

The Institutional Research Revolution in Higher Ed: Top Five Trends Shaping the Transformation

The rise of data analytics. Government efforts to introduce accountability stats for colleges and universities. Students' increased voice in institutions of higher education. These are a few of the forces revolutionizing the field of institutional research. This shift is already underway, but what is leading it? Experts point to these five developing trends as informing and shaping the transformation.

heliocampus.com Moving From IQ to EQ Thirty years ago, job postings for institutional research positions emphasized technical and analytic skills, befitting the role's focus at the time on collecting and crunching numbers. But pure data analysis is no longer enough. To succeed today, says Randy L. Swing, former executive director for the Association for Institutional Research, "people will need new kinds of skills,"¹ including listening, collaboration, understanding and navigating academic and administrative politics, and being able to situate data within context. Part of this new "soft skill set" means getting out from behind your computer and talking to different stakeholders, according to Richard Howard, an institutional-effectiveness consultant who formerly directed offices at four public universities. Howard believes that institutional research must involve understanding how an institution works and how faculty members do their jobs. "You need to be willing to be out talking to people to learn as much as you can,"² Howard said. William E. Knight, assistant provost for institutional effectiveness at Ball State University, suggests some interesting approaches to beefing up one's EQ, including reading a book on the history of the institution or "sitting in the back of faculty-senate meetings and not saying anything, just to find out what things people are struggling with."³

Training Staff to Use Data Effectively Today's institutional research professionals also need to be willing and able to teach data literacy across the campus – be it brick-or-mortar, or online. Just because faculty and staff have more data at their fingertips than ever before, that doesn't mean they know how to filter the numbers, how to interpret them, or even what questions to ask of their data. This is a concept widely understood at University of Maryland University College (UMUC), where the leadership began working to expand both analytics access and training back in 2011. "Departments evolve at varying paces," says UMUC president Javier Miyares, "and institutional inertia is ... one of the greatest hurdles."⁴ Miyares and UMUC's analytics team knew that getting buy-in from departmental staff was critical to both leveraging data across the institution and eliminating data "silos." To do this, they needed to engage with the university community in a new way, facilitating meaningful, ongoing conversations with faculty and non-f

Getting Rid of Outdated Service Models Traditionally, the main role of institutional research was to report data to the president and provost on request, and to fulfill all mandatory reporting requirements. Individual academic units sometimes collected their own data, but they were rarely compiled into an overarching database – if there were lessons to draw from them to improve institutional effectiveness, they went untapped. But campuses have grown in size and complexity, with a broader diversity of students, more varied academic programs, and hybrid online and in-person classes. According to one study of public universities, offices of institutional research are now "deluged by demands for data collection and report writing that blot out time and attention for deeper research, analysis and communication."⁵

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service model that served the field for decades works poorly in this decentralized structure, and some campuses have turned to what's called a federated network model. In this system, institutional research is seen as an organization-wide resource, and data is collected and shared between academic units. To even more flexibly and nimbly meet data demands, some forward-thinking institutional research professionals are now proposing a matrix model, in which specialists in skills like business intelligence or data collection and visualization are temporarily embedded where they are needed, all under the umbrella of a chief institutional research officer or chief analytics officer. Including Institutional Research Staff in Decision-Making To outsiders, the institutional research office is commonly seen as where the "data crunching" goes on. But experts say that to serve the needs of today's institutions of higher education, that identity needs to change. Today, institutional research departments need to more widely collect and share their data among a bigger pool of stakeholders, actively help decision-makers put data in context, and be involved in advance planning. Indiana University-Purdue University Indiana (IUPUI) offers a great example of how well this can work in practice. When IUPUI convened a task force to discuss solutions to low graduation rates of Latino students, Michele J. Hansen, assistant vice chancellor for institutional research and decision support, was among the attendees. Armed with data, Hansen was able to identify the problem not as first-year retention rates, but an issue of campus climate: the paucity of Latino faculty. The data informed a completely different solution to the problem than the task force had originally anticipated. "It's critical for [institutional research staff] to be at the table and part of the conversation so we can hear the issues firsthand," Hansen noted. "We're able to better understand the context of the problem, and we can be proactive in providing information before decisions are made." 6 5 Gagliardi, J. and Wellman, J. (2015). MEETING DEMANDS FOR IMPROVEMENTS IN PUBLIC SYSTEM INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH. [online] Nashonline.org. Available at: <http://nashonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Assessing-and-Improving-the-IR-Function-in-Public-University-Systems.pdf>. 6 Williams June, A. (2017). Higher Ed's Data Experts Face a Crossroads. [online] The Chronicle of Higher Education. Available at: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Higher-Ed-s-Data-Experts/241079>. heliocampus.com 3 3 4 heliocampus.com HelioCampus helps colleges and universities use analytics to increase enrollment, improve student success, ensure financial sustainability and accelerate gift giving. Want to learn more about how we can work with your institution? Contact us at info@heliocampus.com. Creating a Culture of Institutional Effectiveness IUPUI was also one of 10 universities chosen to pilot practices laid out in the "Statement of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research." The statement lays out a set of best practices for institutions that want to take their institutional research to the next level. The guidelines include expanding the array of decision-makers on campus, "developing student-centered paradigms, and creating new leadership for campus-wide networked models." 7 For some institutions, that vision also includes a new title, that of Chief Institutional Effectiveness Officer. This title is becoming increasingly more common, according to one recent study. In the study, researcher Christina Leimer found that the number of campuses that had at least one administrator with the term "institutional effectiveness" in their title increased from 43 to 375 in a 15-year period from 1995 to 2010. By 2015, that number had reached 501. 8 The increase signals a growing recognition across higher ed of the value of this new role. As Knight, the Ball State assistant provost, writes in a 2016 white paper from the Association for Higher Education Effectiveness: "A solution for improving evidence-based decision-making is the establishment of integrated, multi-functional offices or divisions of institutional effectiveness (IE). Such units intentionally bring together the often-disparate functions such as institutional research, student learning outcomes assessment, strategic planning, accreditation, and academic program or unit review into one administrative

structure.” 9 A Call for Change Leadership “For culture to change, someone must turn data into information and institutional knowledge through analysis and interpretation,” Leimer argues. “Developing such a culture takes sustained effort over a long period of time at multiple levels of the organization. But someone needs to take the lead—to advocate for, and maintain focus on, this mode of thinking and practice.”

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