

Stretching Ourselves: Positioning IR for Greater Institutional Effectiveness

RP Group Conference
Kellogg West, CalPoly Pomona
Thursday, April 14, 2011 1:15 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Session Description

Presenters: *Jim Fillpot*, Director, Institutional Research, Chaffey College; *Barbara McNeice-Stallard*, Director, Research and Institutional Effectiveness, Mt. San Antonio College; *Irene Graff*, Director, Institutional Research, El Camino College

Description: Driven by existing institutional culture, research offices often take on a wide array of roles and responsibilities. These roles and responsibilities present both challenges and opportunities for research offices. Seasoned researchers will share strategies and tips on how to proactively position research offices within the existing institutional environment and reshape the role of the researcher. Topics include the following:

- ***developing processes to incorporate systematic evaluation and evidence in planning and decision-making; (Barbara)***
 - Include the systematic use of data for decision-making as part of program review
 - Include student learning outcomes and its systematic assessment as part of program review
 - Make it culturally desirable to use data for most decision-making – reward it with resources
 - Re-define what you are doing to highlight the components of it and how we are all using data for decision-making now, but we might not be thinking about it that way. Do the same for planning – help them understand that they are doing planning and how they can use data/evidence in decision-making.
 - Achieve a common consensus on operational definitions (i.e., a glossary of terms)
 - Make sure only common definitions get used and are frequently and repeatedly used in evaluation and/or as part of evidence
 - Take the time to build robust data sources (e.g., longitudinal MIS database; assessment database; grade history file; enrollment file; student demographic database; National Student Clearinghouse data); regular maintain and update these sources. Put as many tools in your tool belt as possible.
 - Create templates – no need to recreate something from scratch each time.

- ***raising the visibility of the research office; (Irene)***
 - Mix at campus gatherings. Introduce yourself to folks at all levels. Try not to hang out too much with your own “kind.”
 - Attend meetings strategically (don’t get bogged down with too many assigned meetings by sharing the attendance among researchers; staying in tune with agenda topics at open meetings and attend critical meetings).
 - Get in the “news” loop.
 - Get invited to staff and division meetings.
 - Work with public relations to summarize your recent findings.
 - Include the name of your office on every report leaving your office. Thank all those who contributed toward the report:
 - This report is only possible because of the insight and assistance provided by IT, Glenda Bro, and the American Language Department Staff. When you are referring to the data from this report, please remember to acknowledge that it was done through the Research and Institutional Effectiveness office in collaboration with the aforementioned persons and that it was completed on 4/7/09.

- Important to make those connections with people even when you don't "need" something from them. Building relationships is so important to what we do.
- Maintain strong relationships with faculty, starting with "new faculty orientation." Allows you to discuss trustworthiness and integrity of the office.
- Helps people see value of what we do and contributes to advocacy such as needing more research staff.

- *identifying and promoting internal and external professional development opportunities for talented research staff; (Barbara)*

- IR budgets are very small (i.e., affordable!). Push for allocations of books/journals budget and especially a professional development budget. Have all your staff attend the RP Group's Summer Institute. The Strengthening Student Success conference is a great way to connect with faculty interested in innovation and research. Look at the AIR web site for free events. Listservs are a great, free, place to get a pulse of things and ask questions.
- Try to obtain the best IR tools for the job. (e.g., Survey Tracker versus Survey Monkey; SPSS versus SAS)
- Have staff be responsible for entire project even through campus presentations to the Board of Trustees;
- Provide collegial feedback within the research department to help staff develop their skills
- Leverage professional development – if they'd like to attend a conference, then they need to present a project.
- Provide many "Opportunities" for staff development from sitting on a committee, to working on a project as a team, to providing leadership opportunities by leading the team through its program review.
- Be on the lookout for those potential IRers.
- Set aside time that is separate from office staff meetings (usually can't do this weekly, but perhaps bi-monthly or monthly) to engage in "hands-on" training, either from the director or by IR team members. Depending upon the range of skills or your team's level of experience (this will be driven by turnover) it can run the gamut. Repeat as necessary – make "drill-and-kill" your friend.
- Make training practical – what tools/skills do they need to do the job more efficiently? For example, tips and tricks on file merging, how to querying internal data systems, a "Jeopardy" type game on MIS data elements ("What is CB09 Alex?") can help sharpen skills, leading to more efficient outcomes.
- Make team members responsible for certain tasks (e.g., updating MIS, submitting to NSC, extracting data from Accuplacer, etc.). Make them the experts, and then make them responsible for cross-training within the office.
- For new team members, keep the training wheels on for a while. It's not about skill or confidence; it's about helping new staff learn the environment and institutional culture. Shield them and help direct them away from potential landmines until they've developed their own institutional "map".
- Make time for theoretical conversations. You'd be amazed at the educational and philosophical backgrounds that team members bring that can enhance research projects.
- Encourage staff to "think outside the box" about means of assessment, measurements, evidence. Encourage innovation.
- HAVE FUN! Play games! Make up contests! Bring in toys! Play jokes on each other! Laugh!

- *the challenges and opportunities of working with scarce staff and resources; (Irene)*
 - Train faculty to be mini-researchers
 - Pare down what you do to only those items that can't (or shouldn't) be done by anyone else. Ask "Is it research?" If not, suggest another resource (Information Technology Department or Admissions and Records)
 - Empower "power users" – offer to consult on an online survey but the creation and data collection can be done by the user; promote the value of internally-collected data (IR does not need to be the only source).
 - Protect your staff from too much stress. Work collaboratively; sharing ideas & resources (but within and across research offices).
 - Borrow research findings from other sources. If an intervention is heavily researched already, a lit review may be sufficient to show its value.
 - Make friends with staff in IT and A&R. Show them the reciprocal benefits of a strong data relationship.
 - As RFPs turn into grant proposals, work with grant project directors to embed positions/resources within grants. Bring these individuals together to cobble together full-time positions (e.g., 50% Title V; 50% Perkins = 1 full-time researcher)
 - Request support from other office for supplies (paper, toner, etc.) to support the research function. If it's a large project, the sole burden of cost shouldn't fall on a limited IR Office budget.
 - Develop a well-defined prioritization process; make it well known and transparent.

- *successful methods to convey research findings; (Jim)*
 - When a research request is initially received, speak directly with the requestor to define the scope and specifications of the request, how findings will be used, and who information will be shared with.
 - Working with those who requested the data to help them understand it and agree on what it means and agree on the recommendations
 - Incorporate an executive summary and readable charts and graphs. Keep your report look & design consistent so folks get used to how to read your reports.
 - Talk through your report findings in an open meeting, if possible. Promote discussion of findings among the experts in program administration so they can own the results.
 - Check out the AIR resources (www.airweb.org) available to help us all do this better.
 - Push data and information out to all constituent groups in short, digestible formats (e.g., regular, one-page briefs)
 - Make data and information as accessible as possible; train end users to understand and use resources (e.g., data warehouse tools)
 - Share information as broadly as possible. If your goal is to create an inclusive culture of evidence and informed inquiry, you don't want to blindside anyone nor have research/reports used as a weapon.
 - Meet regularly with different constituent groups (e.g., deans, faculty, administrative assistants, etc.) to understand their data/information/assessment/evidence wants and needs. Separate wants from needs.
 - Mix in a little humor – even into reports or presentations – so IR isn't viewed as an exclusively staid or "stuffy" function that is unapproachable. We might not view ourselves in this light, but we can be downright scary to others!

- *training laypersons to use data and information accurately; and battling the mythology of anecdotal information. (Jim)*
 - Start with your power users. They can also serve as an informal advisory team.
 - Identify formal and informal opinion leaders; help train them to become informed opinion leaders.
 - Forward articles of interest to various constituents including an exec summary in an email.
 - Develop awareness and value of assessment.
 - Show your sources (e.g., what MIS data is available; what is captured at the point of assessment; what's included in NSC; etc.). Sometimes know what is available as it helps laypersons frame their thoughts and ask more focused questions.
 - Speak in the language of the people. (For example: Do run that logistic regression when developing English assessment placement rules, but don't talk about beta weights at the English department meeting! Instead, find examples that are meaningful to the lay audience).
 - Start with small steps – successive approximation. Consistently incorporate new concepts (e.g., effect size) and reiterate frequently. Check accuracy of understanding. Gradually expand the envelope.
 - Be proactive. Don't let misinformation fester.
 - Tactfully challenge assumptions and point out how others might view the same situation; suggest opportunities to study the topic more deeply and systematically.
 - Call out generalizations (“I know that happens all the time because I had a student who...”)
 - Be positive – there aren't problems, just solutions we haven't thought of yet! Encourage others to be part of the solution. If you don't embody that behavior, who will?