

Discussion 5

Optimizing Effectiveness in Institutional Research

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The evolution of the information age has created the need for, and access to, data in many areas within colleges and universities. Institutional researchers must provide leadership in working closely with representatives from across campus and beyond as they aim to provide meaningful information and insight to the institutional leadership. Keeping communication open and collegial is imperative in the environments in which we operate. This paper explores ways to build relationships between offices and data sources that will increase the productivity and effectiveness of those involved.

The invitation to participate in the white paper discussion groups included the paragraph above as the background and rationale for the Association for Institutional Research and its members to

Julie Carpenter-Hubin, Chair of the 2010 AIR Forum, and Bill Knight, 2009 President of AIR, invited AIR members to participate in a series of discussion groups on pressing issues in the field of institutional research. This document is one of the 8 resulting White Papers created to summarize and record these thoughtful discussions by leaders in IR. AIR wishes to acknowledge the discussion leaders and participants, and the members of the Forum Committee who arranged these sessions and produced this summary. Permission is granted to disseminate this document, with proper attribution, for non-commercial purposes.

consider the issue of what should be done to facilitate our work and maximize its value. This manuscript builds upon a growing literature on understanding and improving the effectiveness of IR and its practitioners (Augustine, 2001; Delaney, 1997, 2000, 2001; Hurst, Matier, & Sidle, 1998; Knight, 2010; Knight & Leimer, 2010; Knight, Moore, & Coperthwaite, 1997; Leimer, 2009; Lohman, 1998; Terenzini, 1993, 1995; Terkla, 2008; Volkwein, 1999) and enriches it by documenting a contemporary discussion among IR practitioners and referencing related scholarship to allow readers to learn more.

One question addressed by the discussion group was: How can IR offices and their customers work together most effectively to ensure evidence-based management? There was consensus that IR's primary internal customers include presidents, vice presidents, deans, enrollment management leaders, student affairs professionals, research administrators, individual faculty members, and committees. One strategy for working effectively with internal customers is for IR staff members to attend and participate in formal governance groups such as cabinet, deans' council, enrollment management committees, or cross-functional campus leadership groups if extant. Another strategy is for IR to develop one or more customer groups with which its staff members meet periodically; examples may include an information users group (focusing on management needs), a data reporters' group (focusing on common reporting practices), and a data custodians' group (focusing on data definitions). Institutional leadership plays an important role here in recognizing the IR office as *the* official source for institutional information and for establishing practices such as "management from information, not anecdote." It is important to understand how leadership views and uses data and evidence and to craft IR's activities in order to function as effectively as possible within this context (McLaughlin & Howard, 2004). Using this knowledge then allows IR professionals to provide leaders with information and insight upon which they can truly take action. It is

also important to build and maintain quality relationships with mid- and lower-level staff members as well as institutional leaders. These individuals often have the history and the staying power that are important for IR. IR needs to be an organizational ally for those who need and use information. An ideal role for IR is to act as a clearinghouse for institutional information. IR needs to be proactive rather than reactive, to constantly be on the lookout for ways to improve insights, informed decisions, and organizational learning. It is important for IR professionals to get out from behind their computers and meet with people across campus, informally as well as formally. Something as simple as occasionally having lunch with clients can do a great deal to improve mutual understanding. IR staff members also need to communicate and share information in ways that customers can understand and act upon (Sanders & Filkins, 2009). Tailoring information to specific colleges, academic departments, administrative offices, etc. is a proactive strategy that can substantially improve the usefulness of our work.

At some institutions, IR is distributed across multiple offices. This model offers both advantages and challenges (Volkwein, 1999), and one of those challenges is working together effectively to ensure evidence-based management. Key strategies for doing so include regular communication, an agreed-upon designation of responsibilities, and developing a common vocabulary and standard practices. It may be useful to recognize that IR is always decentralized to some extent (i.e., some level of IR goes on in admissions, the registrar's office, financial aid, student affairs, in colleges, etc.). Similarly, IR needs to work effectively with data custodians (e.g., registrar, IT) to ensure provision of useful information.

Institutional researchers are effective if they have a "seat at the table," that is, that they are included in important discussions that allow them to connect data and decisions (Knight, 2010, Parmley, 2009; Terkla, 2008). Given this criterion for effectiveness, the groups discussed ways in which IR can have a "seat at the table."

One important way to do this is to gain access to appropriate committees. IR staff members may need to be proactive, and if necessary, assertive, about getting on committees. Having an advocate with power in the organization that can ensure that IR staff members have a presence in the right settings can be a strong advantage. If it is not possible to get membership in an important group, get copies of its minutes or notes. Participants in the discussion also recognized that IR practitioners need to follow taking a seat at the table with quality, meaningful work that shows how having that seat adds value to the institution.

The discussion groups also considered what reporting relationships optimize effectiveness for IR. Participants agreed that having IR report to the institution's president or chief academic officer is best, since these leaders have the highest level view of institutional priorities and are most able to facilitate cross-functional collaborations. It is important to be seen as apolitical when serving as part of a presidential or academic affairs leadership team. As one person noted, "In order to appear apolitical, the institutional researcher may need to be the most politically astute person on campus." At some level it is the people, not the positions that make a difference in reporting relationships. Having one's supervisor understand and appreciate what IR has to offer may be at least as important as that supervisor's place on the organizational chart. Knight and Leimer (2010) determined that perceived organizational support was a key factor in voluntary job turnover among institutional researchers and the support of one's supervisor is a critical component of perceived organizational support.

Another discussion topic was whether academic preparation, credentials, and skills matter in allowing institutional researchers to enhance their performance and legitimacy in an academic organization and, if so, what specific types of academic preparation, credentials, and skills are optimal. While it seems that formal credentials matter in some settings more than others, Terenzini's (1993) model had a strong degree of resonance with the group.

This model holds that understanding of management issues, contextual knowledge and political skills are ultimately at least as important as technical and analytical skills. While AIR, graduate certificate programs in IR, and other opportunities have advanced the state of technical/analytical capability in the profession, there does not seem to be as much attention paid to helping to improve issues and contextual knowledge and skills and political and leadership ability. AIR has identified this need within its “IR knowledge matrix” and its Professional Development Services Committee has a strong interest in facilitating leadership development. Other capabilities that were identified as important include being able to educate customers, being able to explain data, being able to turn data into actionable information, communicating without jargon in a way that multiple audiences can understand; being able to build relationships; and being able to create interest in IR products and services.

The final area of consideration was whether offices of institutional research should be housed with assessment of student learning, accreditation, strategic planning, program review and other “quality assurance” functions. The consensus of the group was yes, and that this may be happening anyway, possibly as a result of meeting accreditation requirements. This collection of functions adds value to the sum of the component parts by establishing synergy and provides economy of scale with a larger professional staff working together. Having the chief IR officer also lead institutional strategic planning activities is a model that may facilitate this bundling. It was noted by a participant from South Africa that these activities have been forced to combine as a result of a governmental quality assurance mandate. It is interesting to speculate as to whether the same scenario might play out in the United States; accreditation may be the driver.

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