, audit committees, or parties contracting for the engagement.

1.05 Government auditing is essential in providing accountability to legislators, oversight bodies, those charged with governance, and the public. GAGAS engagements provide an independent, objective, nonpartisan assessment of the stewardship, performance, or cost of government policies, programs, or operations, depending upon the type and scope of the engagement.

1.06 The professional standards and guidance contained in this document provide a framework for conducting high-quality engagements with competence, integrity, objectivity, and independence. Auditors of government entities, entities that receive government awards, and other entities, as required by law or regulation or as they elect, may use these standards. Overall, GAGAS contains standards for engagements comprising individual requirements that are identified by terminology as discussed in paragraphs 2.02 through 2.10. GAGAS contains requirements and guidance dealing with ethics, independence, auditors’ professional judgment and competence, quality control, peer review, conducting the engagement, and reporting.

1.07 Engagements conducted in accordance with GAGAS provide information used for oversight, accountability, transparency, and improvements of government programs and operations. GAGAS contains requirements and guidance to assist auditors in objectively obtaining and evaluating sufficient, appropriate evidence and reporting the results. When auditors conduct their work in this manner and comply with GAGAS in reporting the results, their work can lead to improved government management, better decision making and oversight, effective and efficient operations, and accountability and transparency for resources and results.

1.08 Laws, regulations, contracts, grant agreements, and policies frequently require that engagements be conducted in accordance with

GAGAS. In addition, many auditors and audit organizations voluntarily choose to conduct their work in accordance with GAGAS. The requirements and guidance in GAGAS in totality apply to engagements pertaining to government entities, programs, activities, and functions, and to government assistance administered by contractors, nonprofit entities, and other nongovernmental entities when the use of GAGAS is required or voluntarily adopted.

1.09 The following are some of the laws, regulations, and other authoritative sources that require the use of GAGAS:

- a. The Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended (5 U.S.C. App.), requires that the federal inspectors general appointed under that act comply with GAGAS for audits of federal establishments, organizations, programs, activities, and functions. The act further states that the inspectors general shall take appropriate steps to assure that any work performed by nonfederal auditors complies with GAGAS.
- b. The Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990 (Public Law 101-576), as expanded by the Government Management Reform Act of 1994 (Public Law 103-356), requires that GAGAS be followed in audits of major executive branch departments' and agencies' financial statements. The Accountability of Tax Dollars Act of 2002 (Public Law 107-289) generally extends this requirement to most executive agencies not subject to the Chief Financial Officers Act.
- c. The Single Audit Act Amendments of 1996 (Public Law 104-156) requires that GAGAS be followed in audits of state and local governments and nonprofit entities that receive federal awards. Subpart F of OMB's *Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards* (2 C.F.R. part 200), which provides the government-wide guidelines and policies on conducting audits to comply with the Single Audit Act, reiterates the requirement to use GAGAS.

1.10 Other laws, regulations, or authoritative sources may require the use of GAGAS. For example, auditors at the state and local government levels may be required by state and local laws and regulations to follow GAGAS. Also, auditors may be required by the terms of an agreement or contract to follow GAGAS. Auditors may also be required to follow GAGAS by federal audit guidelines pertaining to program requirements. Being aware of such other laws, regulations, or authoritative sources may

assist auditors in performing their work in accordance with the required standards.

1.11 Even if not required to do so, auditors may find it useful to follow GAGAS in conducting engagements pertaining to federal, state, and local government programs as well as engagements pertaining to state and local government awards that contractors, nonprofit entities, and other nongovernmental entities administer. Though not formally required to do so, many audit organizations, both in the United States and in other countries, voluntarily follow GAGAS.

Types of GAGAS Users

1.12 GAGAS provides standards that are used by a wide range of auditors and audit organizations that audit government entities, entities that receive government awards, and other entities. These auditors and audit organizations may also be subject to additional requirements unique to their environments. Examples of the various types of users who may be required or may elect to use GAGAS include the following:

- a. Contract auditors: audit organizations that specialize in conducting engagements pertaining to government acquisitions and contract administration
- b. Certified public accounting firms: public accounting organizations in the private sector that provide audit, attestation, or review services under contract to government entities or recipients of government funds
- c. Federal inspectors general: government audit organizations within federal agencies that conduct engagements and investigations relating to the programs and operations of their agencies and issue reports both to agency management and to third parties external to the audited entity
- d. Federal agency internal auditors: internal government audit organizations associated with federal agencies that conduct engagements and investigations relating to the programs and operations of their agencies

- e. Municipal auditors: elected or appointed officials in government audit organizations in the United States at the city, county, and other local government levels
- f. State auditors: elected or appointed officials in audit organizations in the governments of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. territories
- g. Supreme audit institutions: national government audit organizations, in the United States or elsewhere, typically headed by a comptroller general or auditor general

Types of GAGAS Engagements

1.13 This section describes the types of engagements that audit organizations may conduct in accordance with GAGAS. This description is not intended to limit or require the types of engagements that may be conducted in accordance with GAGAS.

1.14 All GAGAS engagements begin with objectives, and those objectives determine the type of engagement to be conducted and the applicable standards to be followed. This document classifies financial audits, attestation engagements, reviews of financial statements, and performance audits, as defined by their objectives, as the types of engagements that are covered by GAGAS.

1.15 In some GAGAS engagements, the standards applicable to the specific objective will be apparent. For example, if the objective is to express an opinion on financial statements, the standards for financial audits apply. However, some engagements may have objectives that could be met using more than one approach. For example, if the objective is to determine the reliability of performance measures, auditors can perform this work in accordance with either the standards for attestation engagements or performance audits.

1.16 GAGAS requirements and guidance apply to the types of engagements that auditors may conduct in accordance with GAGAS as follows:

- a. Financial audits: the requirements and guidance in chapters 1 through 6 apply.

- b. Attestation-level examination, review, and agreed-upon procedures engagements and reviews of financial statements: the requirements and guidance in chapters 1 through 5 and 7 apply.
- c. Performance audits: the requirements and guidance in chapters 1 through 5, 8, and 9 apply.

Financial Audits

1.17 Financial audits provide independent assessments of whether entities' reported financial information (e.g., financial condition, results, and use of resources) is presented fairly, in all material respects, in accordance with recognized criteria. Financial audits conducted in accordance with GAGAS include financial statement audits and other related financial audits.

- a. Financial statement audits: The primary purpose of a financial statement audit is to provide financial statement users with an opinion by an auditor on whether an entity's financial statements are presented fairly, in all material respects, in accordance with an applicable financial reporting framework. Reporting on financial statement audits conducted in accordance with GAGAS also includes reports on internal control over financial reporting and on compliance with provisions of laws, regulations, contracts, and grant agreements that have a material effect on the financial statements.
- b. Other types of financial audits: Other types of financial audits conducted in accordance with GAGAS entail various scopes of work, including
 - (1) obtaining sufficient, appropriate evidence to form an opinion on a single financial statement or specified elements, accounts, or line items of a financial statement;¹
 - (2) issuing letters (commonly referred to as comfort letters) for underwriters and certain other requesting parties;²

¹See AU-C section 805, *Special Considerations – Audits of Single Financial Statements and Specific Elements, Accounts, or Items of a Financial Statement* (AICPA, *Professional Standards*).

- (3) auditing applicable compliance and internal control requirements relating to one or more government programs;³ and
- (4) conducting an audit of internal control over financial reporting that is integrated with an audit of financial statements (integrated audit).⁴

²See AU-C section 920, *Letters for Underwriters and Certain Other Requesting Parties* (AICPA, Professional Standards).

³See AU-C section 935, *Compliance Audits* (AICPA, Professional Standards).

⁴See AU-C section 940, *An Audit of Internal Control Over Financial Reporting That Is Integrated With an Audit of Financial Statements* (AICPA, Professional Standards).

Attestation Engagements and Reviews of Financial Statements

1.18 Attestation engagements can cover a broad range of financial or nonfinancial objectives about the subject matter or assertion depending on the users' needs. In an attestation engagement, the subject matter or an assertion by a party other than the auditors is measured or evaluated in accordance with suitable criteria. The work the auditors perform and the level of assurance associated with the report vary based on the type of attestation engagement. The three types of attestation engagements are as follows:

- a. **Examination:** An auditor obtains reasonable assurance by obtaining sufficient, appropriate evidence about the measurement or evaluation of subject matter against criteria in order to be able to draw reasonable conclusions on which to base the auditor's opinion about whether the subject matter is in accordance with (or based on) the criteria or the assertion is fairly stated, in all material respects. The auditor obtains the same level of assurance in an examination as in a financial statement audit.⁵
- b. **Review:** An auditor obtains limited assurance by obtaining sufficient, appropriate review evidence about the measurement or evaluation of subject matter against criteria in order to express a conclusion about whether any material modification should be made to the subject matter in order for it to be in accordance with (or based on) the criteria or to the assertion in order for it to be fairly stated. Review-level work does not include reporting on internal control or compliance with provisions of laws, regulations, contracts, and grant agreements. The auditor obtains the same level of assurance in a review engagement as in a review of financial statements.⁶
- c. **Agreed-upon procedures engagement:** An auditor performs specific procedures on subject matter or an assertion and reports the findings without providing an opinion or a conclusion on it. The specified parties to the engagement agree upon and are

⁵See AT-C section 205, *Examination Engagements* (AICPA, *Professional Standards*).

⁶See AT-C section 210, *Review Engagements* (AICPA, *Professional Standards*).

responsible for the sufficiency of the procedures for their purposes. The specified parties are the intended users to whom use of the report is limited.⁷

1.19 The subject matter of an attestation engagement may take many forms, including the following:

- a. historical or prospective performance or condition, historical or prospective financial information, performance measurements, or backlog data;
- b. physical characteristics, for example, narrative descriptions or square footage of facilities;
- c. historical events, for example, the price of a market basket of goods on a certain date;
- d. analyses, for example, break-even analyses;
- e. systems and processes, for example, internal control; and
- f. behavior, for example, corporate governance, compliance with laws and regulations, and human resource practices.

1.20 The objective of the auditor when performing a review of financial statements is to obtain limited assurance as a basis for reporting whether the auditor is aware of any material modifications that should be made to financial statements in order for the financial statements to be in accordance with the applicable financial reporting framework. A review of financial statements does not include obtaining an understanding of the entity's internal control, assessing fraud risk, or certain other procedures ordinarily performed in an audit.⁸

Performance Audits

1.21 Performance audits provide objective analysis, findings, and conclusions to assist management and those charged with governance

⁷See AT-C section 215, *Agreed-Upon Procedures Engagements* (AICPA, *Professional Standards*).

⁸See AR-C section 90, *Review of Financial Statements* (AICPA, *Professional Standards*).

and oversight with, among other things, improving program performance and operations, reducing costs, facilitating decision making by parties responsible for overseeing or initiating corrective action, and contributing to public accountability.

1.22 Performance audit objectives vary widely and include assessments of program effectiveness, economy, and efficiency; internal control; compliance; and prospective analyses. Audit objectives may also pertain to the current status or condition of a program. These overall objectives are not mutually exclusive. For example, a performance audit with an objective of determining or evaluating program effectiveness may also involve an additional objective of evaluating the program's internal controls. Key categories of performance audit objectives include the following:

- a. Program effectiveness and results audit objectives. These are frequently interrelated with economy and efficiency objectives. Audit objectives that focus on program effectiveness and results typically measure the extent to which a program is achieving its goals and objectives. Audit objectives that focus on economy and efficiency address the costs and resources used to achieve program results.
- b. Internal control audit objectives. These relate to an assessment of one or more aspects of an entity's system of internal control that is designed to provide reasonable assurance of achieving effective and efficient operations, reliability of reporting for internal and external use, or compliance with provisions of applicable laws and regulations. Internal control objectives also may be relevant when determining the cause of unsatisfactory program performance. Internal control is a process effected by an entity's oversight body, management, and other personnel that provides reasonable assurance that the objectives of an entity will be achieved. Internal control comprises the plans, methods, policies, and procedures used to fulfill the mission, strategic plan, goals, and objectives of the entity.
- c. Compliance audit objectives. These relate to an assessment of compliance with criteria established by provisions of laws, regulations, contracts, and grant agreements, or other requirements that could affect the acquisition, protection, use, and disposition of the entity's resources and the quantity, quality,

timeliness, and cost of services the entity produces and delivers. Compliance requirements can be either financial or nonfinancial.

- d. Prospective analysis audit objectives. These provide analysis or conclusions about information that is based on assumptions about events that may occur in the future, along with possible actions that the entity may take in response to the future events.

1.23 Examples of program effectiveness and results audit objectives include

- a. assessing the extent to which legislative, regulatory, or organizational goals and objectives are being achieved;
- b. assessing the relative ability of alternative approaches to yield better program performance or eliminate factors that inhibit program effectiveness;
- c. analyzing the relative cost-effectiveness of a program or activity, focusing on combining cost information or other inputs with (1) information about outputs or the benefit provided or (2) outcomes or the results achieved;
- d. determining whether a program produced intended results or produced results that were not consistent with the program's objectives;
- e. determining the current status or condition of program operations or progress in implementing legislative requirements;
- f. determining whether a program provides equitable access to or distribution of public resources within the context of statutory parameters;
- g. assessing the extent to which programs duplicate, overlap, or conflict with other related programs;
- h. evaluating whether the entity is following sound procurement practices;
- i. assessing the reliability, validity, or relevance of performance measures concerning program effectiveness and results or economy and efficiency;

- j. assessing the reliability, validity, or relevance of financial information related to the performance of a program;
- k. determining whether government resources (inputs) are obtained at reasonable costs while meeting timeliness and quality considerations;
- l. determining whether appropriate value was obtained based on the cost or amount paid or based on the amount of revenue received;
- m. determining whether government services and benefits are accessible to those individuals who have a right to access those services and benefits;
- n. determining whether fees assessed cover costs;
- o. determining whether and how the program's unit costs can be decreased or its productivity increased; and
- p. assessing the reliability, validity, or relevance of budget proposals or budget requests to assist legislatures in the budget process.

1.24 Examples of internal control audit objectives include determining whether

- a. organizational missions, goals, and objectives are achieved effectively and efficiently;
- b. resources are used in compliance with laws, regulations, or other requirements;
- c. resources, including sensitive information accessed or stored outside the organization's physical perimeter, are safeguarded against unauthorized acquisition, use, or disposition;
- d. management information, such as performance measures, and public reports are complete, accurate, and consistent to support performance and decision making;
- e. the integrity of information from computerized systems is achieved; and

- f. contingency planning for information systems provides essential backup to prevent unwarranted disruption of the activities and functions that the systems support.

1.25 Examples of compliance objectives include determining whether

- a. the purpose of the program, the manner in which it is to be conducted, the services delivered, the outcomes, or the population it serves is in compliance with provisions of laws, regulations, contracts, or grant agreements or other requirements;
- b. government services and benefits are distributed or delivered to citizens based on eligibility to obtain those services and benefits;
- c. incurred or proposed costs are in compliance with applicable laws, regulations, contracts, or grant agreements; and
- d. revenues received are in compliance with applicable laws, regulations, contracts, or grant agreements.

1.26 Examples of prospective analysis objectives include providing conclusions based on

- a. current and projected trends and future potential impact on government programs and services and their implications for program or policy alternatives;
- b. program or policy alternatives, including forecasting program outcomes under various assumptions;
- c. policy or legislative proposals, including advantages, disadvantages, and analysis of stakeholder views;
- d. prospective information prepared by management;
- e. budgets and forecasts that are based on (1) assumptions about expected future events and (2) stakeholders' and management's expected reaction to those future events; and
- f. management's assumptions on which prospective information is based.

Terms Used in GAGAS

1.27 This paragraph describes certain terms used in GAGAS. When terminology differs from that used at an organization subject to GAGAS, auditors use professional judgment to determine if there is an equivalent term.⁹

- a. **Attestation engagement:** An examination, review, or agreed-upon procedures engagement conducted under the GAGAS attestation standards related to subject matter or an assertion that is the responsibility of another party.
- b. **Audit:** Either a financial audit or performance audit conducted in accordance with GAGAS.
- c. **Audit organization:** A government audit entity or a public accounting firm or other audit entity that conducts GAGAS engagements.
- d. **Audit report:** A report issued as a result of a financial audit, attestation engagement, review of financial statements, or performance audit conducted in accordance with GAGAS.
- e. **Audited entity:** The entity that is subject to a GAGAS engagement, whether that engagement is a financial audit, attestation engagement, review of financial statements, or performance audit.
- f. **Auditor:** An individual assigned to planning, directing, performing engagement procedures, or reporting on GAGAS engagements (including work on audits, attestation engagements, and reviews of financial statements) regardless of job title. Therefore, individuals who may have the title auditor, information technology auditor, analyst, practitioner, evaluator, inspector, or other similar titles are considered auditors under GAGAS.
- g. **Control objective:** The aim or purpose of specified controls; control objectives address the risks related to achieving an entity's objectives.

⁹See the Glossary for an expanded list of terms used in GAGAS.

- h. Engagement: A financial audit, attestation engagement, review of financial statements, or performance audit conducted in accordance with GAGAS.
- i. Engagement team (or audit team): Auditors assigned to planning, directing, performing engagement procedures, or reporting on GAGAS engagements.
- j. Engaging party: The party that engages the auditor to conduct the GAGAS engagement.
- k. Entity objective: What an entity wants to achieve; entity objectives are intended to meet the entity's mission, strategic plan, and goals and the requirements of applicable laws and regulations.
- l. External audit organization: An audit organization that issues reports to third parties external to the audited entity, either exclusively or in addition to issuing reports to senior management and those charged with governance of the audited entity.
- m. Internal audit organization: An audit organization that is accountable to senior management and those charged with governance of the audited entity and that does not generally issue reports to third parties external to the audited entity.
- n. Responsible party: The party responsible for a GAGAS engagement's subject matter.
- o. Review of financial statements: An engagement conducted under GAGAS for review of financial statements.
- p. Specialist: An individual or organization possessing special skill or knowledge in a particular field other than accounting or auditing that assists auditors in conducting engagements. A specialist may be either an internal specialist or an external specialist.

The GAGAS Format

1.28 GAGAS uses a format designed to allow auditors to quickly identify requirements and application guidance related to those requirements. GAGAS requirements are differentiated from application guidance by borders surrounding the text. The requirements are followed immediately

by application guidance that relates directly to the preceding requirements. The auditors' responsibilities related to requirements and application guidance are discussed in paragraphs 2.02 through 2.10.

Chapter 2: General Requirements for Complying with Government Auditing Standards

2.01 This chapter establishes general requirements for complying with generally accepted government auditing standards (GAGAS) that are applicable to all GAGAS engagements. The information it contains relates to how auditors conducting GAGAS engagements identify and apply the requirements contained in GAGAS. The chapter also contains requirements for using other audit standards in conjunction with GAGAS and for reporting compliance with GAGAS in the audit report.

Complying with GAGAS

Requirements: Complying with GAGAS

2.02 GAGAS uses two categories of requirements, identified by specific terms, to describe the degree of responsibility they impose on auditors and audit organizations:

- a. Unconditional requirements: Auditors and audit organizations must comply with an unconditional requirement in all cases where such requirement is relevant. GAGAS uses *must* to indicate an unconditional requirement.
- b. Presumptively mandatory requirements: Auditors and audit organizations must comply with a presumptively mandatory requirement in all cases where such a requirement is relevant except in rare circumstances discussed in paragraphs 2.03, 2.04, and 2.08. GAGAS uses *should* to indicate a presumptively mandatory requirement.¹⁰

2.03 In rare circumstances, auditors and audit organizations may

¹⁰See para. 2.19 for additional documentation requirements for departures from GAGAS requirements.

determine it necessary to depart from a relevant presumptively mandatory requirement. In such rare circumstances, auditors should perform alternative procedures to achieve the intent of that requirement.

2.04 If, in rare circumstances, auditors judge it necessary to depart from a relevant presumptively mandatory requirement, they must document their justification for the departure and how the alternative

procedures performed in the circumstances were sufficient to achieve the intent of that requirement.

2.05 Auditors should have an understanding of the entire text of applicable chapters of GAGAS, including application guidance, and any amendments that GAO issued, to understand the intent of the requirements and to apply the requirements properly.¹¹

2.06 Auditors should consider applicable GAO-issued GAGAS interpretive guidance in conducting and reporting on GAGAS engagements.¹²

Application Guidance: Complying with GAGAS

2.07 GAGAS contains requirements together with related explanatory material in the form of application guidance. Not every paragraph of GAGAS carries a requirement. Rather, GAGAS identifies the requirements through use of specific language. GAGAS also contains introductory material that provides context relevant to a proper understanding of a GAGAS chapter or section. Having an understanding of the entire text of applicable GAGAS includes an understanding of any financial audit, attestation, and reviews of financial statement standards incorporated by reference.¹³

2.08 The need for auditors to depart from a relevant presumptively mandatory requirement is expected to arise only when the requirement is for a specific procedure to be performed and, in the specific

¹¹See <http://www.gao.gov/yellowbook> for GAGAS amendments.

¹²See <http://www.gao.gov/yellowbook> for GAGAS interpretive guidance.

¹³See paras. 2.13, 6.01, and 7.01 for discussion of standards incorporated by reference.

circumstances of the engagement, that procedure would be ineffective in achieving the intent of the requirement.

2.09 The application guidance provides further explanation of the requirements and guidance for applying them. In particular, it may explain more precisely what a requirement means or is intended to address or include examples of procedures that may be appropriate in the circumstances. Although such guidance does not in itself impose a requirement, it is relevant to the proper application of the requirements. “May,” “might,” and “could” are used to describe these actions and procedures. The application guidance may also provide background information on matters addressed in GAGAS.

2.10 Interpretive guidance is not auditing standards. Interpretive guidance provides guidance on the application of GAGAS and recommendations on the application of GAGAS in specific circumstances.

Relationship between GAGAS and Other Professional Standards

Requirement: Relationship between GAGAS and Other Professional Standards

2.11 When auditors cite compliance with both GAGAS and another set of standards, such as those listed in paragraphs 2.13, 2.15, 6.01, and 7.01, auditors should refer to paragraph 2.17 for the requirements for citing compliance with GAGAS. In addition to citing GAGAS, auditors may also cite the use of other standards in their reports when they have also met the requirements for citing compliance with the other standards. Auditors should refer to the other set of standards for the basis for citing compliance with those standards.

Application Guidance: Relationship between GAGAS and Other Professional Standards

2.12 Auditors may use GAGAS in conjunction with professional standards issued by other authoritative bodies.

2.13 The relationship between GAGAS and other professional standards for financial audits, attestation engagements, and reviews of financial statements is as follows:

- a. The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) has established professional standards that apply to financial audits, attestation engagements, and reviews of financial statements for nonissuers (entities other than issuers under the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002,¹⁴ such as privately held companies, nonprofit entities, and government entities) conducted by certified public accountants (CPA). For financial audits and attestation engagements, GAGAS incorporates by reference AICPA Statements on Auditing Standards and Statements on Standards for Attestation Engagements.¹⁵ For reviews of financial statements, GAGAS incorporates by reference AR-C, section 90, *Review of Financial Statements*.¹⁶
- b. The International Auditing and Assurance Standards Board (IAASB) has established professional standards that apply to financial audits and assurance engagements. Auditors may elect to use the IAASB standards and the related International Standards on Auditing and International Standards on Assurance Engagements in conjunction with GAGAS.
- c. The Public Company Accounting Oversight Board (PCAOB) has established professional standards that apply to financial audits and attestation engagements for issuers. Auditors may elect to use the PCAOB standards in conjunction with GAGAS.

2.14 For financial audits, attestation engagements, and reviews of financial statements, GAGAS does not incorporate the AICPA Code of Professional Conduct by reference, but recognizes that certain CPAs may use or may be required to use the code in conjunction with GAGAS.

¹⁴See the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 (Public Law 107-204) for a discussion of issuers (generally, publicly traded companies with a reporting obligation under the Securities Exchange Act of 1934).

¹⁵AICPA, *Professional Standards*.

¹⁶AICPA, *Professional Standards*.

2.15 For performance audits, GAGAS does not incorporate other standards by reference, but recognizes that auditors may use or may be required to use other professional standards in conjunction with GAGAS, such as the following:

- a. *International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing*, Institute of Internal Auditors, Inc.;
- b. *International Standards of Supreme Audit Institutions*, International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions;
- c. *Guiding Principles for Evaluators*, American Evaluation Association;
- d. *The Program Evaluation Standards*, Joint Committee on Standards for Education Evaluation;
- e. *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*, American Psychological Association; and
- f. *IT Standards, Guidelines, and Tools and Techniques for Audit and Assurance and Control Professionals*, Information Systems Audit and Control Association.

Stating Compliance with GAGAS in the Audit Report

Requirements: Stating Compliance with GAGAS in the Audit Report

2.16 When auditors are required to conduct an engagement in accordance with GAGAS or are representing to others that they did so, they should cite compliance with GAGAS in the audit report as set forth in paragraphs 2.17 through 2.19.

2.17 Auditors should include one of the following types of GAGAS compliance statements in reports on GAGAS engagements, as appropriate.

- a. Unmodified GAGAS compliance statement: Stating that the

auditors conducted the engagement in accordance with GAGAS. Auditors should include an unmodified GAGAS compliance statement in the audit report when they have (1) followed unconditional and applicable presumptively mandatory GAGAS requirements or (2) followed unconditional requirements, documented justification for any departures from applicable presumptively mandatory requirements, and achieved the objectives of those requirements through other means.

b. Modified GAGAS compliance statement: Stating either that

- (1) the auditors conducted the engagement in accordance with GAGAS, except for specific applicable requirements that were not followed, or
- (2) because of the significance of the departure(s) from the requirements, the auditors were unable to and did not conduct the engagement in accordance with GAGAS.

2.18 When auditors use a modified GAGAS statement, they should disclose in the report the applicable requirement(s) not followed, the reasons for not following the requirement(s), and how not following the requirement(s) affected or could have affected the engagement and the assurance provided.

2.19 When auditors do not comply with applicable requirement(s), they should (1) assess the significance of the noncompliance to the engagement objectives; (2) document the assessment, along with their reasons for not following the requirement(s); and (3) determine the type of GAGAS compliance statement.

Application Guidance: Stating Compliance with GAGAS in the Audit Report

2.20 Situations for using modified compliance statements include scope limitations, such as restrictions on access to records, government officials, or other individuals needed to conduct the engagement.

2.21 The auditors' determination of noncompliance with applicable requirements is a matter of professional judgment, which is affected by

the significance of the requirement(s) not followed in relation to the engagement objectives.

2.22 Determining whether an unmodified or modified GAGAS compliance statement is appropriate is based on the consideration of the individual and aggregate effect of the instances of noncompliance with GAGAS requirements. Factors that the auditor may consider include

- a. the pervasiveness of the instance(s) of noncompliance;
- b. the potential effect of the instance(s) of noncompliance on the sufficiency and appropriateness of evidence supporting the findings, conclusions, and recommendations; and
- c. whether report users might misunderstand the implications of a modified or unmodified GAGAS compliance statement.

2.23 If an audit report is issued in situations described in paragraph 3.60 (except in circumstances discussed in paragraphs 3.25 or 3.84), a modified GAGAS compliance statement as discussed in paragraph 2.17b(2) is used.

Chapter 3: Ethics, Independence, and Professional Judgment

3.01 The first section of this chapter sets forth fundamental ethical principles for auditors in the government environment. The second section establishes independence standards and provides guidance on this topic for auditors conducting financial audits, attestation engagements, reviews of financial statements, and performance audits under generally accepted government auditing standards (GAGAS). This section emphasizes the importance of independence of the auditor and the audit organization. The third section establishes the standard for the auditor's use of professional judgment and provides related application guidance. The requirements of this chapter are intended to be followed in conjunction with all other applicable GAGAS requirements.

Ethical Principles

3.02 The ethical principles presented in this section provide the foundation, discipline, and structure, as well as the environment, that influence the application of GAGAS.¹⁷

3.03 Because auditing is essential to government accountability to the public, the public expects audit organizations and auditors who perform their work in accordance with GAGAS to follow ethical principles. Management of the audit organization sets the tone for ethical behavior throughout the organization by maintaining an ethical culture, clearly communicating acceptable behavior and expectations to each employee, and creating an environment that reinforces and encourages ethical behavior throughout all levels of the organization. The ethical tone maintained and demonstrated by management and personnel is an essential element of a positive ethical environment for the audit organization.

3.04 Performing audit work in accordance with ethical principles is a matter of personal and organizational responsibility. Ethical principles

¹⁷See para. 5.08 for a discussion of ethical requirements in an audit organization's system of quality control.

apply in preserving auditor independence,¹⁸ taking on only work that the audit organization is competent to perform,¹⁹ performing high-quality work, and following the applicable standards cited in the audit report. Integrity and objectivity are maintained when auditors perform their work and make decisions that are consistent with the broader interest of those relying on the audit report, including the public.

3.05 Other ethical requirements or codes of professional conduct may also be applicable to auditors who conduct engagements in accordance with GAGAS. For example, individual auditors who are members of professional organizations or are licensed or certified professionals may also be subject to ethical requirements of those professional organizations or licensing bodies. Auditors employed by government entities may also be subject to government ethics laws and regulations.

3.06 The ethical principles that guide the work of auditors who conduct engagements in accordance with GAGAS are

- a. the public interest;
- b. integrity;
- c. objectivity;
- d. proper use of government information, resources, and positions;
and
- e. professional behavior.

The Public Interest

3.07 The public interest is defined as the collective well-being of the community of people and entities that the auditors serve. Observing integrity, objectivity, and independence in discharging their professional responsibilities helps auditors serve the public interest and honor the public trust. The principle of the public interest is fundamental to the responsibilities of auditors and critical in the government environment.

¹⁸See paras. 3.18 through 3.108 for requirements and guidance related to independence.

¹⁹See paras. 4.02 through 4.15 for additional information on competence.

3.08 A distinguishing mark of an auditor is acceptance of responsibility to serve the public interest. This responsibility is critical when auditing in the government environment. GAGAS embodies the concept of accountability for public resources, which is fundamental to serving the public interest.

Integrity

3.09 Public confidence in government is maintained and strengthened by auditors performing their professional responsibilities with integrity. Integrity includes auditors performing their work with an attitude that is objective, fact-based, nonpartisan, and nonideological with regard to audited entities and users of the audit reports. Within the constraints of applicable confidentiality laws, regulations, or policies, communications with the audited entity, those charged with governance, and the individuals contracting for or requesting the engagement are expected to be honest, candid, and constructive.

3.10 Making decisions consistent with the public interest of the program or activity under audit is an important part of the principle of integrity. In discharging their professional responsibilities, auditors may encounter conflicting pressures from management of the audited entity, various levels of government, and other likely users. Auditors may also encounter pressures to inappropriately achieve personal or organizational gain. In resolving those conflicts and pressures, acting with integrity means that auditors place priority on their responsibilities to the public interest.

Objectivity

3.11 Auditors' objectivity in discharging their professional responsibilities is the basis for the credibility of auditing in the government sector. Objectivity includes independence of mind and appearance when conducting engagements, maintaining an attitude of impartiality, having intellectual honesty, and being free of conflicts of interest. Maintaining objectivity includes a continuing assessment of relationships with audited entities and other stakeholders in the context of the auditors' responsibility to the public. The concepts of objectivity and independence are closely related. Independence impairments affect auditors' objectivity.²⁰

²⁰See paras. 3.18 through 3.108 for independence requirements and guidance.

Proper Use of Government Information, Resources, and Positions

3.12 Government information, resources, and positions are to be used for official purposes and not inappropriately for the auditors' personal gain or in a manner contrary to law or detrimental to the legitimate interests of the audited entity or the audit organization. This concept includes the proper handling of sensitive or classified information or resources.

3.13 In the government environment, the public's right to the transparency of government information has to be balanced with the proper use of that information. In addition, many government programs are subject to laws and regulations dealing with the disclosure of information. Exercising discretion in using information acquired in the course of auditors' duties is an important part in achieving this balance. Improperly disclosing any such information to third parties is not an acceptable practice.

3.14 Accountability to the public for the proper use and prudent management of government resources is an essential part of auditors' responsibilities. Protecting and conserving government resources and using them appropriately for authorized activities are important elements of the public's expectations for auditors.

3.15 Misusing the auditor position for financial gain or other benefits violates an auditor's fundamental responsibilities. An auditor's credibility can be damaged by actions that could be perceived by an objective third party with knowledge of the relevant information as improperly benefiting an auditor's personal financial interests or those of an immediate or close family member; a general partner; an entity for which the auditor serves as an officer, director, trustee, or employee; or an entity with which the auditor is negotiating concerning future employment.

Professional Behavior

3.16 High expectations for the auditing profession include complying with all relevant legal, regulatory, and professional obligations and avoiding any conduct that could bring discredit to auditors' work, including actions that would cause an objective third party with knowledge of the relevant information to conclude that the auditors' work was professionally deficient. Professional behavior includes auditors putting forth an honest effort in performing their duties in accordance with the relevant technical and professional standards.

Independence

3.17 GAGAS's practical consideration of independence consists of four interrelated sections, providing

- a. general requirements and application guidance;
- b. requirements for and guidance on a conceptual framework for making independence determinations based on facts and circumstances that are often unique to specific environments;
- c. requirements for and guidance on independence for auditors providing nonaudit services, including identification of specific nonaudit services that always impair independence and others that would not normally impair independence; and
- d. requirements for and guidance on documentation necessary to support adequate consideration of auditor independence.

Requirements: General

3.18 In all matters relating to the GAGAS engagement, auditors and audit organizations must be independent from an audited entity.

3.19 Auditors and audit organizations should avoid situations that could lead reasonable and informed third parties to conclude that the auditors and audit organizations are not independent and thus are not capable of exercising objective and impartial judgment on all issues associated with conducting the engagement and reporting on the work.

3.20 Except under the limited circumstances discussed in paragraphs 3.66 and 3.67, auditors and audit organizations should be independent from an audited entity during

- a. any period of time that falls within the period covered by the financial statements or subject matter of the engagement and
- b. the period of professional engagement.

Application Guidance: General

3.21 Independence comprises the following:

- a. Independence of mind: The state of mind that permits the conduct of an engagement without being affected by influences that compromise professional judgment, thereby allowing an individual to act with integrity and exercise objectivity and professional skepticism.
- b. Independence in appearance: The absence of circumstances that would cause a reasonable and informed third party to reasonably conclude that the integrity, objectivity, or professional skepticism of an audit organization or member of the engagement team had been compromised.

3.22 Auditors and audit organizations maintain their independence so that their opinions, findings, conclusions, judgments, and recommendations will be impartial and will be viewed as impartial by reasonable and informed third parties.

3.23 The period of professional engagement begins when the auditors either sign an initial engagement letter or other agreement to conduct an engagement or begin to conduct an engagement, whichever is earlier. The period lasts for the duration of the professional relationship—which, for recurring engagements, could cover many periods—and ends with the formal or informal notification, either by the auditors or the audited entity, of the termination of the professional relationship or with the issuance of a report, whichever is later. Accordingly, the period of professional engagement does not necessarily end with the issuance of a report and commence with the beginning of the following year's engagement or a subsequent engagement with a similar objective.

3.24 Under some conditions, the party requesting or requiring an engagement, referred to as the engaging party, will differ from the party responsible for the engagement's subject matter, referred to as the responsible party. Under such conditions, the GAGAS independence requirements apply to the relationship between the auditors and the responsible party, not the relationship between the auditors and the engaging party. The following are examples of conditions under which the party requesting an engagement may differ from the party responsible for the engagement's subject matter.

- a. A legislative body requires that auditors conduct, on the legislative body's behalf, a performance audit of program operations that are the responsibility of an executive agency. GAGAS requires that the auditors be independent of the executive agency.
- b. A state agency engages an independent public accountant to conduct an examination-level attestation engagement to assess the validity of certain information that a local government provided to the state agency. GAGAS requires that the independent public accountant be independent of the local government.
- c. A government department works with a government agency that conducts examination-level attestation engagements of contractor compliance with the terms and conditions of agreements between the department and the contractor. GAGAS requires that the auditors be independent of the contractors.

3.25 Auditors in government sometimes work under conditions that impair independence in accordance with this section. An example of such a circumstance is a threat created by a statutory requirement for auditors to serve in official roles that conflict with the independence requirements of this section, such as a law that requires an auditor to serve as a voting member of an entity's management committee or board of directors, for which there are no safeguards to eliminate or reduce the threats to an acceptable level. Paragraph 2.17b provides standard language for modified GAGAS compliance statements for auditors who experience such impairments. Determining how to modify the GAGAS compliance statement in these circumstances is a matter of professional judgment.

GAGAS Conceptual Framework Approach to Independence

3.26 Many different circumstances, or combinations of circumstances, are relevant in evaluating threats to independence. Therefore, GAGAS establishes a conceptual framework that auditors use to identify, evaluate, and apply safeguards to address threats to independence. The conceptual framework assists auditors in maintaining both independence of mind and independence in appearance. It can be applied to many variations in circumstances that create threats to independence and allows auditors to address threats to independence that result from activities that are not specifically prohibited by GAGAS.

Requirements: GAGAS Conceptual Framework Approach to Independence

3.27 Auditors should apply the conceptual framework²¹ at the audit organization, engagement team, and individual auditor levels to

- a. identify threats to independence;
- b. evaluate the significance of the threats identified, both individually and in the aggregate; and
- c. apply safeguards as necessary to eliminate the threats or reduce them to an acceptable level.

3.28 Auditors should reevaluate threats to independence, including any safeguards applied, whenever the audit organization or the auditors become aware of new information or changes in facts and circumstances that could affect whether a threat has been eliminated or reduced to an acceptable level.

3.29 Auditors should use professional judgment when applying the conceptual framework.

3.30 Auditors should evaluate the following broad categories of threats to independence when applying the GAGAS conceptual framework:

- a. Self-interest threat: The threat that a financial or other interest will inappropriately influence an auditor's judgment or behavior.
- b. Self-review threat: The threat that an auditor or audit organization that has provided nonaudit services will not appropriately evaluate the results of previous judgments made or services provided as part of the nonaudit services when forming a judgment significant to a GAGAS engagement.
- c. Bias threat: The threat that an auditor will, as a result of political, ideological, social, or other convictions, take a position that is not objective.

²¹See fig. 1 at the end of ch. 3 for a flowchart on applying the conceptual framework in accordance with GAGAS.

- d. Familiarity threat: The threat that aspects of a relationship with management or personnel of an audited entity, such as a close or long relationship, or that of an immediate or close family member, will lead an auditor to take a position that is not objective.
- e. Undue influence threat: The threat that influences or pressures from sources external to the audit organization will affect an auditor's ability to make objective judgments.
- f. Management participation threat: The threat that results from an auditor's taking on the role of management or otherwise performing management functions on behalf of the audited entity, which will lead an auditor to take a position that is not objective.
- g. Structural threat: The threat that an audit organization's placement within a government entity, in combination with the structure of the government entity being audited, will affect the audit organization's ability to perform work and report results objectively.

3.31 Auditors should determine whether identified threats to independence are at an acceptable level or have been eliminated or reduced to an acceptable level, considering both qualitative and quantitative factors to determine the significance of a threat.

3.32 When auditors determine that threats to independence are not at an acceptable level, the auditors should determine whether appropriate safeguards can be applied to eliminate the threats or reduce them to an acceptable level.

3.33 In cases where auditors determine that threats to independence require the application of safeguards, auditors should document the threats identified and the safeguards applied to eliminate or reduce the threats to an acceptable level.

3.34 If auditors initially identify a threat to independence after the audit report is issued, auditors should evaluate the threat's effect on the engagement and on GAGAS compliance. If the auditors determine that the newly identified threat's effect on the engagement would have

resulted in the audit report being different from the report issued had the auditors been aware of it, they should communicate in the same manner as that used to originally distribute the report to those charged with governance, the appropriate officials of the audited entity, the appropriate officials of the audit organization requiring or arranging for the engagements, and other known users, so that they do not continue to rely on findings or conclusions that were affected by the threat to independence. If auditors previously posted the report to their publicly accessible website, they should remove the report and post a public notification that the report was removed. The auditors should then determine whether to perform the additional engagement work necessary to reissue the report, including any revised findings or conclusions, or to repost the original report if the additional engagement work does not result in a change in findings or conclusions.

Application Guidance: GAGAS Conceptual Framework Approach to Independence

3.35 For consideration of auditor independence, offices or units of an audit organization, or related or affiliated entities under common control, are not differentiated from one another. Consequently, for the purposes of evaluating independence using the conceptual framework, an audit organization that includes multiple offices or units, or includes multiple entities related or affiliated through common control, is considered to be one audit organization. Common ownership may also affect independence in appearance regardless of the level of control.

Identifying Threats

3.36 Facts and circumstances that create threats to independence can result from events such as the start of a new engagement, assignment of new personnel to an ongoing engagement, and acceptance of a nonaudit service for an audited entity.

3.37 Threats to independence may be created by a wide range of relationships and circumstances. Circumstances that result in a threat to independence in one of the categories may result in other threats as well.

3.38 Examples of circumstances that create self-interest threats for an auditor follow:

- a. An audit organization having undue dependence on income from a particular audited entity.
- b. A member of the audit team entering into employment negotiations with an audited entity.
- c. An audit organization discovering a significant error when evaluating the results of a previous professional service provided by the audit organization.
- d. A member of the audit team having a direct financial interest in the audited entity. However, this would not preclude auditors from auditing pension plans that they participate in if (1) the auditors have no control over the investment strategy, benefits, or other management issues associated with the pension plan and (2) the auditors belong to such pension plan as part of their employment with the audit organization or prior employment with the audited entity, provided that the plan is normally offered to all employees in equivalent employment positions.

3.39 Examples of circumstances that create self-review threats for an auditor follow:

- a. An audit organization issuing a report on the effectiveness of the operation of financial or performance management systems after designing or implementing the systems.
- b. An audit organization having prepared the original data used to generate records that are the subject matter of the engagement.
- c. An audit organization providing a service for an audited entity that directly affects the subject matter information of the engagement.
- d. A member of the engagement team being, or having recently been, employed by the audited entity in a position to exert significant influence over the subject matter of the engagement.

3.40 Examples of circumstances that create bias threats for an auditor follow:

- a. A member of the engagement team having preconceptions about the objectives of a program under audit that are strong enough to affect the auditor's objectivity.

- b. A member of the engagement team having biases associated with political, ideological, or social convictions that result from membership or employment in, or loyalty to, a particular type of policy, group, entity, or level of government that could affect the auditor's objectivity.

3.41 Examples of circumstances that create familiarity threats for an auditor follow:

- a. A member of the engagement team having a close or immediate family member who is a principal or senior manager of the audited entity.
- b. A member of the engagement team having a close or immediate family member who is an employee of the audited entity and is in a position to exert significant influence over the subject matter of the engagement.
- c. A principal or employee of the audited entity having recently served on the engagement team in a position to exert significant influence over the subject matter of the engagement.
- d. An auditor accepting gifts or preferential treatment from an audited entity, unless the value is trivial or inconsequential.
- e. Senior engagement personnel having a long association with the audited entity.

3.42 Examples of circumstances that create undue influence threats for an auditor or audit organization include existence of the following:

- a. External interference or influence that could improperly limit or modify the scope of an engagement or threaten to do so, including exerting pressure to inappropriately reduce the extent of work performed in order to reduce costs or fees.
- b. External interference with the selection or application of engagement procedures or in the selection of transactions to be examined.
- c. Unreasonable restrictions on the time allowed to complete an engagement or issue the report.

- d. External interference over assignment, appointment, compensation, and promotion.
- e. Restrictions on funds or other resources provided to the audit organization that adversely affect the audit organization's ability to carry out its responsibilities.
- f. Authority to overrule or to inappropriately influence the auditors' judgment as to the appropriate content of the report.
- g. Threat of replacing the auditor or the audit organization based on a disagreement with the contents of an audit report, the auditors' conclusions, or the application of an accounting principle or other criteria.
- h. Influences that jeopardize the auditors' continued employment for reasons other than incompetence, misconduct, or the audited entity's need for GAGAS engagements.

3.43 Examples of circumstances that create management participation threats for an auditor follow:

- a. A member of the engagement team being, or having recently been, a principal or senior manager of the audited entity.
- b. An auditor serving as a voting member of an entity's management committee or board of directors, making policy decisions that affect future direction and operation of an entity's programs, supervising entity employees, developing or approving programmatic policy, authorizing an entity's transactions, or maintaining custody of an entity's assets.
- c. An auditor or audit organization recommending a single individual for a specific position that is key to the audited entity or program under audit, or otherwise ranking or influencing management's selection of the candidate.
- d. An auditor preparing management's corrective action plan to deal with deficiencies detected in the engagement.

3.44 Examples of circumstances that create structural threats for an auditor follow:

- a. For both external and internal audit organizations, structural placement of the audit function within the reporting line of the areas under audit.
- b. For internal audit organizations, administrative direction from the audited entity's management.

Evaluating Threats

3.45 Threats to independence are evaluated both individually and in the aggregate, as threats can have a cumulative effect on auditors' independence.

3.46 When evaluating threats to independence, an acceptable level is a level at which a reasonable and informed third party would likely conclude that the audit organization or auditor is independent. The concept of a reasonable and informed third party is a test that involves an evaluation by a hypothetical person. Such a person possesses skills, knowledge, and experience to objectively evaluate the appropriateness of the auditor's judgments and conclusions. This evaluation entails weighing all the relevant facts and circumstances, including any safeguards applied, that the auditor knows, or could reasonably be expected to know, at the time that the evaluation is made.

3.47 A threat to independence is not at an acceptable level if it either

- a. could affect the auditors' ability to conduct an engagement without being affected by influences that compromise professional judgment or
- b. could expose the auditors or audit organization to circumstances that would cause a reasonable and informed third party to conclude that the integrity, objectivity, or professional skepticism of the audit organization, or an auditor, had been compromised.

3.48 The GAGAS section on nonaudit services in paragraphs 3.64 through 3.106 provides requirements and guidance on evaluating threats to independence related to nonaudit services that auditors provide to audited entities. That section also enumerates specific nonaudit services that always impair auditor independence with respect to audited entities and that auditors are prohibited from providing to audited entities.

Applying Safeguards

3.49 Safeguards are actions or other measures, individually or in combination, that auditors and audit organizations take that effectively eliminate threats to independence or reduce them to an acceptable level. Safeguards vary depending on the facts and circumstances.

3.50 Examples of safeguards include

- a. consulting an independent third party, such as a professional organization, a professional regulatory body, or another auditor to discuss engagement issues or assess issues that are highly technical or that require significant judgment;
- b. involving another audit organization to perform or re-perform part of the engagement;
- c. having an auditor who was not a member of the engagement team review the work performed; and
- d. removing an auditor from an engagement team when that auditor's financial or other interests or relationships pose a threat to independence.

3.51 The lists of safeguards in 3.50 and 3.69 cannot provide safeguards for all circumstances. They may, however, provide a starting point for auditors who have identified threats to independence and are considering what safeguards could eliminate those threats or reduce them to an acceptable level. In some cases, multiple safeguards may be necessary to address a threat.

Audit Organizations in Government Entities

3.52 The ability of an audit organization structurally located in a government entity to perform work and report the results objectively can be affected by its placement within the government entity and the structure of the government entity being audited. The independence standard applies to auditors in both external audit organizations (reporting to third parties externally or to both internal and external parties) and internal audit organizations (reporting only to senior management within the audited entity). Such audit organizations are often subject to constitutional or statutory safeguards that mitigate the effects of structural threats to independence.

3.53 For external audit organizations, constitutional or statutory safeguards that mitigate the effects of structural threats to independence may include governmental structures under which a government audit organization is

- a. at a level of government other than the one of which the audited entity is part (federal, state, or local)—for example, federal auditors auditing a state government program—or
- b. placed within a different branch of government from that of the audited entity—for example, legislative auditors auditing an executive branch program.

3.54 Safeguards other than those described in paragraph 3.53 may mitigate threats resulting from governmental structures. For external audit organizations, structural threats may be mitigated if the head of the audit organization meets any of the following criteria in accordance with constitutional or statutory requirements:

- a. directly elected by voters of the jurisdiction being audited;
- b. elected or appointed by a legislative body, subject to removal by a legislative body, and reporting the results of engagements to and accountable to a legislative body;
- c. appointed by someone other than a legislative body, so long as the appointment is confirmed by a legislative body and removal from the position is subject to oversight or approval by a legislative body, and reports the results of engagements to and is accountable to a legislative body; or
- d. appointed by, accountable to, reports to, and can only be removed by a statutorily created governing body, the majority of whose members are independently elected or appointed and are outside the organization being audited.

3.55 In addition to the criteria in paragraphs 3.53 and 3.54, GAGAS recognizes that there may be other organizational structures under which external audit organizations in government entities could be considered independent. If appropriately designed and implemented, these structures provide safeguards that prevent the audited entity from interfering with the audit organization's ability to perform the work and report the results impartially. An external audit organization may be structurally

independent under a structure different from the ones listed in paragraphs 3.53 and 3.54 if the government audit organization is subject to all of the following constitutional or statutory provisions. The following constitutional or statutory provisions may also be used as safeguards to augment those listed in paragraphs 3.53 and 3.54:

- a. protections that prevent the audited entity from abolishing the audit organization;
- b. protections requiring that if the head of the audit organization is removed from office, the head of the agency reports this fact and the reasons for the removal to the legislative body;
- c. protections that prevent the audited entity from interfering with the initiation, scope, timing, and completion of any engagement;
- d. protections that prevent the audited entity from interfering with audit reporting, including the findings and conclusions or the manner, means, or timing of the audit organization's reports;
- e. protections that require the audit organization to report to a legislative body or other independent governing body on a recurring basis;
- f. protections that give the audit organization sole authority over the selection, retention, advancement, and dismissal of its personnel; and
- g. access to records and documents related to the agency, program, or function being audited and access to government officials or other individuals as needed to conduct the engagement.

3.56 Government internal auditors who work under the direction of the audited entity's management are considered structurally independent for the purposes of reporting internally, if the head of the audit organization meets all of the following criteria:

- a. is accountable to the head or deputy head of the government entity or to those charged with governance;
- b. reports the engagement results both to the head or deputy head of the government entity and to those charged with governance;

- c. is located organizationally outside the staff or line management function of the unit under audit;
- d. has access to those charged with governance; and
- e. is sufficiently removed from pressures to conduct engagements and report findings, opinions, and conclusions objectively without fear of reprisal.

Internal Auditors

3.57 Certain entities employ auditors to work for entity management. These auditors may be subject to administrative direction from persons involved in the entity management process. Such audit organizations are internal audit functions and are encouraged to use the Institute of Internal Auditors' *International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing*, in conjunction with GAGAS.

3.58 When an internal audit organization conducts engagements pertaining to external parties, such as contractors or entities subject to other outside agreements, and no impairments to independence exist, the audit organization can be considered independent as an external audit organization of those external parties.

Requirements: Independence Impairments

3.59 Auditors should conclude that independence is impaired if no safeguards have been effectively applied to eliminate an unacceptable threat or reduce it to an acceptable level.

3.60 When auditors conclude that independence of the engagement team or the audit organization is impaired under paragraph 3.59, auditors should decline to accept an engagement or should terminate an engagement in progress (except in circumstances discussed in paragraphs 3.25 or 3.84).

Application Guidance: Independence Impairments

3.61 Whether independence is impaired depends on the nature of the threat, whether the threat is of such significance that it would compromise an auditor's professional judgment or create the appearance that the auditor's integrity, objectivity, or professional skepticism may be

compromised, and the specific safeguards applied to eliminate the threat or reduce it to an acceptable level.

3.62 If auditors conclude that an individual auditor's independence is impaired under paragraph 3.59, it may be necessary to terminate the engagement or it may be possible to take action that satisfactorily addresses the effect of the individual auditor's independence impairment.

3.63 Factors that are relevant in evaluating whether the independence of the engagement team or the audit organization is impaired by an individual auditor's independence impairment include

- a. the nature and duration of the individual auditor's impairment;
- b. the number and nature of any previous impairments with respect to the current engagement;
- c. whether a member of the engagement team had knowledge of the interest or relationship that caused the individual auditor's impairment;
- d. whether the individual auditor whose independence is impaired is (1) a member of the engagement team or (2) another individual for whom there are independence requirements;
- e. the role of the individual auditor on the engagement team whose independence is impaired;
- f. the effect of the service, if any, on the accounting records or audited entity's financial statements if the individual auditor's impairment was caused by the provision of a nonaudit service;
- g. whether a partner or director of the audit organization had knowledge of the individual auditor's impairment and failed to ensure that the individual auditor's impairment was promptly communicated to an appropriate individual within the audit organization; and
- h. the extent of the self-interest, undue influence, or other threats created by the individual auditor's impairment.

Provision of Nonaudit Services to Audited Entities

Requirement: Nonaudit Services

3.64 Before auditors agree to provide a nonaudit service to an audited entity, they should determine whether providing such a service would create a threat to independence, either by itself or in aggregate with other nonaudit services provided, with respect to any GAGAS engagement they conduct.

Application Guidance: Nonaudit Services

3.65 Auditors have traditionally provided a range of nonaudit services that are consistent with their skills and expertise. Providing nonaudit services to audited entities may create threats to the independence of auditors or audit organizations.

3.66 For performance audits and agreed-upon procedures engagements, nonaudit services that are otherwise prohibited by GAGAS may be provided when such services do not relate to the specific subject matter of the engagement.

3.67 For financial audits, examination or review engagements, and reviews of financial statements, a nonaudit service otherwise prohibited by GAGAS and provided during the period covered by the financial statements may not threaten independence with respect to those financial statements provided that the following conditions exist:

- a. the nonaudit service was provided prior to the period of professional engagement;
- b. the nonaudit service related only to periods prior to the period covered by the financial statements; and
- c. the financial statements for the period to which the nonaudit service did relate were audited by other auditors (or in the case of an examination, review, or review of financial statements, examined, reviewed, or audited by other auditors as appropriate).

3.68 Nonaudit services that auditors provide can affect independence of mind and in appearance in periods after the nonaudit services were

provided. For example, if auditors have designed and implemented an accounting and financial reporting system that is expected to be in place for many years, a threat to independence in appearance may exist in subsequent periods for future engagements that those auditors conduct. For recurring engagements, having another independent audit organization conduct an engagement over the areas affected by the nonaudit service may provide a safeguard that allows the audit organization that provided the nonaudit service to mitigate the threat to its independence.

3.69 The following are examples of actions that in certain circumstances could be safeguards in addressing threats to independence related to nonaudit services:

- a. not including individuals who provided the nonaudit service as engagement team members;
- b. having another auditor, not associated with the engagement, review the engagement and nonaudit work as appropriate;
- c. engaging another audit organization to evaluate the results of the nonaudit service; or
- d. having another audit organization re-perform the nonaudit service to the extent necessary to enable that other audit organization to take responsibility for the service.

Routine Activities

3.70 Routine activities that auditors perform related directly to conducting an engagement, such as providing advice and responding to questions as part of an engagement, are not considered nonaudit services under GAGAS. Such routine activities generally involve providing advice or assistance to the audited entity on an informal basis as part of an engagement. Routine activities typically are insignificant in terms of time incurred or resources expended and generally do not result in a specific project or engagement or in the auditors producing a formal report or other formal work product. However, activities such as financial statement preparation, cash-to-accrual conversions, and reconciliations are considered nonaudit services under GAGAS, not routine activities related to the performance of an engagement, and are evaluated using the conceptual framework as discussed in paragraphs 3.87 through 3.95.

3.71 Routine activities directly related to an engagement may include the following:

- a. providing advice to the audited entity on an accounting matter as an ancillary part of the overall financial audit;
- b. providing advice to the audited entity on routine business matters;
- c. educating the audited entity about matters within the technical expertise of the auditors; and
- d. providing information to the audited entity that is readily available to the auditors, such as best practices and benchmarking studies.

Other Services Provided by Government Audit Organizations

3.72 Audit organizations in government entities frequently provide services that differ from the traditional professional services that an accounting or consulting firm provides to or for an audited entity. These types of services are often provided in response to a statutory requirement, at the discretion of the authority of the audit organization, or to an engaging party (such as a legislative oversight body or an independent external organization) rather than a responsible party, and would generally not create a threat to independence. Examples of these types of services include the following:

- a. providing information or data to a requesting party without auditor evaluation or verification of the information or data;
- b. developing standards, methodologies, audit guides, audit programs, or criteria for use throughout the government or for use in certain specified situations;
- c. collaborating with other professional organizations to advance auditing of government entities and programs;
- d. developing question and answer documents to promote understanding of technical issues or standards;
- e. providing assistance and technical expertise to legislative bodies or independent external organizations;

- f. assisting legislative bodies by developing questions for use at hearings;
- g. providing training, speeches, and technical presentations;
- h. providing assistance in reviewing budget submissions;
- i. contracting for audit services on behalf of an audited entity and overseeing the audit contract, as long as the overarching principles are not violated and the auditor under contract reports to the audit organization and not to management; and
- j. providing audit, investigative, and oversight-related services that do not involve a GAGAS engagement, such as
 - (1) investigations of alleged fraud, violation of contract provisions or grant agreements, or abuse;
 - (2) periodic audit recommendation follow-up engagements and reports; and
 - (3) identifying best practices or leading practices for use in advancing the practices of government organizations.

Requirements: Management Responsibilities

3.73 Before auditors agree to provide nonaudit services to an audited entity that the audited entity's management requested and that could create a threat to independence, either by themselves or in aggregate with other nonaudit services provided, with respect to any GAGAS engagement they conduct, auditors should determine that the audited entity has designated an individual who possesses suitable skill, knowledge, or experience and that the individual understands the services to be provided sufficiently to oversee them.

3.74 Auditors should document consideration of management's ability to effectively oversee nonaudit services to be provided.

3.75 In cases where the audited entity is unable or unwilling to assume these responsibilities (for example, the audited entity does not have an individual with suitable skill, knowledge, or experience to oversee the

nonaudit services provided, or is unwilling to perform such functions because of lack of time or desire), auditors should conclude that the provision of these services is an impairment to independence.

3.76 Auditors providing nonaudit services to audited entities should obtain agreement from audited entity management that audited entity management performs the following functions in connection with the nonaudit services:

- a. assumes all management responsibilities;
- b. oversees the services, by designating an individual, preferably within senior management, who possesses suitable skill, knowledge, or experience;
- c. evaluates the adequacy and results of the services provided; and
- d. accepts responsibility for the results of the services.

3.77 In connection with nonaudit services, auditors should establish and document their understanding with the audited entity's management or those charged with governance, as appropriate, regarding the following:

- a. objectives of the nonaudit service,
- b. services to be provided,
- c. audited entity's acceptance of its responsibilities as discussed in paragraph 3.76,
- d. the auditors' responsibilities, and
- e. any limitations on the provision of nonaudit services.

3.78 Auditors should conclude that management responsibilities that the auditors perform for an audited entity are impairments to independence. If the auditors were to assume management responsibilities for an audited entity, the management participation threats created would be so significant that no safeguards could reduce them to an acceptable level.

Application Guidance: Management Responsibilities

3.79 A critical component of determining whether a threat to independence exists is consideration of management's ability to effectively oversee the nonaudit service to be provided. Although the responsible individual in management is required to have sufficient expertise to oversee the nonaudit services, management is not required to possess the expertise to perform or re-perform the services. However, indicators of management's ability to effectively oversee the nonaudit service include management's ability to determine the reasonableness of the results of the nonaudit services provided and to recognize a material error, omission, or misstatement in the results of the nonaudit services provided.

3.80 Management responsibilities involve leading and directing an entity, including making decisions regarding the acquisition, deployment, and control of human, financial, physical, and intangible resources.

3.81 The following are considered management responsibilities:

- a. setting policies and strategic direction for the audited entity;
- b. directing and accepting responsibility for the actions of the audited entity's employees in the performance of their routine, recurring activities;
- c. having custody of an audited entity's assets;
- d. reporting to those charged with governance on behalf of management;
- e. deciding which of the audit organization's or outside third party's recommendations to implement;
- f. accepting responsibility for the management of an audited entity's project;
- g. accepting responsibility for designing, implementing, or maintaining internal control;
- h. providing services that are intended to be used as management's primary basis for making decisions that are significant to the subject matter of the engagement;