

1 To whom should higher education institutions provide data, and what is the impact of transparency on institutions?

## Transparency for Whom? Impacts of Accountability Movements for Institutional Researchers and Beyond

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How important is it for higher education institutions to be transparent? Why is transparency important and just how transparent do universities need to be to ensure institutional accountability? Most people assume that transparency will lead to greater accountability; however, transparency has its cost. All the reports generated by higher education institutions to meet transparency and accountability requirements must be produced by someone either employed by or contracted with the institution. The price tag can be steep. According to career website Glassdoor.com (2015), the average salary of an institutional research (IR) analyst in 2015 is \$52,051. Is the cost of transparency a worthy investment or is it a waste of scarce resources? In this chapter, we will attempt to provide a general overview of the various constituents that current institutional research offices serve, including governing boards, state agencies, the federal government, and public and private entities. Next, a discussion of how accountability at these various levels has dictated institutional research offices in reporting with high levels of transparency. Finally, implications for institutional research offices will be discussed in light of the changing face of higher education.

### **Transparency and U.S. Higher Education**

The United States has a long history of making higher education institutions accountable to an external governing body. Unlike European universities that were self-governed by teachers and students or from within a court or church, all colonial colleges in the United States were governed by outsiders—often a board of overseers who were not part of the college or university community (Cohen, 1998). The university community—faculty, students, administrators, and staff—was represented by the president to the board of overseers. Being accountable to outsiders is not new for U.S. higher

education institutions—such systems were in place even before the birth of the nation. The reporting burden, however, did increase gradually over the years as the government invested more heavily in higher education and took on more regulatory responsibilities through legislation.

Government agencies are not the only organizations that try to ensure accountability in U.S. higher education. Accreditation agencies and organizations that rank and rate higher education institutions all play the role of accountability enforcer to an extent. As Calderon and Mathies (2013) pointed out, today's higher education institutions are accountable to a variety of external stakeholders whose interests do not align. The government may want institutions to enroll more underprivileged students, whereas other internal and external constraints may dictate a more stringent admission standard. The accreditation agencies may want faculty to devote more time to educating undergraduates, whereas the board of trustees wants the institution to become a research powerhouse. Most higher education institutions do not have the luxury to choose the priority on which they want to focus. Instead, administrators and faculty are constantly negotiating among these priorities.

Another aspect of transparency is that societal expectations for higher education are constantly evolving. These changes are reflected through legislation, budget priorities, funding opportunities, job markets, employer expectations, parent and student expectations, and enrollment patterns. Higher education must respond to the changing societal expectations and produce appropriate indicators of public accountability (Zumeta, 2011). One such example is President Obama's attempt to develop a college rating system.

In August 2013, President Obama released his plan to make higher education more affordable in the United States (The White House, 2013). The plan called for a new college rating system to be established by the Department of Education before 2015, and the rating system would be built on three principles: access, affordability, and outcomes. In December 2014, days before President Obama's stated deadline, the U.S. Department of Education released not a rating system, but a framework for rating colleges, and called for public feedback (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Critics quickly pointed out that President Obama's original rating system was too complex, too subjective, and too dependent on unreliable data (Lederman, 2015).

Even though ranking colleges and universities has been a popular sport among newspapers, magazines, and buzz-making websites, it has never been seriously considered as an accountability measure by scholars and policymakers. The problem with college rankings is that American higher education is highly diverse in terms of mission, size, funding, and student body. Reducing the complex higher education ecological system into a single number means the context would be totally lost. Compounding the problem is the limitation of data availability, validity, and reliability of

measures, and questionable statistical precision (Sponsler, 2009). A seasoned IR professional can testify that a simple-looking term like *graduation rate* can be hugely complex and contentious, not to mention terms like *student learning outcomes* or *faculty productivity*.

In July 2015, news outlets around the country reported that President Obama's original college rating plan was dead. Instead, the U.S. Department of Education would create a tool to help prospective students and their parents select colleges and universities based on factors such as price and graduation rates (Lederman, 2015). President Obama finally made public a new college information website, "College Scorecard," in mid-September 2015, which provided new college outcome data that were not available before (Stratford, 2015). These new data include student-loan repayment status and postgraduation earnings. However, there was no learning-outcome indicator other than institutional graduation rate and first-year retention rate. This marks a drastic setback on the ambitious rating plan President Obama originally envisioned in 2013. Although the President's college rating system represents a failed attempt by federal policymakers to establish a new way of measuring accountability, it will not be the last attempt. As the societal expectations for higher education change, so will the measures of public accountability.

## Transparency and Institutional Research

Cowley (1960) stated that the origins of institutional research can be traced back to 1701 when Yale conducted a study of various Great Britain institutions to inform the university's decision regarding the single board governance model as opposed to the dual-board models of Harvard and William and Mary. Institutional research activities continued to increase throughout the 1700s and into the 1800s, with colleges and universities using data to inform curriculum, instruction, and economic efficiency. However, it was not until the 1960s that more than a handful of institutions had created formal offices of institutional research. The legitimacy of the profession was greatly facilitated by the formation of the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) in 1966, the American Council on Education's Office of Strategic Information and Research (OSIR), and subsequent regional and international suborganizations (Richard, 2012).

**External Governing Board.** Regardless of institutional type, mission, or location, almost all U.S. postsecondary institutions are beholden to a board of appointed or elected regents or trustees. These administrators possess the legal authority to make decisions on behalf of the institutions (Cohen, 1998) and carry a certain level of political clout. This authority extends to issues such as outsourcing of services, system-wide budgets oversight, and the hiring of institutional presidents. These responsibilities have taken on greater importance in a culture of increased accountability and transparency.

Considering the political nature of their appointment/election and a background typically rooted in business, regents/trustees often want their systems/institutions to be perceived as forerunners in ensuring efficiency and quality instruction at affordable rates. Offices of institutional research may be called upon to provide data related to institutional staffing, semester credit hours attempted versus completed, student fee structures, and alumni employment rates. Furthermore, boards may champion causes that ensure this information is transparent to the public and the perception of being proactive. The Texas A&M University System (TAMUS) and University of Texas System (UTS) have developed interactive dashboard websites where constituents can review and compare selected key performance indicators (KPIs) of system schools, and in some instances, out-of-state peers and aspirants. Citing the need for increased accountability with high levels of transparency, TAMUS' "EmpowerU" and UTS' "Productivity Dashboard" give the public insight into student demographics, success measures, and faculty productivity (Texas A&M University System, 2015).

**Internal Stakeholders.** Offices of institutional research are usually the central repository of institutional data and serve the needs of a variety of internal constituents. Enrollment management administrators may rely on institutional research to provide data on student applicants as a way of predicting enrollments. Student affairs might call on institutional research to determine how many students are involved in student organizations, and finance and administration may request a salary comparison among peer colleges and universities. Undoubtedly, the most important internal constituent that institutional research offices have is the president of the institution.

The president will call upon institutional research to provide information and data for efforts in dealing with the media, alumni, potential donors, boards of regents/trustees, and state and federal policymakers. And it is not unusual for these data requests to be due within a very short turnaround period. Therefore, it is critical that the relationship between the president and institutional research be one of trust and respect for the role each plays in the administration of the university. Increasingly, college and university presidents around the country are making chief institutional research officers members of strategic planning committees.

Institutional research must be a critical player in the president's vision of what the university will be going forward. This requires the office of institutional research to almost assume a predictive role in knowing what information the president will need to respond to discussions related to available resources and institutional needs (Purcell, Harrington, & King, 2012). This also requires the staff, especially senior leaders, of the institutional research offices to understand not only statistics and data management, but also higher education policies, finance, and the context of institutional operations.

In addition to institutional administration, the office of institutional research may be charged with making certain KPIs available to the general public. This has often taken the form of the “fact book,” an abridged compilation of KPIs related to retention/graduation rates, costs of attendance, and cocurricular achievements such as athletics. In recent years, fact books have evolved from traditional book format either in hard copy or PDF document to web-based or interactive formats. Many institutions have also made efforts to make an increasing amount of data available to the public. For example, Kansas State University’s Office of Planning and Analysis has foregone the publication of both hard-copy and online fact books in an effort to streamline their website and make more holistic data files available to their constituents (Kansas State University, n.d.). The University of South Carolina not only provides multiple reports and tables, but also allows users to create their own customizable tables (University of South Carolina, n.d.).

**State Reporting Duties.** Questionable retention and graduation rates and diminished marketable skills have increased the call for accountability of higher education at the state level over the past few decades (Leveille, 2006). The responsibility of higher education oversight at the state level is usually provided through multi-institutional systems and/or a state-level coordinating or governing agency. Most states have adopted both models. For example, Texas has six university systems and an overarching higher education coordinating board, whereas states such as Georgia, Hawaii, North Dakota, and Rhode Island have only one statewide board with governance over all colleges and universities (Fulton, McGuinness, & L’Orange, 2015). Michigan, on the other hand, does not have a state-level coordinating or governing agency. State-level coordinating or governing agencies develop policies and initiatives based on the goals and strategic plans of state constituents and elected officials. Although reporting requirements for private institutions vary, all states require some level of reporting from publicly funded institutions (Brown, 2008). It is the responsibility of offices of institutional research to provide data that help guide and inform state policy decisions (Krotseng, 2012).

State agencies use data associated with student enrollments, courses taught, and faculty teaching loads to identify trends and guide policy related to postsecondary education and job-market demands. The actual reporting process may be managed by the office of institutional research, the registrar’s office, or a combination of both and/or other enrollment management areas. States may also require institutions to report on how well they are utilizing classroom and laboratory space for instructional time. This information is then used for evaluation of requests for new buildings, expansion of existing sites, and/or addition of new academic programs.

Time frames, specific data, and repositories may differ by state, but most agencies/systems provide colleges and universities with reporting

schedules, often including file layout instructions for electronic transmission. The California Postsecondary Education Commission maintains on its website a link to the sources of data used in public reporting and an estimated time frame of when the data are made available (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2015). The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board provides colleges and universities with an online Reporting and Procedures Manual that identifies report due dates and record file layout guidelines. These reports include the Coordinating Board Management (CBM) reports for student enrollments, course inventory, graduation rates, and space utilization. Reports and due dates for community/technical colleges, private institutions, and health-related institutions are also provided (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2015).

Most state university systems and/or oversight agencies make access to accountability data/trends highly visible on their websites. For example, the State of Wisconsin Educational Approval Board publishes a student outcomes report by cohort class as a highly transparent method of demonstrating institutional effectiveness while providing information to assist students in their college choice process (State of Wisconsin Educational Approval Board, 2015). The New York State Office of Higher Education website offers a link to its Office of Research and Information Systems, where consumers can access reports on college and university profiles, student enrollments, cost of attendance, and financial assistance (New York State Office of Higher Education, 2015).

**Federal Reporting.** Calls for increased accountability and transparency have also impacted the types and amount of data collected at the federal level. Henderson (Chapter 2) and Atchison and Hosch (Chapter 6) provide more detailed discussion on accountability and transparency issues related to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), with specific attention paid to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Within NCES is the Postsecondary, Adult, and Career Division (PACE), which not only collects information related to postsecondary institutions, but also information about training and employability of high school students (Fink & Muntz, 2012).

**Private Entities.** Offices of institutional research receive numerous requests for information from nongovernmental entities to be used in college choice publications. It is important to reiterate that often these voluntary surveys collect similar data and information, but completing each survey individually can be costly in terms of staff hours. Carpenter-Hubin and Crisan-Vandeborne discuss the demands and benefits of optional external reporting in greater detail in Chapter 7.

Ironically, in an environment of increased transparency in higher education, rarely is information made available as to how college or university rankings are calculated. Even more problematic is the validity of the ranking constructs and what decision-making process was utilized to select

variables and create the rankings. Although detail of this nature is most likely not of interest to students and their families, it is imperative that institutional researchers have a working knowledge of the ranking process. This is especially important when peer/aspirant comparisons generate unfavorable results.

### **Impacts of Transparency on Institutional Research**

The most direct impact of increasing transparency in higher education for institutional researchers is the swelling amount of data requests received at institutional research offices. Ethically, it is the responsibility of institutional research offices to ensure that data provided by the offices are being used in an accurate and ethical manner. Although it is not possible for institutional researchers to monitor the collection and use of data by state and federal governments, great care should be given to all incoming requests to ensure the legitimacy of the requestors. For instance, institutional research offices should verify that data requestors have been cleared by Institutional Review Boards, ensure Family Educational Rights and Policy Act (FERPA) is not violated, and verify the identity of the requestors. Data requests such as those associated with IPEDS and state higher education agencies/boards can be fulfilled with little or no scrutiny based on the authority of the requesting body. However, when fielding requests from college choice and ranking entities, consideration should be given to how and where the data will be used.

Simply opting not to participate in a college choice or ranking survey does not ensure the entity will not publish institutional information. Institutional data are available to any entity researching an institution via the Common Data Set Initiative (2015) and IPEDS. However, with no understanding of the institutional context, rankings/ratings based on publicly available institutional data could be inaccurate and/or incomplete. Much like being able to describe in detail to institutional leadership how these agencies calculate their rankings/ratings, institutional researchers must be able to convey to leadership potential pitfalls of participating in one college choice survey over another while still maintaining an appearance of transparency.

Another impact of the transparency movement on institutional research is the growing need for staff training and professional development. As noted by Calderon and Mathies (2013) in their article about future challenges, institutional researchers are younger and less experienced; this trend is perpetuated by movement of professionals amongst institutions. Therefore, professional development, training, and mentoring opportunities will become imperative throughout the industry. Organizations such as the Association for Institutional Research and its regional and state affiliates can facilitate workshops and networking opportunities. Newer professionals could greatly benefit from the sage wisdom of seasoned veterans who have

experienced and understand the political landmines associated with higher education reporting.

To survive in the age of accountability and transparency, institutional research professionals must become more than number crunchers. Technology has made it easy to generate data and share information. Consequently, today's society has become information overloaded. Institutional research offices must strive to not only report data and information, but to report data and information that matter to the sustainability of the institution they serve. The need for highly accurate and long-term forecasting will increase as enrollment trends shift because of population changes by number and ethnicity, community college attendance, and public versus private institution cost. In the past, institutional researchers may have been able to adopt a "just the messenger" mentality, but moving forward, professionals must interject themselves in institutional and governmental discussions regarding policy and strategic planning (Calderon & Mathies, 2013).

## **Who Benefits from Transparency?**

After reviewing the reporting burden of today's higher education institutions and various accountability measures implemented by state and federal governments and external agencies, it is worth asking who really benefits from such transparency movements. In 2005, then Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings established the Commission on the Future of Higher Education to study challenges facing U.S. higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The commission, also known as the Spellings Commission, reported their findings on September 26, 2006 and identified three major issues in U.S. higher education: access, affordability, and accountability. These three challenges were echoed by President Obama's proposed college rating system (The White House, 2013).

Even without the college rating system called for by President Obama in 2013, today's parents and students are equipped with a vast variety of college choice tools fueled from data generated by higher education institutions. From federal government and state coordinating agencies, to private entities, numerous websites were created to help students choose the best institution that matches their goals and needs. These websites and online tools help parents and students learn about college cost, admission requirements, acceptance rates, and outcome measures such as graduation rates and future earning potential. Clearly, prospective college students and their parents are the group most benefited by the accountability and transparency movement.

From a broader point of view, giving more information to prospective students and parents to ensure a good match between students and institutions may promote more student success, although this thesis has not been empirically examined. College education is not only beneficial for the individual, but also for society as a whole, as educated citizens are a vital



component of a successful democratic society. Therefore, it can be suggested that increased accountability and transparency in higher education may benefit society overall.

Last but not least, increased accountability and transparency may also benefit the private entities that profit from publishing college rankings/ratings. Many have pointed out that college rankings are a proven revenue source for magazines and newspapers, who struggle to survive in the Internet age (Gladwell, 2011; Goldin, 2006). *U.S. News & World Report*, for example, ended its weekly print magazine in December 2010 (Romenesko, 2010), but continues to publish its annual college rankings issue. Some may argue that accountability measures such as college rankings and ratings actually benefit the publishers more than parents, students, and higher education in general.

## Conclusion

The landscape of institutional research has changed exponentially over the past 20 years and this trend is likely to continue. Federal, state, and private entities are demanding more evidence associated with student learning outcomes, career preparation, budgetary efficiencies, and the overall economic impact that higher education has on society. Accountability and transparency have become an embedded aspect of U.S. higher education; the increasing number of constituents and the data they demand will likely result in additional accountability and transparency initiatives.

Offices of institutional research should prepare themselves by ensuring they possess adequate resources, and more importantly, properly trained staff, to embrace and accommodate future changes. The role of institutional research has shifted from one of reporting to that of a major player in organizational governance. As such, it is critical that institutional researchers are keenly aware of the various players impacting higher education, prioritize their importance, and cultivate effective working relationships appropriately (Hanover Research, 2015). New data and analysis and new ways of reporting will be critical as calls for accountability and transparency increase. Institutional researchers should expect to field an increasing number of data and report requests from an increasing number of new constituents.

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