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AUTHOR Nelson, Glenn M.; Ducanis, Alex J.
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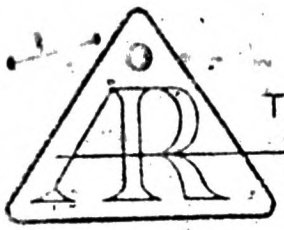
ABSTRACT

In an examination of institutional decision making, this study identified types of data used by college presidents in assessing their institution's stability and their perception of the comparative importance of various indicators purported to demonstrate the vital signs of an institution. Indicators were in the areas of Student Flow, Finance, and Personnel. Three rounds of the Delphi method were employed over a four-year period. Presidents were asked to indicate their assessment of the relative importance of each of the indicators using the following scale: high importance--3, moderate importance--2, low importance--1, and no importance--0. Mean scores and rankings were calculated for each informational subset within the three areas. Although the rankings according to highest mean values varied, the five highest rated items in each informational subset were consistent in each round with only minor exceptions. The data indicated that although the context in which decisions were made was changing, the indicators utilized by presidents to determine the vital signs of their institutions' stability changed little over the four-year period of the study. (Author/JMD)



THE ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

Robert H. Fenske
Arizona State University
(Editor, AIR Forum Publications)

PRESIDENTS' VITAL SIGNS:

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL DECISION MAKING

Glenn M. Nelson

Research Associate Professor

University of Pittsburgh

Higher Education Program

5S30 Forbes I Quadrangle

Pittsburgh, PA 15260

(412) 624-1383

and

Alex J. Ducanis

Professor

University of Pittsburgh

Higher Education Program

5S32 Forbes I Quadrangle

Pittsburgh, PA 15260

(412) 624-1382

ABSTRACT

This research analyzed a portion of the data essential to institutional decision making. The study identified types of data used by college presidents in assessing their institution's stability and their perception of the comparative importance of various indicators which are purported to demonstrate the vital signs of an institution. Indicators were in the area of Student Flow, Finance and Personnel.

Three rounds of the Delphi method were employed over a four-year period. Presidents were asked to indicate their assessment of the relative importance of each of the indicators using the following scale: high importance - 3, moderate importance - 2, low importance - 1, and no importance - 0. Mean scores and rankings were calculated for each informational subset within the three areas.

Although the rankings according to highest mean values varied, the five highest rated items in each informational subset were consistent in each round with only minor exceptions.

The data reflected the influence of Title IX regulations; however, did not reach the category of most important. The data indicated that although the context in which decisions were made was changing, the indicators utilized by presidents to determine the vital signs of their institutions' stability changed little over the four-year period of study.

PRESIDENTS' VITAL SIGNS:
IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL DECISION-MAKING

Introduction

This research analyzed a portion of the data essential to institutional decision making and identified those areas which were consistently utilized as well as those which reflected the changing context in which decisions were made. The study identified types of data used by college presidents in assessing their institutions' stability and their perception of the relative importance of various indicators which are purported to demonstrate the vital signs of an institution. Indicators were in the area of Student Flow, Finance, and Personnel.

The report which follows analyzes a fine slice of the data essential to an institutional planner and at the same time compares the importance of these data to college presidents as they approach the process of institutional decision making.

Data Source

In April of 1974, the Pennsylvania Association of Colleges and Universities (PACU) presented a program entitled "President's Portfolio." This research was originally designed as part of that program. PACU is an organization of 119 institutional members, public and private colleges and universities including two and four year institutions. Institutions whose college presidents participated in this research were all members of PACU.

Methodology

In order to obtain the presidents' perceptions, the Delphi Technique was employed. This technique is a systematic means of obtaining expert opinion and requires successive interrogations and feedback until consensus is reached or no change occurs. Although three rounds were completed during this study, the results from the first and third rounds will be emphasized.

The results from Round #2 are incorporated as part of the Delphi process; however, that Round's population differed slightly from the other rounds and was not appropriate for the longitudinal comparison.

The indicators utilized focused on the following perspectives: Student Flow, Finance, and Personnel. Each of these selected perspectives contained subsets as follows: Student Flow - admissions, continuing students, attrition, and housing; Finance - income and expenditures; and Personnel - faculty, administrative and professional noninstructional staff, clerical staff, and nonprofessional staff.

The presidents were asked to assess the relative importance of each of the indicators using the following scale: high importance - 3, moderate importance - 2; low importance - 1; and no importance - 0. Mean scores and rankings were calculated for each subset within the three areas.

Results

A total of 56 questionnaires were returned from the 118 distributed during Round #1, 47%. During Round #3, 39 returns were received from the 119 questionnaires, 33%. Overall 95 questionnaires were returned for an overall return rate of 40%, the majority of which were from smaller and medium size institutions.

Although no attempt was made to clarify the data according to institutional type, the intent being to identify data utilized by college presidents regardless of institutional type, it is important to recognize that certain types of data essential to a particular type of institution could be excluded. For example, at the end of Round #1 any item in a subset whose mean score was less than 1.50 was not included in Round #3.

As a result the items (30) in the Income and Expenditures subsets pertaining to research were dropped. Obviously, these data would be important to a major research university, but as a general indicator of institutional stability across institutional types, they were viewed as nonessential.

Selected data, therefore, were affected by their lack of general applicability across institutional types. Student housing is an example of this and although these items were not eliminated, the mean scores associated with them were lower due to the no importance rankings awarded them by non-residential institutions. The results reported in the selected perspectives and their respective subsets reflect the importance of the indicators across rather than specific to institutional types.

Part I - Student Flow

This area contained the following subsets: admissions, (30 items); continuing students, (14 items); attrition (11 items); and housing (25 items). Only 10 of the 76 items in this area achieved a mean score above 2.50. With respect to gender, 10 of the 18 items achieved a mean score above 1.50, although none of these were above 1.92. There were 11 items pertaining to minorities and their mean scores in Round #3 generally increased. Most of these items pertained to admissions where 4 of the 6 minorities items achieved a mean score greater than 2.00. These items concerned

number of paid registration deposits, financial aid applications, acceptance versus number of matriculants, and projected financial need for the entering class.

The mean rankings in each of the Student Flow subsets were essentially the same in Round #3 as they were in Round #1. In other words the highest five mean rankings did not vary although there were some minor changes within them. For example, items ranked 2 and 3 in Round #1 were ranked 3 and 2 in Round #3.

The only major change occurred in the Continuing Students subset. At the end of Round #1 a new descriptor was added, number of FTE students. This item was ranked 1 in Round #3 and the number of full-time students item, which had been ranked 1 in Round #1 was ranked 2 in Round #3.

Nine of the ten mean scores above 2.50 occurred in the indicator concerned with the overall enrollment picture, which also occurred in Round #1. The data reflected only minor changes over the four year period between Rounds #1 and #3 which suggests that the indicators utilized by presidents in the area of Student Flow were consistently applicable.

Part II - Personnel

This area contained the following subsets: faculty, (39 items); administrative and professional noninstructional staff, (23 items); clerical staff, (12 items); and nonprofessional staff (14 items). Within the 88 items contained in these four subsets, 10 items pertained to gender and 14 items pertained to minorities.

Overall nine items achieved a mean score above 2.50. With respect to gender, only 2 of the 10 items failed to achieve a mean score above 1.50.

These mean scores although generally low, with the exception of the faculty subset where 3 mean scores were 1.97 or higher, were slightly higher than they were in Round #1.

There were 14 items pertaining to minorities and although the mean scores for these items were generally higher than in Round #1, those considered most important were also in the faculty subset. The items with the highest mean scores for both gender and minorities in the faculty subset were the same: total number of faculty, total number of full-time faculty, and total number of full-time equivalent (FTE) faculty.

The ranking of the mean scores in each subset indicated only slight variation between Rounds #1 and #3. One change occurred in the faculty subset. In Round #1 the total number of faculty projected for the following year ranked 1; however, in Round #3 its ranking changed to 4-5. In Round #3 the total number of faculty and the total number of full-time faculty, which had been ranked 2-3 in Round #1, were ranked 1-2.

Another major change also occurred between Rounds. In Round #1 the third highest mean ranking was the projected number of staff budgeted for the following year. That item was ranked fifth in Round #3 and the third ranked item became the number of staff terminating employment in each of the three staff subsets.

In both rounds, with the exception of the faculty indicator already mentioned, current data were considered to be more important than projected data. It is important to note, however, that the current data indicators ranked 1 and 2 in Round #3 were also ranked 4 and 5, regarding projected data.

Another interesting dimension of the data in the Personnel area was that with few exceptions, the importance of indicators projected for the following year was ranked higher than the importance of these same indicators by department. The general pattern that emerged revealed that for any item it would be ranked in the following descending order of importance within each of the subsets:

Total Number of Current Personnel

Total Number of Personnel Projected for Next Year

Personnel Within Departments

Personnel by Rank/Grade Level

Minority Personnel

Personnel by Gender

For example see Table 1. This pattern was followed in all but five instances.

Part III - Finance

Income - This subset contained 26 items, 4 of which achieved a mean score above 2.50. The student tuition and fees item was by far the most important income item and received all four of the mean scores above 2.50. The three highest ranked items in both Rounds were identical: total amount of student tuition and fees in the current year, total amount of student tuition and fees projected for next year, and the percentage of student tuition and fees as part of total income.

The items in this subset also followed a pattern when compared across the relative importance indicators, although not as uniformly as in Round #1. With the exception of the governmental appropriations and the endowment income items, the income items followed the following descending order of importance:

Table 1

Personnel

Administrative and Professional Noninstructional Staff

Mean Scores for Rounds #1 and #3

Item	Relative Importance					
	Total	Projected For Next Year	Within Departments	By Administrative Rank	Minority	By Gender
1. Number of staff budgeted	2.73[a] 2.89	2.49 2.35	2.10 1.88	1.80 1.94	1.66 1.78	1.53 1.67
2. Number of staff actually employed	2.80 2.84	2.33 2.18	2.22 2.20	1.86 1.94	1.98 1.81	1.82 1.65
3. Number of staff terminating employment	2.27 2.39	1.90 1.89	1.80 1.83	1.61 1.81	1.45 1.75	
4. Number of staff being terminated[b]	2.05	1.64	1.70	1.62	1.45	1.44

[a]Round #1 mean scores precede Round #3 mean scores.

[b]Item added after Round #1.

Note: Rating Scale

3 high importance
2 moderate importance
1 low importance
0 no importance

A full report of the data is available upon request.

Total Amount Received

Income Projected for Next Year

Percentage of Total Income

The exception items reversed the top two rankings. In all instances income generated by departments was considered to be of low importance.

Expenditures - This subset contained 65 items, 31 of which had a mean score 2.50 or higher. The highest ranked item in both rounds was the total amount of expenditures for faculty salaries. In Round #3 the five highest mean scores, in descending order of importance were:

Total Expenditures for Faculty Salaries

Total Expenditures for Instruction and Departmental Research

Amount Budgeted for Faculty Salaries

Amount Projected for Faculty Salaries for Next Year

Amount Budgeted for Instruction and Departmental Research

With the exception of the highest ranked item, none of these items ranked this high in Round #1. Although there were not many changes in the items ranked 2.50 or higher on the two rounds, the priorities in this subset reflected the greatest priority variations.

In Round #3 the six highest rated mean scores pertained to total instruction and departmental research, and total faculty salaries. With the exception of the total expenditures for faculty salaries, the highest rated mean scores in Round #1 pertained to total library expenditures, total expenditures for general institutional expense, total expenditures for faculty and staff benefits and total expenditures for student aid from institutional funds.

Of these, only the item pertaining to total expenditures for general institutional expense ranked highly (7) and the item pertaining to student aid had a mean score less than 2.50.

Although minor exceptions occurred, a general pattern emerged regarding the relative importance of expenditures items. Each of the items tended to be ranked in the following descending order of importance:

Total Current Expenditures

Amount Budgeted for Current Expenditures

Expenditures Projected for Next Year

Percentage of Total Expenditures

Expenditures by Department

This pattern was generally consistent with the exception of the amount budgeted and projected for next year ratings of importance. These ratings exchanged places almost equally among the items investigated. Other than these ratings, there were only two other exceptions to the pattern. Once again, the ratings by department were of the least importance to the presidents.

Conclusions

The data in each of the three areas and their respective subsets indicate that although the context in which decisions were made was changing, the indicators utilized by presidents to determine the vital signs of their institution's stability changed little over the four year period of the study.

While it would seem reasonable to assume that the new federal regulations, specifically Title IX, would have had some effect upon the ratings of the

personnel indicators dealing with minorities and gender, they evidently did not since these indicators continued to rate almost as low in 1977 as they did in 1974. Within the Student Flow area, the minority and gender item ratings also remained substantially the same in both rounds. However, the items pertaining to minorities generally increased and were rated higher than the items pertaining to gender.

The only other area which reflected a change in decision making was expenditures where only the highest ranked mean, total expenditures for faculty salaries, remained the same. It would appear that in light of the current fiscal situation the presidents have focused on total expenditures for instruction and departmental research as well as faculty salaries as a vital sign for their institutions.

Within the Personnel and Finance areas items that reflected the institution's current situation from a total perspective were viewed as the most important. Those same items in terms of projections for the following year were of the next greatest importance. In other words, these items were perceived by the presidents as being the most important in determining their institution's stability.

Information pertaining to departments in the Personnel area was of the next greatest importance following the data which would yield a picture of the total current situation. Although this type of a choice didn't exist in the Finance area, departmental data, both in terms of income and expenditures, was of the least importance. It would appear that perhaps more attention needs to be given to departmental income and expenditures in arriving at an accurate picture of an institution's financial vital signs.

Perhaps most important to the institutional research person is that the pattern of data which presidents say they find most useful for decision making has not changed appreciably in the past four years.