

Dear Members of the AIR Community:

It is my high honor to accept the 2025 John Stecklein Distinguished Member Award. Since beginning my first job in IR in 1988, I've had the benefit of observing many changes and well as consistencies in higher education over the past 35+ years. Throughout the years, the continued need for context-based data-informed decision making has been a *very* important part of our community, and I believe that the future of higher education will only benefit more with the dedicated and talented work accomplished by colleagues in Institutional Research.

When I first became an IR analyst in the Office of IR & Planning at the University of Delaware, little did I know how my understanding and continued passion for higher education would grow, both at UDelaware as well as my subsequent work at The University of Georgia. I loved IR from day one because it offers a unique and wide perspective of the higher education enterprise. IR professionals must look broadly across campus and see the interconnections— from academic issues, to student services, to facilities, to fiscal issues, and so on. I'm indebted to good mentors in my early days at The University of Delaware, and also deeply indebted to the Associate Provost and Provost who took a chance and brought me to the University of Georgia in 2003 where I served as the Director of IR. I think I saw early, and I continue to see today, that one of the greatest assets of the IR professional is his or her ability to situate information within the context. Decisions about many topics – for example academic course offerings—are affected by teaching and learning pedagogy, classroom space, the balance of in-person and online courses, how many instructors are available, parking spaces available, and if the buildings are heated and cooled. The IR professional's access to and appropriate use of data to inform issues such as courses offerings makes him or her a prized colleague—s/he is the one who has the knowledge and skill to inform decisions in a context-driven way. Today as we move further into facets of artificial intelligence, I remain firm in the need for augmented decision making – using information that may include AI analytics but always augmented with human insights that incorporate the context.

I'm pleased to have been a member of AIR since 1989 and have had the honor of serving on numerous AIR committees and activities. I was deeply honored to serve as AIR President in 2022-2023, and during my three years on the AIR board, I asked many questions. I felt an incredible sense of responsibility in serving as the Board Chair, and although my many questions may have added time to our discussions, I did so because I sought to ensure that every decision made would strengthen and advance the Association.

Although I spent the last decade of my career at UGA as a full-time faculty member, I did so knowing that I would continue to teach courses on IR and data analytics. Going through tenure and promotion in my late 40's was not fun, but I'm glad to have successfully accomplished the professor rank and honored to have published articles on IR with many great colleagues in our IR community, including Henry Zheng, Vic Borden, Fred Volkwein, Charles Mathies, Jan Botha, and Angel Calderon. I thank them for their wisdom and for helping me to become a better scholar. I'm also pleased to see such growth in IR across the world and to have the opportunity to introduce IR concepts to graduate students across the globe. Whether it's called IR or a

slightly different name, I'm so pleased to see many higher ed leaders around the world grow in their understanding and desire to have IR professionals contribute to data-informed decision making. Indeed, IR is a global, and growing, function in higher education.

While my contributions to the Association weren't as groundbreaking as Dr. Stecklein's, I hope that my service to AIR, my publications on IR and data analytics, and my work with students and colleagues in the profession have lived up to the standard for the Stecklein Distinguished Member Award. It is indeed an honor.

Thank you,
Karen L. Webber, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus, UGA