

## Introduction to Special Institutional Research Section

*Tasha Dannenbring*

**Director of Assessment and Institutional Research, South Dakota Board of Regents**

This issue of the *Mid-Western Educational Researcher* highlights the prominence of institutional research in higher education. Institutional research serves many critical functions in the operations of higher education systems and institutions. Institutional researchers are assuming increased leadership roles in critical areas, including strategic planning and reporting, institutional effectiveness, predictive analytics, data governance, and accreditation. The role of institutional researchers has evolved, with the movement from reporting to business intelligence to predictive analytics, IR professionals are drawn upon to delve into data and serve a critical function to assist institutions in understanding outcomes and offering explanations and solutions. These articles showcase work done by institutional researchers across the country concerning these critical functions.

As the role of IR professionals becomes increasingly prominent and crucial, the skills required of institutional researchers have evolved. In an environment where data and information are desired and highly valued, IR professionals need increasingly sophisticated skills in a variety of areas. The Association for Institutional Research (AIR) has identified key duties and functions of institutional researchers. These include the ability to identify information needs, collect, analyze, interpret and report data and information, plan and evaluate, serve as stewards of data and information, and educate information producers, users, and consumers (AIR, 2017).

Because institutional researchers are often asked to provide data and analysis on virtually every aspect of the educational operation, they have the ability to understand how each unit within that operation functions in the educational model. With *Infusing Data Campus-Wide to Drive Institutional Change*, Wentz, Brown, and Sweat address data-related challenges to identify key performance indicators through utilization of the Baldrige Framework, in order to develop a balanced scorecard to drive institutional effectiveness and overall success. As mentioned above, trends in higher education force institutions to act on data purposefully and systematically. In a political environment that places increased attention on efficiency and a call for institutions to critically evaluate their operation and quality of service, the authors come to terms with the data needed to address a variety of institutional needs. All from the University of Wisconsin-Stout, they note that the process of developing a balanced scorecard began in order to focus the university's attempt to address critical issues facing many institutions nationwide; in their case specifically, the challenge of performance-based funding.

Professional networking and communication in the field of IR is important, yet can be a challenge. With the variety of roles served, IR personnel find themselves in a number of professional groups. Further, new IR professionals may find themselves in small IR offices, in which they may be running a "one man show," so to speak. It is important for IR professionals to communicate with others in their field, both to keep current and to build a sense of connection to the field. In their article *Building Institutional Research Knowledge and Skills Through Communities of Practice*, Sheppard and Kerrigan highlight the impact of professional networks in institutional research. As institutional researchers, are called to relentlessly inspect each

institutional data element, and the day to day business often leaves us somewhat secluded from professional networks. Sheppard and Kerrigan remind us that these professional networks help us to grow and learn. In their social network analysis, they show us that through IR affinity groups, IR professionals can build and maintain vital skills related to the three tiers of organizational intelligence in the field of IR. Of particular importance, in my opinion, is the need for seasoned IR professionals to mentor and teach new institutional researchers through membership in affinity networks such as these.

Finally, it is now common knowledge among IR professionals that dashboards and data visualization have become a non-negotiable tool in the field of institutional research. They serve multiple functions, both to communicate data in a meaningful manner and to make data more accessible to audiences, thereby mitigating the continual stream of data requests that come to IR offices. Byrd, Woodward, Yan, and Simon, in *Analytical Collaboration for Student Graduation Success: Relevance of Analytics to Student Success in Higher Education*, showcase the implementation of a graduation and retention tracking dashboard to assist in improving graduation rates of students facing academic challenges. They detail the process of data discovery, illustrate collaboration across a large university, and ultimately identify a mechanism that would equip staff to intervene early with those students who need services. The dashboard allows for multiple audiences to themselves be able to navigate a large set of data easily. Further, it allows for university decision makers to quickly observe data trends in areas such as graduation for their reporting needs.

### Author Notes

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Tasha Dannenbring at [Tasha.dannenbring@sdbor.edu](mailto:Tasha.dannenbring@sdbor.edu).

### References

Association for Institutional Research, Advisory Group (2017). *Report of the AIR Advisory group*. Retrieved from [https://www.airweb.org/Resources/Documents/AIR-Duties-and-Functions-of\\_IR.pdf](https://www.airweb.org/Resources/Documents/AIR-Duties-and-Functions-of_IR.pdf)