

Running head: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

In Their Own Words: Effectiveness in Institutional Research

William E. Knight

Bowling Green State University

Abstract

This study sought to understand and improve upon effectiveness in institutional research by interviewing, observing, and analyzing resumes of IR practitioners who have been identified by their colleagues as effective in having an impact on decision making, planning, and policy formation. Results of the study concerned the meaning of effectiveness in IR, the characteristics of effective practitioners, barriers, and opportunities and strategies to overcome them; they should be of interest to all interested in improving effectiveness in IR.

In Their Own Words: Effectiveness in Institutional Research

Institutional research is viewed by a variety of constituencies as essential to allowing higher education to survive and thrive in the current environment. The funding crisis; competition from both traditional and nontraditional sectors; pressures to show effectiveness in student learning, contributions to economic development and community engagement; and the need for effective enrollment management are just a few examples of areas where institutional research has been called upon to contribute to decision making and planning. (Howard, 2001; Hutchings & Shulman, 2006; Kuh and Associates, 2005; Saupe, 1990)

As Peterson (1999) points out, our profession is fortunate in that we have a long history of self-reflection. We have pondered topics such as what institutional research is (Dressel, 1971; Fincher, 1985; Lasher & Firnberg, 1983; Peterson & Corcoran, 1985; Saupe, 1990), how it should be organized (Presley, 1990), what skills and expertise it requires (Terenzini, 1993), and what roles and activities practitioners should embrace (Billups, F. D. & DeLucia, L. A., 1990; Chan, S. S., 1993; Chase, 1979; Gubasta, 1976; Hurst, Matier, & Sidle, 1998; Keller, 1995; Lohman, 1998; Matier, Sidle, & Hurst, 1995; Sanford, 1983, 1995; Terenzini, 1995; Volkwein, 1990, 1999). Surveys (e.g., Lindquist, 1999; Muffo, 1999) have described the characteristics, settings, and activities of institutional researchers. Numerous professional development opportunities, including conferences, workshops, institutes, publications, graduate coursework and certification, grant programs, and professional organizations, exist to allow us to maintain and enhance our career effectiveness (Knight, 2003).

Some institutional researchers have studied the characteristics and experiences of their colleagues in order to learn how we can enhance our effectiveness in our roles at our institutions or organizations. Augustine (2001) concluded that effective use of institutional research studies is associated with transmission of findings through multiple media, congruence in disciplinary backgrounds between the researcher and decision-makers, organizational placement of the IR office, frequent communication between researchers and decision-makers, use of qualitative methods, and provision of advice on use of research results. Clyburn (1991) found that many small, private colleges lacked an institutional research function and where it did exist it tended to suffer from lack of coordination, commitment, and support. Delaney's (1997) survey of institutional researchers at New England colleges and universities revealed that the scope of the function, the reporting relationship, and the size and qualifications of the staff varied significantly with institutional size, level, and control. She also found that the likelihood of involvement of institutional research offices with research (as contrasted with reporting), planning, and policy development varied with institutional size, level, control, and staff size and qualifications. Delaney (2000) concluded that institutional researchers who perceived themselves to be more effective felt that they had more opportunities for autonomy and leadership and were more likely to have their work used in executive decision making, include policy recommendations in reports, conduct follow-up studies on the impact of their work, have a doctorate, be part of a strong professional network, and describe their positions as challenging. Using a survey of institutional researchers in the Northeast, Delaney (2001) identified workload, limited opportunity for advancement, stress, lack of recognition, concern for producing quality work within time constraints,

and financial and moral support as the most common challenges practitioners face to their engagement in policy. She concluded through the use of a path analysis model that practitioners who were in higher positions and who had more experience and higher education levels, a mentor, a strong professional network, and an independent job structure can more effectively meet such challenges and actively engage in policy development. Huntington & Clagett (1991) learned that the most prevalent problems experienced by institutional researchers include workload and staffing, perceptions of the function, access to institutional leaders, and access to and reliability of institutional information systems. Knight, Moore, & Coperthwaite (1997) sought to empirically validate Terenzini's (1993) thoughts on the knowledge and skills necessary for effective institutional research; they found that practitioners employed in the field for a greater number of years, those with doctoral degrees, those with the title of associate director, and those who reported directly to the institution's president perceived themselves to be more effective. Storrar (1981) determined that institutional researchers at large, public universities experience role conflict that impinges upon their perceived effectiveness.

The profession of institutional research has benefited from turning its analytic lens back upon itself. Some clear patterns have emerged about how practitioners can negotiate professional challenges and increase their effectiveness, which the literature has operationally defined as having a tangible impact on decision making, planning, and policy formation. Still, more of the story remains to be told. Many of the suggestions for improving effectiveness made by theorists and practitioners in institutional research, while based upon valuable lived experience, were not arrived at through rigorous research methods. Further the research studies that have been carried out to determine

correlates of effectiveness have been limited by the fact that the dependent variable is self-reported effectiveness. While not wishing to impugn the importance of this work or the responses of our colleagues, it does seem that validation of self-reported effectiveness, through such means as feedback from colleagues (Delaney, 2001) would add substance to this line of inquiry. Finally, the studies carried out thus far have all been within the objectivist, deductive, positivist paradigms, which assume that truth exists independently of experience, simply waiting to be discovered and having the same meaning for all (Crotty, 1998). One of several alternative approaches to understanding effectiveness in institutional research includes using a constructionist epistemology, a related theoretical perspective such as phenomenology, and methods such as interviews, document, analysis and observation. Such an inductive approach holds that meaning is constructed by human beings as they engage with the world, that the possibility for new meaning emerges when we lay aside our prevailing understanding, and that depth and detail emerge when data collection and analysis are not limited to preexisting categories (Patton, 2002). The goal of this study is to use such an alternative approach to arrive at responses to the following research questions:

1. How do institutional researchers who have been identified as effective by their colleagues view effectiveness in the profession?
2. What are the personal and professional characteristics and experiences of such institutional researchers?
3. What opportunities to improve their effectiveness have such institutional researchers taken advantage of?

4. What barriers to effectiveness have such institutional researchers faced and how have they overcome them?
5. What suggestions do such institutional researchers have for improving effectiveness throughout the profession?

Method

This study was carried out using qualitative research methods since the research questions are descriptive and open-ended in nature and require somewhat lengthy responses from a small group of persons with particular viewpoints (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, Merriam, 1998). Techniques of naturalistic inquiry were employed, which affected sampling techniques, participant selection, research design, and data analysis (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002).

The initial pool of effective institutional researchers was established based upon nomination by colleagues throughout the country. Email messages asking practitioners to nominate colleagues were sent via the listprocs of the Association for Institutional Research and several of its regional and state affiliates. Nominations were also solicited at the Association for Institutional Research national conference. These efforts yielded 26 nominations. The researcher then narrowed the list of candidates to a smaller number (eight) that provided for maximum variability in terms of the candidates institutions, job titles, longevity in institutional research, and personal characteristics. Candidates were then contacted and asked if they were willing to participate in the study; all agreed.

Participants submitted copies of their resumes to the researcher and participated in individual on-site interviews (except for one interview that was carried out via telephone), which were tape recorded and captured in written transcripts. The appropriateness of the questions was confirmed by a national panel of experts who provided feedback about both the interview questions as well as an overall proposal for the study. The researcher maintained a reflective journal in order to record observations made during the research process. The reflective journal, analysis of resumes, and analysis of interview transcripts served as methods of data triangulation of the results (Patton, 2002).

Data analysis yielded two types of findings: detailed descriptions of each case, which were used to document uniqueness, and shared patterns that emerge across cases (Patton, 2002). Data analysis involved breaking material into small units of observation, developing initial themes or categories within the findings, and considering alternative interpretations that will either confirm the initial themes or lead to the creation of new ones. The researcher attempted to bracket his knowledge and presuppositions so as not to taint the findings (Crotty, 1998), but rather to focus on participants' perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Two peer debriefers were used to test themes and alternative conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Preliminary conclusions were shared with participants for their confirmation and elaboration; this constitutes a member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An audit trail of study materials will serve to provide for dependability and confirmability. All names noted in the results are pseudonyms.

Results

Profiles of the Participants

Henry. Henry has been an IR director at a large, urban community college in the Midwest for 15 years. He previously served as Director of Planning at a community college system office, giving him a total of 23 years in the profession. He has also served as a dean of continuing education, executive director of a regional higher education consortium, director of a state vocational council, and as a community college instructor, providing for a total of 30 years of professional experience in higher education. He holds a bachelor's degree in Political Science, an MPA, and an MBA, and has completed additional graduate coursework in educational leadership. He has been active as a member and committee member in AIR and has done some consulting.

His office consists of 5.75 FTE staff members, including himself, an assistant director, three project analysts, and an administrative coordinator. Office activities typically include federal and state reporting, responding to college guidebook and other external surveys, carrying out an annual research agenda (that includes program evaluations, student surveys, and various requested studies that are undertaken through a request for proposal process), process improvement surveys supporting regional accreditation, maintaining databases for program review, supporting for the planning process, involvement with the *Achieving the Dream* project, responding to many ad hoc information requests, interaction with campus information technology staff concerning the data warehouse, a limited role in assessment and program review, support for specialized accreditation, and attendance at state board of regents meetings. Henry's reporting line has recently shifted from the president's chief of staff to a newly created

Senior Vice President. He sees his primary responsibility as office management, support for accreditation activities, and interaction with campus leaders and staff.

Elizabeth. At the time of the interview Elizabeth was transitioning from her role as an associate vice president for information technology, research, and planning at a West coast community college to a new position as a vice president with responsibility for technology and learning services for a community college district in the same state. She served as a director at the college for four years before her three years as an associate vice president. She previously was employed as a program associate for a government institute, a research analyst at a private university, a graduate assistant, and a faculty member, giving her a total of 10 years of institutional research-related experience and 14 years of professional experience in academe. She holds a bachelor's degree in mathematics and masters and doctoral degrees in higher education. She has 13 publications, 43 conference presentations and 3 book reviews, and has served as a member, committee member, and member of the board of directors for AIR, a member and associate editor for the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP), a member and editor for the National Community College Council for Research and Planning, a member of the board of directors for the Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management, and as a member and leader of the institutional research and community college groups in her state. She has received awards from her state's community college group and from her graduate institution.

Her office consists of herself and a full-time institutional research analyst. The office's responsibilities include descriptive and analytic studies; projections; responses to ad hoc information requests; administering surveys; federal and state reporting;

coordination of all disciplinary accreditation activities; coordination of her college's regional accreditation self-study and site visit; designing the college's three-year college plan and carrying out annual evaluations of progress toward its goals; membership in many committees; responsibility for the institution's data warehouse; training college staff in the use of decision support systems; assessment at the institutional, program, and general education levels; and strong role in enrollment management. The analyst creates routine reports, responds to surveys, provides information for program review, and extracts data from administrative systems; Elizabeth carries out all of the other activities noted above personally. She reports directly to the College's president.

Martha. Martha has served as the IR director at a private, historically African American college in the South for 19 years. She previously served as a faculty member at the college; she has a total of 34 years of professional experience in higher education. She holds bachelor's and master's degrees in mathematics and a master's degree in computer science. Martha has presented numerous workshops and authored several institutional research publications at her institution. She has attended many leadership training conferences and curriculum institutes, and has received several grants. She has provided leadership to her college's Title III program, its accreditation activities, and to the National Youth Sports Program and the Ford Teacher Scholar Program. She is an active member and presenter at AIR, a member and past board member of her state's institutional research professional organization, a member and leader of AIR's Traditionally Black College and University special interest group, and a member of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, the Southern Association for Institutional

Research (SAIR), and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. She has received numerous institutional recognitions as well as AIR's Charles I Brown Award.

Martha, an administrative assistant, and some student employees make up her office staff. Office responsibilities include producing a fact book, responding to ad hoc information requests; reporting to federal, state, and accreditation agencies; administering a graduating senior survey; assists others on campus with surveys; and producing research briefs. The administrative assistant is responsible for data entry and data integrity edits, while Martha carries out the other responsibilities. She reports to a director of planning and evaluation as well as the college's academic vice president.

Linda. Linda has served as associate director of IR, director, executive director, and (currently) assistant vice president in a large, urban, private research university in the South for 23 years. She has also served as a statistical consultant at the university, a programmer in private industry, and instructor of statistics, and a research assistant, giving her 31 years total professional experience in higher education. She holds a bachelor's degree in mathematics, master's and doctoral degrees in quantitative psychology, and a master's degree in computer science. She has been a member, member of numerous committees, and past president of AIR, Southern AIR, and the Higher Education Data Consortium, a member and member of various committees for SCUP, CAUSE, the National Association of College and University Business Officers, the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, the National Center for Educational Statistics, and the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative; and a member of the Common Data Set Advisory Board. She has received the Outstanding Service Award from both AIR and SAIR.

Linda's office consists of herself, an assistant director, a systems specialist, three research analysts and an administrative assistant. The office carries out a broad range of internal and external reports, including all official enrollment, admissions, financial aid, retention, graduation, and human resources reporting; administers a battery of surveys with students and employee; provides dashboards for senior leaders; and manage ad hoc surveys and focus groups, external reporting, a fact book, school-level fact files, and enrollment projections. Linda's describes her role in the office as managing, attending meetings, checking results, and being proactive. She reports to a vice president for information technology.

Kim. Kim has been a director of institutional research at a comprehensive public university in the South for two years. She was previously employed as the director of a state higher education information system, director of management information and analysis at another institution, a management technician in a state system office, and a graduate assistant. Kim has nine years of professional experience in higher education. She is or has been a member of AIR, Northeastern AIR, Southern AIR, her state AIR affiliate, SCUP, and the Data Warehouse Institute. She holds bachelor's and master's degrees in psychology and is pursuing a doctoral degree in educational administration and leadership studies.

Kim's colleagues include an associate director, two programmer-analysts, two technical-clerical support staff, and an administrative assistant. The office serves as the university's official information source, carries out reports to state and federal agencies, responds to external surveys, administers surveys to students, carries out qualitative research with students, produces a fact book and academic department profiles, does

faculty salary and workload studies, and benchmarks institutional performance against that of peers. Kim reports to an associate provost. She sees her role as bringing vision to the office.

Marshall. Marshall has served in the roles of IR director, assistant vice president, and (currently) executive assistant to the president at a public doctoral university in the Midwest for eleven years. Previously, he served as a research analyst at another institution for two years. He has also been an admissions counselor and a faculty member, giving him a total of 19 years of professional experience in academe. He holds bachelor's and master's degrees in international relations and a doctoral degree in political science. He has 6 publications and 23 conference presentations, and has done several consulting activities. He is a member of AIR, the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE), his state institutional research group, SCUP, and several community organizations. He is a member and past president of the Consortium for Assessment and Planning Support, serves as a trainer for creative problem solving, and holds a Harvard Management Development Program certificate.

In addition to himself, the institutional research staff at Marshall's university consists of an associate director, an assistant director, two research analysts, a data manager, and two administrative assistants. Office activities include production of a factbook and analytic studies; administration of surveys; internal and external reporting; production faculty workload analyses, information for program review, academic department profiles; and supporting assessment, institutional effectiveness, and strategic planning activities. Marshall describes his role as translating strategic issues into institutional research projects and putting information in front of people.

Frank. Frank has served as the IR director at a public, comprehensive university in the Midwest for 19 years. He was also a research associate at another institution and a research associate at a state board of regents, giving him a total of 23 years of experience in institutional research. During his tenure at his university he has also served as the coordinator of a Title III grant. He has also served as an associate project director, instructor, and graduate assistant, giving him a total of 27 years of academic professional experience. He has a bachelor's degree in history and master's and doctoral degrees in higher education. He has 10 publications, 37 conference presentations, and experience doing consulting at numerous organizations. He is a member and has often been a committee member at AIR, ASHE, SCUP, CAUSE, the American Educational Research Association, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, and his state board of regents and institutional research organization. Frank is also a member of several community groups.

Frank's office colleagues include a half-time assessment coordinator, a full-time administrative assistant, one graduate assistant, and two student employees. The office is responsible for producing a factbook, internal and external reporting, carrying out a self-directed research agenda, coordinating university planning, coordinating and consulting about assessment of student learning, and serving on many committees. Frank reports to the vice president for academic affairs at his institution.

Susan. Susan has served as the IR director at a large, public university in the Midwest for 31 years, before which she served as assistant director and a research assistant, giving her a total of 34 years of experience in institutional research. She also served as an administrative assistant at another office at the same university, giving her a

total of 36 years of professional experience in higher education. She has an associate degree and bachelor's and master's degrees in accounting. She is the author of 34 publications and 49 conference presentations, and has carried out several consulting activities. She is a member and has been past president, past national conference chair, and member of numerous committees at AIR; co-founder of the Midwest Association for Institutional Research; member, committee member, and past national conference chair at CAUSE; member and past national conference chair for SCUP; and a member of ASHE and EDUCAUSE, and the American Society for Quality Control. She has received AIR's Distinguished Member and Outstanding Service Awards.

Susan's office is comprised of 15 headcount staff, including herself, an associate director, two assistant directors, eight analysts, a statistical and information officer, an assessment and survey coordinator, and an administrative assistant. The office coordinates university strategic planning and academic program review; provides a web-based departmental management information system; responds to internal and external data requests; carries out state and federal reporting; administers a broad program of surveys; coordinates and consults concerning assessment of student learning; carries out enrollment management, financial, workload, and salary analyses; and coordinates accreditation activities. Susan reports to the university's provost, who is the chief academic and operating officer.

Themes

The Meaning of Effectiveness in Institutional Research.

The overwhelming response to the question about what effectiveness means in institutional research was having the information produced considered in decision making. Each of the participants gave some variation of this response. Several noted, however, that other factors such as politics and personalities affect the decision process; directions implied by empirical information do not always hold sway. Susan referred to this as having one's institution be "data informed" rather than "data driven."

Somewhat related was the notion that it often takes quite a bit of time for the benefit of institutional research to be realized. Susan said:

I tell new staff when they come on board that you will see the impact of your work, but it may take a couple of years. The gestation period is quite lengthy. But if you stick around long enough, you'll see a particular analysis that you know has implications on how the University ought to think about creating new programs, eliminating new programs, or just helping them to chart their course. You'll see it. And that is probably what is most satisfying. I do think that for me that is the gage of effectiveness.

Most of the participants also stated or implied that having one's information used in decision making, while important, is really an instrumental goal; the ultimate benefit of the work follows the implementation of those decisions so that the institution can improve in some way. Martha, Frank, and Linda felt that helping students to succeed is an end product of institutional research that is particularly important and satisfying to them. Frank stated:

Anybody can report anything effectively. Anybody can fill out IPEDS forms.

What you need to ask yourself is if what you do makes a difference in the lives of the students and the campus. If you can answer yes to that, you are being effective. I'd die if all I did was fill out IPEDS forms, I'd literally die.

A final take on the meaning of effectiveness in institutional research was the very practical idea of doing whatever it is to make institutional leaders happy. This suggests that customers rather than practitioners of institutional research may be the best judges of effectiveness. It also introduces the often repeated comment that offices must continue to evaluate their ability to meet clients' needs. Susan illustrates this point:

The other thing that I always tell new staff is that we exist only because someone finds our work valuable. We are not paying people. We are not registering students. We are not paying the bills. We are not cleaning the offices. Our analytical work must be of a measure that people find valuable, or we don't exist.

Characteristics of Effective Practitioners.

The analysis of resumes and office activities and characteristics may have served more to illustrate the diversity of the participants than to point to the common hallmarks of their effectiveness. There was considerable diversity among them in terms of sex, race, age, longevity in the profession, number of institutional research positions held, educational backgrounds, office staffing, and reporting relationships. Only two commonalities were evident from the analysis of resumes and from observations. First, the magnitude and breadth of activities within all of the participants' offices was quite large. They did lots of work and lots of different work. "We do it all" was a phrase used several times to characterize their activities. Some of the participants even had

responsibilities not generally associated with institutional research, such as managing information technology, overseeing a testing center, and serving as the president's chief of staff. Interestingly, although there might be some relationship to institutional size, two- and three-person offices seemed to be engaged in as wide an array of activities as those with much larger staffs. The other commonality was a large degree of experience among the office staff. Kim, for example, although her professional experience in institutional research and in her current role specifically was relatively low as compared to most of the other participants, noted that her colleagues have over 70 years of combined experience.

Several categories of responses emerged in response to the question about what institutional researchers need to know, to be able to do, or to be like to be effective. The most often-cited of these was the need to understand institutional context, personalities, and processes. Susan noted:

Related to that is it depends upon the person receiving the information. I have worked for eight academic officers at least and I've worked from the extreme of "you do the analysis, but I want to get the data set" . . . to the other extreme of "give me the bottom line." So its sizing up your particular administrator and developing your responses according to what they best need and how far they want to dig down.

Henry discussed the need to understand the culture of higher education, to understand the impact of reporting and research, and to understand idiosyncratic decisions. He also stressed "being able to figure out how the place gets the job done" at one's institution:

You really need to develop an eye for process, which is something you really have to work to acquire in higher education. [For example] somebody in Registration years ago decided we're going to define this field that way and didn't think about what impact it had on everybody else.

Martha and Kim explained the importance of understanding the perspectives of multiple constituencies, realizing that multiple answers are possible to a given problem, and recognizing that people get defensive when institutional research is viewed as an interloper.

Closely related to the response of needing to understand context was the response concerning the need to build relationships and gain trust. Elizabeth offered the following:

Gauging how effective you are is [related to] how many people know about you. And I can tell you that everybody on this campus knows who I am. Why is that? Its because what we provide . . . is done in such a way that we end up serving everybody one way or another. . . . I am the type of person who is very outgoing. I know that some institutional research folks have the tendency to just sit in their offices and not interact too much, but the key is building relationships, and being out there, and being very responsive with quality stuff quickly. . . . I think effectiveness is related to being able to build relationships and gain trust, having your product on high demand and being used, and being able to make suggestions and being proactive rather than reactive, getting to know the operation of the college so well, and making suggestions in areas that people didn't think about.

Related to understanding people and processes and building relationships and trust was the idea of using the unique perspective available to institutional researchers to provide what Susan called “leadership from below.” The idea is develop the ability to slowly and quietly, but tenaciously and persuasively, work toward the institution’s best interests. Henry noted that “You try to find the points of influence. . . . You have to keep chiseling away at it.” He discussed “being an intermediary among the leadership to carry bad news forward.” Similarly, Susan stated:

A term I like to use a lot is fly below the radar. Its times I know I have moved information from one end of the administration building to the other . . . in a non-threatening way. I know it sounds trite, but I work for the greater glory of the University of _____. I’m a ___ alum, I care deeply about this place.

Several participants noted that understanding perspectives and context is facilitated by having frequent access to key people and being involved in high level activities (e.g., accreditation, strategic planning) than lend visibility to the office. Being visible, being in the right place at the right time to make important contributions, allows IR to demonstrate its usefulness. As Elizabeth stated:

Being part of the Cabinet makes me extremely effective because you know what is needed at the highest level and you understand what is expected. If you are at a lower level you may never know exactly what is needed. Reporting to the president is key and being part of Cabinet is tremendously helpful. It is also important to use this opportunity to contribute to show your value.”

Most of those interviewed listed key personal characteristics of effectiveness that might be considered traits of professionalism. These included being objective, creative, flexible, timely, accurate, logical, cooperative, and responsive; having a broad perspective, not sacrificing principles or ethical standards; being able to function under pressure; actively listening; knowing your own capabilities and biases; wanting to and having the ability to learn new things; constantly re-evaluate the role of the office; keeping up with best practices; having a network of colleagues; and being willing to embrace change. Several people also noted the importance of having a sense of humor; for example, Martha cited the need to

. . . smile when you are asked the same question the third time because you have lost the information that I gave you before.

Martha, Susan, and Linda also discussed the importance of maintaining project documentation, an activity calendar, and a procedures manual.

Both Martha and Susan discussed at length the importance of data integrity for effective IR. Martha referred to this as the need to “have a critical eye for data consistency,” and Susan stated:

Your work needs to be reliable, be credible, you need to be consistent. Obviously we like to do things flawlessly, but that realistically isn't going to happen, but you need to minimize because once you have set out a data set or an analysis you don't want to come back two days later and say “Oh, we had a big bust” and someone else has now acted and they have to step back. So we have a lot of processes in place to try to minimize that, but sometimes things still do happen. You have to know enough to say “this doesn't pass the test of reasonableness.”

Marshall and Susan explained that an important characteristic of effectiveness is having the ability to convey information effectively. Marshall stated: "I have built my career on an ability to portray information in meaningful ways." Susan offered the following:

Another aspect is to decide what is pertinent to a particular issue and don't bury people in data. That's not what they want. They need for you to get it processed, pull out the key things, and present it in a way that they can quickly assimilate it. Only a few of the participants noted the importance of what Terenzini (1993) calls technical/analytical skills. Martha and Kim discussed the need to be able to work with various types of computer software; Elizabeth volunteered the importance of accessing, manipulating, and analyzing data without the support of information technology colleagues outside of the office; and Kim commented upon understanding the epistemological bases of research approaches and their corresponding methodologies. Several persons noted that not everyone in a multi-person IR office needs to have the full compliment of technical/analytical skills as long as they are found overall among the staff.

Barriers and Opportunities.

Perhaps not surprisingly, several of the participants mentioned workload, handling multiple simultaneous requests for information, and not having adequate staff support as their greatest obstacles to effectiveness.

Lack of utilization of the products and services provided by the IR office was another barrier that was mentioned. This may be related to the barrier of lack of trust. In

both situations, participants volunteered that these problems take time, effort, and knowing the right approach to be able to overcome. Issues of campus politics and personalities were also part of this theme. Linda commented upon the difficulties of a prior leader's tendency towards secrecy and his "shoot the messenger" reaction. She also noted some offices purposely not following standard reporting methodologies so that they look better. Frank cited the problem of a leader who didn't believe in using information to make decisions. Henry noted that a barrier to having his office's work be used to a greater extent lied in the fact that the institution perceives itself as very successful and views IR as overly critical:

I really think that successful institutions are the ones that have the hardest job making a change. This place has never been in a crisis. . . . In 1997-98 we got 10 years of re-accreditation with a totally clean slate, we passed our levy with a 72% affirmative vote, and we were re-validated as a member of the League for Innovation in the Community College. Well, then, the [state] Performance Report came out and then they were like "what's IR trying to do here, throwing all this mud on our faces."

Marshall added the related barrier of lack of user sophistication, that is, leaders not knowing what to do with the information that institutional research supplies. He discussed the need for IR to move on from just being a provider of information to taking an educational role of working with leaders to act upon it. He noted that he does monthly seminars for department chairs.

Martha noted a barrier that was articulated by several participants: lack of data quality from cooperating offices such as Registrar, Academic Affairs, or Information

Technology. She also volunteered another dilemma that has important ethical implications: people asking her to do things that are beyond her capability.

Finally, both Linda and Susan said that moving the IR office to a less visible location on campus had led to an “out of sight, out of mind” situation that they combated by being highly visible in other locations.

Participants discussed both taking advantage of opportunities provided at their institutions as well as proactive strategies they have used to increase their effectiveness. Important opportunities included, as Elizabeth noted, “having a budget and the freedom to spend it as I like;” good support for involvement in professional development activities such as attending the AIR Forum, other conferences, and visiting other campuses; having friends and colleagues both on and off campus with whom to share ideas, experiences, and frustrations; and having good relationships with supervisors. Susan spoke about the opportunity to learn from mentors:

I’ve definitely been blessed by fabulous mentors. . . . Several of them have gone onto and are presidents of different universities. . . . They were all fabulous men. They included me from the very beginning in meetings and discussions. I had to be part of the conversation so I understood the thinking process. . . . So now I try to include my staff in conversations wherever I can because you have to be in the conversation to get how people think about things, to understand what the other tangential issues are that are not always easy to identify.

Several of those interviewed discussed actively working to build relationships with data custodians and with customers. Linda noted the importance of informal

contacts with faculty and staff members across campus. Marshall stated: “Building good relationships is absolutely essential for people to take to heart what the data say.”

It was noted earlier that several of the participants have been leaders in AIR and other professional associations at various levels. Elizabeth said that being a member and leader in such groups was “tremendously helpful in becoming more effective and in understanding how to become more effective.” Frank also said that being involved in consulting activities gives one a broader perspective.

Similarly, many of those interviewed discussed the importance of taking the initiative to be included in campus groups. Frank stated that “I wheedle my way into everything.” And Elizabeth took pride in declaring that “everybody knows me.” Susan described her habit of going out to lunch with various people every day as being helpful in sharing ideas, building trust, and connecting to others.

Another proactive strategy for effectiveness involved becoming a recognized expert in some IR-related specialty (such as environmental scanning for Frank and TQM for Susan); this broadens one’s perspective and garners respect.

Additional Suggestions for Improving Effectiveness in the Profession.

Several themes emerged in response to a final question about additional ideas for improving effectiveness in IR. Linda and Susan both discussed the critical need for institutional researchers to try to rise above the press of day to day demands and focus on critical issues that are most important to the institution so that we may have the greatest impact. Networking, continuing to learn new things, taking advantage of colleagues’ willingness to share, and continuing to evaluate the role of the office were mentioned in

one form or another by each of the participants; Elizabeth specifically suggested doing systematic, formal IR program reviews.

A last set of suggestions concerned professional development at a broad level. It was noted that more practitioners, especially new ones, need to become actively involved in the AIR network. Linda stated that AIR needs to focus on support for members as they progress through their careers. Marshall suggest that as a group IR should push for good research on important topics on a national scope such as financial aid and accountability. He and Frank also articulated that we need to collaborate among ourselves and with other higher education professional associations (e.g., ACE) that get the attention of presidents.

Discussion

The study added depth and richness to the existing literature about effectiveness in institutional research by means of collecting data from IR practitioners judged to be particularly effective by their colleagues. Effectiveness was defined by the participants as having the information produced by IR considered in decision making, although it was also recognized that other factors over which the institutional researcher has little or no control, such as politics and personalities, affect the decision process.

A large number of diverse activities and a large degree of experience among the office staff were commonalities found among effective institutional researchers. Also, the results confirmed Tenenzini's (1993) contention that contextual knowledge and skills (e.g., understanding of the institutional culture, history, politics, personalities, and the like) are critical for success in IR. Developing this set of knowledge and skills and cultivating relationships allows institutional researchers to establish and maintain trust.

Key personal characteristics of effectiveness listed by participants included being objective, creative, flexible, timely, accurate, logical, cooperative, and responsive; having a broad perspective, not sacrificing principles or ethical standards; being able to function under pressure; actively listening; knowing your own capabilities and biases; wanting to and having the ability to learn new things; constantly re-evaluate the role of the office; keeping up with best practices; having network of colleagues; being willing to embrace change, and having a sense of humor. Effective institutional researchers are also very concerned about data integrity and have developed the ability to convey information effectively. Important technical/analytical skills (Terenzini, 1993) were also noted, such as being able to work with various types of computer software and accessing, manipulating, and analyzing data independently.

As Delaney (2001) found, workload and lack of recognition served as barriers to effectiveness in IR. Other barriers included lack of utilization of the products and services provided by the IR office, lack of user sophistication, lack of data quality from cooperating offices, and the presence of the IR office in a low visibility location on campus. Opportunities that effective IR practitioners took advantage of and supports that they proactively developed included access to resources for professional development, attendance at conferences, visits to other campuses, developing a strong professional network (also noted by Delaney, 2000), access to institutional leaders (Huntington & Clagett (1991), mentoring (Delaney, 2001), becoming involved as members and leaders in campus groups and in professional organizations, and becoming experts in areas of specialization.

Finally, effective practitioners discussed the need for institutional researchers to rise above the press of day to day demands and focus on critical issues that are most important to the institution, the need to continue to learn new things, to take advantage of colleagues' willingness to share, and to continue to evaluate the role of the IR office. AIR was called upon to support practitioners' professional development throughout their careers, and to serve as a means for institutional researchers to interact with others in academe in important national policy issues.

While the results of this study are not intended to generalize to all institutional researchers or even to all those deemed particularly effective, they nevertheless provide some implications for practitioners and for those who impact their professional preparation. Just as many years of research about the effect of college on students has clearly determined that "What students do during college counts more in terms of desired outcomes than who they are or even where they go to college." (Kuh, 2001, 1), this study suggests that what institutional researchers do in their jobs is more important than their backgrounds, institutional settings, and prescribed tasks. Effective institutional researchers develop a keen understanding of people and processes and use this understanding to tailor their activities and disseminate them effectively (Augustine, 2001). They are involved in an abundance of activities, interact with a diverse array of people, and cultivate the variety of professional characteristics listed above. They overcome barriers by taking advantage of opportunities provided to them and proactively cultivating others. Strategies for those facilitating the preparation of institutional researchers include articulating the characteristics of effective IR, pairing aspiring and

new professionals with effective practitioners early and often, and assisting them with developing an ongoing capacity to gauge their own effectiveness.

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