STATEMENT OF ASPIRATIONAL PRACTICE FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

RANDY L. SWING AND LEAH EWING ROSS

AN EXPANDED DEFINITION OF "DECISION MAKERS"

Senior leaders have been, and will continue to be, priority consumers of data and information provided by the institutional research function. They are not, however, the only decision makers who impact an institution's achievement of its mission. Other decision makers include students shaping their own experiences, faculty shaping their teaching and interactions with students, and staff shaping program designs and direct interactions with students.

Top-down policies and structures alone do not ensure informed choices and commitments to successful pathways. Broadly engaging all stakeholders in data-informed decisions (tactical, operational, and strategic) is essential for institutional excellence. This hybrid model positions students, faculty, staff, and other decision makers as key consumers and clients of institutional research, and is foundational to a change agency vision of institutional research as a driver for institutional improvement.

Students as Decision Makers

Colleges and universities have responsibilities for assisting students in decisions about their educational pathways. These decisions include student choice to comply with institutional requirements and to select non-required pathway options. Students deserve access to usable information that is focused on their decisions, is of high quality, and is not so highly aggregated or obfuscated by higher education jargon to fail to be useful.

✓ **Activating Data-Informed Student Decision Making**

- Institutional research topics inform decisions students make (e.g., how to best use time, academic and extracurricular choices, and life decisions that impact collegiate success).

- Institutional research is produced and disseminated with students as the target audience and/or unit of analysis.

- The timing for release and promotion of institutional research products is intentionally aligned with the cycles of student decisions, which often differ from fiscal, multi-year strategic planning, and academic term calendars.

Faculty as Decision Makers

Faculty members are the frontline in achieving an institution's mission and they are the chief architects of the academic environment. Focused and intentional data management and institutional research provide timely and useful faculty decision support for curricula, teaching, and governance.

✓ **Activating Data-Informed Faculty Decision Making**

- Faculty and faculty committees have access to data and information to support decisions about policies and structures for which they have oversight.

- Individual faculty have access to data and information to support them in designing their work, with special emphasis on student learning outcomes.

Staff as Decision Makers

Staff members have frontline responsibilities for fostering student development of academic and civic behaviors, establishing challenge and support structures for many student learning outcomes, and minding the safety and well-being of individuals in collegiate spaces. Disaggregation of data by unique subpopulations and robust data on out-of-class and life experiences informs planning, design, and implementation of student success initiatives and structures.

✓ **Activating Data-Informed Staff Decision Making**

- Staff members and staff committees have access to data and information to support decisions about policies and structures for which they have management oversight.

- Individual staff members have access to data and information to support them in designing their work, with special emphasis on disaggregation of data to address the unique needs of specific students.

STRUCTURES AND LEADERSHIP FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

The complexity of modern higher education demands investment in leadership and staffing for strategic, tactical, and operational decisions. Use of data for institutional research cannot be restricted to one office. With greater access to data sources and data tools, and increased department-specific data, institutional research products are widely dispersed across higher education institutions already, even when a strong central office of institutional research exists. An increasing number of staff and mid-level administrators are expected to use data to inform decisions, and decision makers at all levels are establishing their own data collection processes and analytics. Where institutional research once took pride in being the "one source of the truth," the reality is that the new role for institutional research is in coaching a wide array of data consumers, managing institution-wide data and analytical requirements, and orchestrating "the economics of institutional research" in balancing information supply and demand.

Building and Supporting an Institutional Research Function

The greatest potential for building effective institutional research is leveraging talent across the institution. The function of institutional research connotes the institution-wide use of data and analytics, and not just the products of an office of institutional research. Building the function requires coaching and professional development of employees across the institution in a purposeful and intentional process that increases capacity for data-informed decisions to permeate the institution. Coaching must differentiate an "auto-pilot" "data-driven" strategy from the intended "data-informed" strategy, which includes professional judgment, innovation, experience, theory, and wisdom in decision making.

The goal is for data literacy to be as ubiquitous as expectations for writing, speaking, and computer skills. These are reflected in position descriptions and performance reviews.

✓ **Activating a Networked Institutional Research Function**

- Data and analytic tools are available institution-wide to activate a broad network of institutional research aligned with strategic, tactical, and operational decisions.

- Human Resource practices identify the data literacy skills required of employees who produce and/or use data and information in their work assignments.

- Institutions provide training and continuing professional development of data-related skills for all employees. Institutions establish and support networks of data users and consumers who share good practices and collectively advocate for the data, tools, and dissemination methods required to meet the institution's needs.

LEADERSHIP FOR THE INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH FUNCTION

A Chief Institutional Research Officer (CIRO), at a commensurate level of others who manage valuable resources (e.g., Chief Financial Officer and Chief Information Officer), is prudent to provide leadership to build and maintain the **institutional research function**. This role is broader than a traditional director of institutional research in that the CIRO is responsible for the tactical and strategic direction of the institutional research function.

The CIRO leads by supporting and coordinating all institutional research, institutional effectiveness, assessment, accreditation, mandatory reporting, business analytics, and other data-focused decision-support activities. The position assures an effective institutional research function, internally-driven and resourced through purchased and shared services. It requires a significant focus on building relationships with individuals throughout the institution, understanding data and information structures and capacities, and connecting disparate pieces of information.

✓ **Activating Leadership for the Institutional Research Function**

- The Chief Institutional Research Officer (CIRO) institutes strategic plans for growing and maintaining an institution's analytic and data capacities.

- The CIRO communicates the value of data-derived information in a holistic model of decision making that includes professional judgment, institutional mission, and environmental factors.

- The CIRO is a leader of the institution's data governance strategy.

- The CIRO ensures that decision-makers have timely and useful information.

A STUDENT-FOCUSED PARADIGM

In this aspirational vision of institutional research, data and analytics are transparent and are intentionally focused on improving the student experience. Many of the past successes in institutional research have focused on students—enrollment management, retention, engagement, and graduation rates. Yet that focus can be further enhanced by **intentionally** grounding institutional research initiatives and reports in a student-focused perspective. A key question to be addressed in all institutional research is "how does this exploration serve students?" An essential component of communicating these results is making clear their underlying student-centered purposes.

✓ **Activating a Student-Focused Paradigm**

- The selection and design of institutional research is predicated on a commitment to the success of all students.

- Using expertise in communications, institutional reports demonstrate effective strategies for "telling the data story" and intentionally connecting all exploration to the student experience, including learning outcomes.

- Institutional research avoids "silo" approaches that fail to recognize that students experience an institution holistically and not as individual administrative functions and units.

CONTACT THE AUTHORS

Randy L. Swing
randy.swing@gmail.com

Leah Ewing Ross
leahewingross@gmail.com

Association for Institutional Research
air@airweb.org

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Web: www.airweb.org
Email: air@airweb.org

Phone: 850.385.4155
Fax: 850.385.5180

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