

## **A Brief Summary of Statements of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research**

Data are everywhere across institutions of higher education, and access to analytical tools and reporting software means that a wide array of higher education employees can be actively involved in turning data into decision-support. The Statements of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research present a new vision of the role of offices of institutional research working in conjunction with departments and units across the institution. Key to this new vision is a broadened definition of “decision makers” that institutional research supports, especially with establishment of a “student-focused” mindset for institutional studies.

This approach builds on the 50-year collaborative nature of the institutional research field. It is a hybrid model that includes professionals, some of whom work in dedicated offices of institutional research, and others who work in various units across the institution and share in efforts to collect, interpret, and use data to achieve an institution’s mission. While there is reason to celebrate the increased demand for actionable data, few higher education institutions have the resources to fulfill that demand solely by using dedicated staff in “traditional” offices of institutional research. That paradigm shift to data-informed decisions has opened the door to re-think, re-prioritize, and renew the function of data management and institutional studies.

The following are highlights from the Statements of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research. The final and expanded Statements will be released after feedback is gathered from an initial pilot test of the Statements in Spring 2015.

### **An Expanded Definition of “Decision Makers”**

Senior campus leaders have been, and will continue to be, priority consumers of data and information created by institutional research functions. They are not, however, the only decision makers who impact an institution’s achievement of its mission. Research increasingly proves that the achievement of desired outcomes is significantly shaped by the thousands of decisions made by students themselves about their higher education experiences, by faculty about their own teaching and interactions with students, and by professional staff who work directly with students. Ultimately, what individuals do and the decisions they make matter, and structures alone do not assure informed choices and pathways. A core value of a new vision for institutional research is to expand the view of who decision makers are and how to support them with data and information to improve their decisions. Considering students, faculty, professional staff, and other decision makers as key consumers and customers of institutional research, in addition to senior campus leaders, is foundational to a change agency vision of institutional research.

### **A Student-Focused Paradigm**

Many of the 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 that should be addressed in all institutional research is “How does this area of exploration serve students?” In this new vision of institutional research, reports close the loop by clearly stating—and not leaving to assumption—the value of efforts in improving the student experience. The absence of such statements has opened higher education to accusations of failing to put students first. Consider, for example, how a study of faculty salaries can, and should,

be placed in the context of putting students first by assuring the retention of outstanding faculty because of their critical importance in the student experience.

As with any disruptive innovation, there must be ready access and limited burden to entry. The institutional research function of the future will make it easy to find and use data effectively, and will actively pursue motivators and incentives to nudge decision makers to do so. As such, accountability must include use of institutional research products, not just the production of them. Simply put, producing reports is only the start of a process that leads to use of data and better decision-making.

A student-focused paradigm will recognize that student and faculty calendars and decision cycles do not always align with administrative cycles, including fiscal years, multi-year strategic planning, and academic term calendars. Timing the release of institutional studies to align with the points in time in which students, faculty, and other stakeholders are making key decisions invites use of the results and proactive decision-making.

### **Removing Obstacles for Institutional Studies**

Use of data for institutional studies cannot be locked in one office. With greater access to data sources, more department-specific data, and easy access to data tools, institutional studies 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 will have data-related tasks in their position descriptions. And as decision makers—from managers to deans and vice presidents—many will expand their unit's capacity to conduct data studies that align with their own information needs. The future institutional research function will require coordination of efforts and investments from a cabinet-level administrator, the Chief Institutional Research Officer (CIRO). The person in that position will spend significant time building relationships among stakeholders, building crossroads to connect data silos, governing data use, coordinating institutional studies, and sharing results. This will not happen by accident, but rather, only through intentional, strategic design and investments.

Key to the successful implementation of a broad culture of data-informed decisions is promotion of data-oriented job skills among all employees. Just as use of office computers is now standard in most job descriptions, many positions will include specific data skill requirements and expectations, and promotions will be based on further developing those data and decision-making skills. As such, institutional researchers will take on new roles in professional development and training for employees, consulting on study designs, and coaching on report writing and dissemination.

### **Summary**

The Statements of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research are not predictions of a distant future; rather, they are reflections of changes that are already observable. They are not a critique of institutional research functions that have served higher education well over the past five decades. These ideas address and support the rapidly growing culture of data-informed decision-making and provide a significant starting point for a new vision for institutional research in higher education. The ultimate goal is engagement, not prescription. The future role of institutional research will be in creating demand for decision-support and increasing the supply of information to meet that demand. While celebrating the success of institutional research in shaping our colleges, universities, and state and national policies, this movement is intended to promote active re-envisioning of the institutional research function needed for the short- and long-term future of postsecondary education.

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