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First, Get Their Attention: Getting Your Results Used

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Abstract

Fostering data-driven decision-making is not an easy task, nor is getting busy people's attention in this age of information overload. How we write about and disseminate our findings can help. Writing to the audience, timing, formatting, choice of medium, and connecting results to institutional goals and current, even controversial, issues are keys. This paper offers suggestions and examples from a former journalist turned institutional researcher.

First, Get Their Attention: Getting Your Results Used

Busy schedules, data skeptics, lack of access to decision-makers, and time constraints are some of the many issues and obstacles IR professionals contend with in seeing their data and research findings used for decision-making, planning, and improvement. And yet, knowing that our work is valued and influences the organization is what makes the job worth doing.

Some of these obstacles are inherent in today's world, the academy, the nature of complex decision-making, and individual decision-makers' personalities, preferences, and disciplinary background. But some aspects of our own training and temperament affect this as well. To get data and research used, we need to examine our own expectations and preferences as well as learn to size up an audience, strategize ways to fulfill our purpose, and make

our work match decision-makers' needs. In doing so, we not only increase the chance that our results will be used, but we build the value of our office and promote the benefits of institutional research.

The suggestions and examples in this paper are intended to help institutional researchers get data and research used and, consequently, raise the visibility and influence of IR. The first section addresses the value of clearly understanding the purpose for a particular project, being able to size up an audience, and tailoring presentations to its needs. Next, advice is offered for how to create knowledge rather than simply supply data. Since, for many people, writing is an aversive task, tips for how to get the words on paper and writing strategies that engage readers may ease the pain. The next step is dissemination, focusing on choosing the medium and timing for maximum effect. Finally, rather than waiting and hoping to be asked to help solve a problem, strategies for making opportunities for IR to contribute are considered.

Know Thyself (and Thy Campus)

It's easy in the academy, to believe that everyone understands technical jargon and expects scholarly documentation and presentation of research. Consequently, IR professionals—in addition to being trained to write in this manner—can believe that to be respected and have their work accepted they must present it according to scholarly standards. However, like the rest of the world, academe contains a wide range of audiences with different educational backgrounds and different purposes for using data and research findings. We increase the likelihood that our findings will interest others and be used by them when we tailor our presentations accordingly.

Our work is primarily applied, not theoretical. Generally, our reports are used not for scholarly investigation, but to address specific problems or concerns about which an executive, manager, or faculty group needs to make a decision. Often, the

analyses have to be done quickly, and the results will be given to people who are multi-tasking or have many decisions to make on a variety of issues. The scholarly model of presentation, designed to display methodology and allow critique, suggestions, and methodological discussion, usually doesn't match this situation. Scholarly writing is established to facilitate others evaluating and critiquing the research being done in order to develop knowledge in a discipline. Usually, decision-makers don't want or need to evaluate our work. They want to get to the bottom line so they can focus on what to do.

Certainly, there are times when presenting explicit, detailed methodology is necessary or beneficial, for example, if an issue is controversial or likely to be challenged or if the research will be disseminated to a broad range of people for ongoing discussion and investigation. Under these conditions, displaying the methodological and statistical details of the study can help assure trust and confidence. In most cases, institutional research is trusted. If this is the case on your campus, take it as a compliment and use the latitude it allows to focus on alternative forms of presentation. It should go without saying that solid research and analysis is always imperative. Its details just need not always be explicit.

To maximize the likelihood that institutional research products will be used, IR professionals must understand the differing backgrounds and needs of their audiences and be able to target their written and oral presentations accordingly. To do this, ask yourself the following questions when thinking about packaging your findings.

What Is Your Purpose?

Is it to open lines of communication, prompt discussion, correct a misperception, influence a decision, raise a new issue, gain or broaden understanding of a known issue, to teach, to change, to build consensus, to show what's working or what isn't?

What Goals or Issues Do Decision-makers Care About?

How well do you know your campus goals and broader higher education issues? How well do you know the major decision-makers on your campus? Do you know who they are? Do you know how they prefer to make decisions? Do they have a quantitative background? What issues are they most passionate about? What university goals or issues fall into their areas of responsibility?

What Information Do They Need to Help Make a Decision?

Knowing the issues, goals, and decision-makers, can you see the issue from their perspective? What would they need to consider when making a major decision? Not everything they need to take into account will be quantitative. Other factors may involve political considerations, equity, balancing competing demands, etc. Of those information needs, which ones can IR answer?

Who Is Your Audience?

Who needs to know about your findings? Who can act on them? Who requested the study?

When you know your purpose for any particular project, what you want the research or analysis to accomplish, and who cares about this particular issue or who needs to know about it, you have the necessary information to think strategically about the best ways to get your results used. Additionally, if you know the issue well enough to be able to recognize its multiple dimensions, you have the information needed to see implications and make recommendations if you choose, or if requested to do so. Although researchers disagree about taking this step in their reports, and institutional cultures and supervisors differ in their expectation or acceptance of such, drawing conclusions is a common part of research. To the extent you can do this, institutional research becomes more influential and, ultimately, more useful to decision-makers.

Developing these strategies and using them to shape your reports increases their utility. And it changes the role of the IR office from data compiler to knowledge creator.

Think and Act Strategically

Self-knowledge and knowledge of your campus and higher education issues give you a foundation for thinking strategically. The next steps are focusing your projects, targeting your audience, and tailoring your report to match so that readers can easily grasp the central points and recall them when thinking through their decisions.

Find a Focus

Explicitly connect your data, research, or assessment findings to institutional issues or goals. I frequently see survey results presented as table after table of descriptive statistics for nearly every item on the instrument. If any narrative is included at all, it simply states a trend or difference evident in the data. The narrative does not offer context or link the finding to other findings. Few people can absorb this amount of data and make sense of it without a considerable investment of time. Many lack the quantitative background or institutional context to make anything of it at all. Fact Books, though intentionally provided as a reference source, can be difficult to use for these reasons as well.

Try a different approach. Develop multiple short, tightly focused reports based on a portion of the items in these large data sets and analyze or present them in the context of a campus issue. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and most standardized surveys lend themselves well to this approach. For example, using NSSE data, and the companion Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), we developed a two-page brief on the types of pedagogies used by Fresno State faculty. This report's purpose was to provide baseline data for the university's goal of increasing the number of faculty and classes using pedagogies that stimulate

engagement. To contribute additional information to faculty workload analyses, we developed a two-page brief, using NSSE and FSSE data, which shows how faculty members spend their class time. Other portions of these survey data were used in this manner as well.

When writing such reports, explicitly connect the findings to the goal, issue, or intent. Don't leave it to the reader to figure out what in their world relates to these data or why the data might be important or useful to them. Tell them. Tell them in the title, if possible, or in the first paragraph, and, as appropriate, throughout the report. Making the connection clear might seem like an obvious need, but it is easy to forget to do. For example, our team developed a short report around a particular issue, and even as cognizant as we were of the issue, we became so absorbed in the intricacies of the data that we forgot to relay the context to readers. We were able to remedy the situation because the report was posted online rather than distributed via hard copy, but it illustrates how easy it is to communicate just data while failing to communicate in a way that shares knowledge.

Targeting Your Audience and Tailoring Your Report

In most cases, your audience may be an audience of one—the person who requested the data. Even so, it's important to understand the best way to provide those data to maximize utility and ease of use. It helps spread the word that the IR office is accessible, and that, ultimately, contributes to its value to the institution. So, if you don't know the requester's preferences for the output format, ask. I've seen tables with so many dimensions, it's nearly impossible to answer any question from it directly. Unless the data are needed in such micro form, it usually is clearer and easier to use if presented in a set of two, at most three, dimensional tables.

If a project isn't specifically requested, and you are producing it proactively, stop and consider who would care about the issue. Is it relevant to curriculum, or to a particular college or department? If so, then provide it to the Provost, the college Dean, Associate Dean, Department Chair, and possibly the faculty either in that department or the Academic Senate leaders, depending on the breadth of the issue or level of goal it supports (institution, college, or department). What about analyses of student attrition? Who is interested? On our campus, this would be the President, Vice President for Student Affairs, Provost, and a host of managers and faculty who comprise the Student Success Task Force that has been implementing student success initiatives for the last seven years. What about analyses of first-generation students? On our campus, this one has been used by executives, fundraisers, university communications, outreach, student support programs, faculty in their classrooms, and reporters for the student newspaper. Match your project to the people who care about it and who could use it for carrying out their responsibilities.

Writing Strategies

Following are a few tips to help you think about ways to write that get readers' attention and engage them. I've included a few tips that may make getting the words on paper easier as well. These suggestions are not intended to be exhaustive, but are some I have found particularly useful in this field and that help me enjoy writing.

Titles Are Critical

A title creates the first impression. It can make readers decide the report is worth their time to read or it isn't. There are numerous ways to create titles that capture interest. Asking a question is a great way to hook readers. Few of us can resist looking for the answer, especially if the question is a relevant, interesting, or challenging one. For example: "Freshmen Retention: Who Stays and Who

Goes?" In higher education, this is an enduring question. Retention and graduation rates are the most commonly used measures of student success. Another question title "Why Do Freshmen Leave Our University?" makes it clear the topic is relevant and important not just in general, but to a particular campus community. Freshmen are not just leaving; they're leaving "our" university. Such a title makes the finding personal for anyone who feels a sense of belonging or pride in their college or university. Why would students do that, they wonder? And so they read on.

An "attention grabber" title might proclaim an unusual or startling finding. Or, maybe you approached an old topic in a new or unexpected way in your research or interpretation of findings. Say so in the title. But be specific and brief. Detail, rather than generalities, brings words to life. Remember, a title isn't supposed to tell the whole story. Its purpose is to identify the topic and pull the reader into the article or report.

Scholarly journal articles typically use long titles, often with a subtitle following a colon. For instance, "From Retention to Satisfaction: New Outcomes for Assessing the Freshman Experience" or "A Longitudinal Study of the Retention and Academic Performance of Participants in a Freshmen Orientation Course." These kinds of titles identify the topic of the report, but don't imply that leisurely reading follows. We would expect a display of methodological rigor and formal presentation of findings.

Shorter, less jargon-laden titles can be used for internal reports. For example, "An Analysis of First-Year Freshmen Retention" or "Freshmen with Lower HS GPA More Likely to Drop Out." The first identifies the subject succinctly. Anyone who is especially interested in freshmen retention or who needs to know more about it is likely to read this report. The second report title highlights a finding and states it in lay terms. Few people outside of higher education refer to student "retention." They say students drop out, leave, or stay in school. A paper with this title

may attract the attention of high school counselors and college admissions officers (although the finding will be obvious to them). It may attract the interest of student government or reporters. This title feels fresher than the others and it hints at an easy read.

In summary, choose a title that matches the tone of the narrative that follows, the image you want to present, and the audience, to assure receptivity. Some documents you provide will be best suited to a scholarly title; others more journalistic titles. A style that is too colloquial may put off some readers or even undermine credibility if used inappropriately. You will never please everyone though, and crossover exists in any audience, so choose based on your understanding of the primary audience characteristics.

Don't Waste Your First Paragraph

Once past the title, readers' interest must be fed by the first couple of sentences. Usually, this is not the place for explication of methodology. If you must, include only the bare minimum or refer the reader to the full study or to an appendix for more detail. For instance, short papers may start out like this:

An analysis of first-time freshmen and new undergraduate transfer students was conducted to examine the ratio of native to non-native students.

Or, it could start like this:

A common misperception on campus is that the majority of our new students are transfer students. In fact, it's just the opposite (Table 1). The Fall 2011 new student cohort was 60% freshmen and 40% transfer.

The second approach captures the reader with a statement that something they thought was true, isn't. They will want to know what the truth is, or want to see what the report is saying so they can challenge the finding. Either way, it gets their attention. And they are likely to read on if they

want to know why this misperception exists or what else they might learn that they thought they already knew. Also, the second approach replaces the passive statement that a study was done with a more immediately interesting statement of results. Given time constraints and the volume of material crossing our desk, readers are most likely to attend to or at least scan the beginning of reports to decide what merits their attention. Place your most important information based on that knowledge.

Methodological/Technical Notes

Decision-makers trust you. They hired you to do this work and trust that you are using appropriate research and statistical methods. So just give them what they need from your research to make a decision or discuss implications or potential directions. Participate in the discussion if you can. Informed, objective information and suggestions from a professional who has no agenda other than finding a solution or assuring credible information can be invaluable to someone trying to sort through a myriad of opinions from a variety of sources, most of which represent competing interests or perspectives.

If the institutional culture in which you work, or the type of report you are writing, requires extensive methodological or technical detail, do so in a way that is unobtrusive. For example, include a methodology section as an appendix. Another possibility is, instead of a full section, use "methodological notes" to show only issues that research-trained readers might question. Consider placing this at the end of the paper, rather than the beginning. A common practice is to introduce a long report with an executive summary that focuses on findings. An executive summary only mentions the minimum of methodology (such as the fact that the data came from a survey of a particular population) and refers the reader to the full report for methodological detail. Instead, it focuses on providing an encapsulated statement of the problem or issue under consideration and

the findings or recommendations. It is intended to provide a brief, accurate summation of the significant details. Findings can be bulleted so that the summary is no more than one page. To that document, attach your full-length report.

Resist the need to qualify everything. Decision-makers need to decide. They may never feel they have enough information, but they have to decide anyway. Don't contribute to uncertainty. If you are uncertain, tell them what specific research still needs to be done. This helps clarify the areas of uncertainty and allows people to determine whether they can make a decision based on the current data or whether further research is feasible or worthwhile. Remember though, uncertainty is unlikely to ever be completely eliminated. Decisions often have to be made based on incomplete data and information. Researchers can reduce their value and even stop being asked for input if their answer is too frequently, "it depends," or "more research is needed."

Create a Picture

Create a picture with words. Use graphic illustrations as necessary, but words too can convey a picture if appropriate choices and arrangements are made. As an example, when writing an executive summary, rather than simply listing a bulleted set of findings, think about how you order them. Do so in a way that they either build on each other, fit into topic-related groups, or begin with the most crucial results at the top of the list. Using these methods, you move the readers' attention in a way that helps them put the pieces together to see an overall picture. Then, you have created knowledge. From this new knowledge, discussion can ensue.

Interpreting data and making recommendations helps create a picture as well. When you have investigated an issue enough to know what the findings mean, tell people. Say it in your report or oral presentation. If there are other interpretations, likely you will have already ruled those out and so can respond if an alternative is put forward by

someone in the audience. What you are showing when you do this is a picture, an image people can comprehend more clearly than a series of abstractions. Don't leave it to them to try to connect the dots and draw a conclusion on their own. By making recommendations, we move the audience a step further. People can then imagine action and consider the implications.

Yet another way to create a picture is to weave together findings from multiple studies. Over time, IR offices do so many projects that numerous dimensions of an issue get analyzed, often disparately since each may have been done originally for a distinct purpose or may have been requested by different people. Notice connections between these projects. Then put the pieces together to show people a rich reality. Perhaps one that was previously unrecognized.

One area in which we did this is with data on African American students. Our university is highly diverse, and various people ask for demographic data for a wide range of purposes. Eventually, between descriptive requests at different times, retention studies, graduation data, an analysis of academic probation and disqualification, and research into the upper division writing requirement, a pattern emerged. African Americans were falling behind in so many places, even among upper division students, that it made me question why. Examining entering preparation levels added support to an advisor's theory that African American students come in less prepared and never catch up. Showing this set of findings to the Provost, I was asked to present them to our Student Success Task Force and facilitate discussion of the issue. Converging evidence from multiple studies is very powerful. It creates a picture that is difficult to ignore.

Break It Up

Sometimes a long report is necessary. For instance, budget, workload, and performance data often require large, dense tables or extended,

complex narrative, and there is not much way around it. When this is the case, use headers and subheaders. Make sure the headers and subheaders are clear and highlight aspects of the paper readers are likely to be seeking. Organizing a report this way allows the reader to quickly get the gist of the content. It directs their attention to specific elements of the report and facilitates their ability to pick out only the part they need at the time they need it or that they have time to review.

Headers and subheaders allow readers to move easily between ideas. When long reports are necessary, usually the issues being addressed are multifaceted. Readers may need to comprehend the problem and its ramifications, think about various possibilities for resolving it, and take into account budget considerations and constraints related to different action plans. Headers and subheaders facilitate comparisons between these different aspects of a problem because people can quickly identify and locate the particular component needed at any point in a discussion. Knowing how the reader will use the document helps determine the content and style of headers. In other types of long papers, readers may need to understand a complex problem. In this case, headers and subheaders help them see at a glance the logical progression of an argument. People can more easily follow the logic when it is broken down into components or steps.

Using graphics and formatting styles such as vertical or horizontal bars, indentions, and off-setting quotes or particular findings can help a long report feel more fluid and easier to follow. The report will appear more accessible when readers encounter it, and that is more likely to get them started reading.

Multiple Audiences: Multiple Styles or Formats?

What if there are multiple audiences? Do you have to do multiple reports in different styles? Sometimes, for maximum effect, you do.

I have used this approach numerous times. For instance, the issue of academic challenge is a complex one—to define, to measure, and to influence. When asked to examine this issue, I knew any discussion of it would be long-term, and involve multiple constituencies and ongoing studies. Consequently, findings from my first foray into the data were initially presented in a 13-page report provided to the campus community and posted on the Institutional Research, Assessment and Planning (IRAP) website. A four-page report focusing on a portion of the findings was presented to the Dean's Council for discussion, and a two-page synopsis and PowerPoint presentation was presented to Department Chairs for discussion and planning at their retreat. Each of these groups had access to the full report, but paring it for presentation to them helped focus on components about which they were likely to have the most knowledge or over which they were likely to have the most control. Additionally, after the Chairs' Retreat, I added a link to a YouTube video called to the web version of the report. A brief and impressive visual, it adds immediacy and living reality to the findings shown on paper.

Another reason you may want to use multiple presentation styles is to assure credibility. A paper that sounds too colloquial or contains minimal methodological detail may not carry enough weight with faculty, especially if the group includes people with science or other quantitative backgrounds or if the issues or findings presented are contentious or controversial. Another circumstance in which this approach may be important is when you are new on the job or establishing your credibility. These are situations you can only judge by knowing the culture of your institution and the people for whom you are doing the research. In my experience, balancing accessibility and credibility has not been problematic, but I have heard from others for whom it has been. We must always be cognizant of the need for both.

Getting It on Paper

Sometimes, getting started writing can be tough. The cursor blinks on a blank white screen and trying to force words to come often results in stiff, awkward, lifeless writing. Here are some of the techniques I use to get going and bring the words to life.

- For an early draft, write quickly, as if you were talking to someone and telling them an interesting story or tidbit of information you just learned. Don't worry about spelling or grammar or citations. Just get the basic words on paper. Don't judge it while you're writing it.
- Use active voice. Active voice brings the narrative alive. It makes the information feel more immediate and conversational.
- Use short sentences and vary sentence lengths. Long, densely arranged sentences and paragraphs demand time and attention from the reader to get the point. Sometimes they never do. And for the writer, a short sentence focuses thinking. It makes very clear to us what point is important and what we wish to say.
- Resist the need to qualify statements. Research training and our intimate knowledge of the idiosyncracies of data prompts us to hedge what we say, sometimes to the extent that decision-makers feel uncomfortable using our results or even talking to us. In written work, qualifying what we say slows down the communication and drains the power from statements and questions. It has the same effect on the writer.
- Play. Do something to put yourself in a silly mood. This "lightening up" can broaden thinking, spark creativity, and get the words flowing.

Disseminating Results

Once you have matched your project to a targeted audience and put the words on paper, the next step is to determine the best way to provide the report. That may be a single data table, a technical report, a brief, an executive summary, a memo, an e-mail, orally, online, or via any one or combination of formats and distribution media. Data may be received differently based on the medium that is used. Timing too can influence the way attention is given. Our choices in these areas will affect the impact of our data and research.

Medium Matters

When is it best to send data out in hard copy, e-mail, on the web, or through an oral presentation? When is a full-length technical report, a memo, an executive summary, a bulleted list, or a brief the best approach?

There is no hard and fast rule to guide decisions. It's a matter of judgment based on all that's been presented so far in this paper. But, consider these possibilities. In the age of e-mail, memos carry weight. They are formal and targeted to a specific person or group. When I receive a memo, it rises to the top of my mail stack and gets an immediate read. But, use it too often, and that effect will dissipate. Therefore, I save memos for serious or potentially controversial topics, for information I prefer to provide privately to people who might be affected by the findings before I release them generally, or for issues that I believe will be best absorbed by focused attention. The use of memos and the way they are perceived likely varies considerably across institutions. How are memos used at your campus? Knowing this will help you decide if and when a memo would be the most effective dissemination method.

Another factor that can influence the choice of dissemination method is the number of people who need to know about the findings. In a large

institution, sending out hard copies of reports to everyone who may have some interest can be time-consuming and expensive. For just this reason, we considered publishing our annual fact book online only. This was not a popular idea. Although all data in this book are on the IRAP website, our administrators prefer this hard copy reference manual be at hand when they need it. We use hard copy reports sparingly, providing them to the President, Provost, other Vice Presidents, if relevant to them, and occasionally to members of university-level faculty committees or specific managers. More often, reports go to the specific requester via e-mail with a Word, Excel, or pdf attachment, or we post them to our website with an e-mail announcement to the campus community and targeted listservs.

I use e-mail and the web often. But if you do, keep in mind the need for crispness and brevity. For instance, if you send an e-mail announcing a new study with a subject line "new IRAP study" or "Check out IRAP's latest report on the web," don't expect the hit meter to jump. Subject lines (i.e., titles) must be snappy and enticing. Otherwise, they will never survive the e-mail flood, even if you tag them with the little red exclamation point. When disseminating findings via e-mail, use bullets. Make them few and short. Readers scan e-mails. They do not absorb information or pick up subtleties. Nor do they finish long e-mails. In an e-mail, there is no time for build-up. No time for methodology. The facts only please, and few of them. An advantage of e-mail is that the message can be conversational, even colloquial to some extent. This kind of communication can help make the IR office approachable to those who might not ordinarily use its services.

At times, multiple dissemination methods may be most viable. For instance, providing a report, synopsis of a report, or a bulleted list of findings via hard copy or e-mail attachment to a group of people who will be the audience for an oral presentation of the research gives them time in

advance to grasp the gist of your topic. To the extent that they review this material, the oral presentation goes more quickly and discussion is more fruitful.

As mentioned previously, a full-length technical report may be the best option if an issue is likely to be controversial or hashed out through the course of several discussions. This detail allows participants the opportunity to review the study, gain confidence in the findings, offer feedback and suggestions for modification or additional investigation, and bring the intimate knowledge of their background and role in the university to interpretation of the data and discussion.

Timing Is Critical

IR professionals must be aware of routine academic cycles, agendas of major meetings, and campus events and controversies and then time the release of reports for maximum effect or to avoid being lost in the competing demands for attention. Data are needed when discussions are occurring or decisions are being considered, not afterward. Provide the information before they know they need it, or right when the issue arises. Being attuned to campus issues and the data or research you have on hand, or could develop quickly, helps you respond “just in time.” Consequently, IR gets noticed and its contributions recognized.

Timing is especially crucial when using e-mail rather than hard copy or web postings. Remember, the delete key is close at hand, and most of us are skimming sender names and subject lines. Messages are easy to miss. Again, know the cycles on your campus. During crunch times, save the keystrokes. In the first and last couple weeks of the semester, forget general e-mailings. Specifically targeted mailings to individuals may get results, but more likely those messages will get stored for future review, and that may never happen. Think about daily cycles as well. Do you know when key individuals usually read and respond to their e-mail? If so, use this knowledge to your advantage.

Watch for Opportunities; Make Them When Necessary

IR professionals need to promote the work of their office in order to become familiar faces on campus and develop trust, to share as much knowledge as possible about campus issues, to get results used, and to build and demonstrate the value of an IR office. Often this happens through the routine course of our work. But sometimes we have to look for openings to make known what we do.

Take advantage of opportunities as they arise. If invited to present findings or bring data to a meeting, attend. Be sure you can contribute, that your presentation matches the audience, and that you engage them rather than put them to sleep. You want to be invited back. You want them to spread the word, so others will send invitations as well. Other opportunities may be less obvious. For instance, instead of writing an introduction to our annual fact book that includes new tables, refinements, or even trends in the data, I related the data to goals in our strategic and academic plans. This approach helped bring our goals to readers’ attention and put data that are normally for reference into a broader context. And when accreditors arrive on campus—evidence exists that we are connecting our work to goals, tracking progress, and implementing changes.

Make your own opportunities. Be proactive. If you know a decision is pending, or might be soon, provide the people involved with relevant data. Find out what committees on campus would have some interest in projects you are working on and ask to be put on the agenda. Think about using data or research you already have available in ways other than its original purpose. Develop analyses and reports based on the institution’s strategic or academic goals and disseminate them widely. This approach makes the campus community aware that such goals exist, lets them know how successful the institution is, and may stimulate them to question how they contribute to those goals.

Have some fun. To introduce one of IRAP's projects, I developed a quiz in the form of an IRAP brief and posted it on the web with links to the answers. Based on e-mail responses and hallway commentary, people enjoyed it and accepted the challenge. At another institution, I needed to increase awareness of the requirement to assess effectiveness and spur managers and faculty to evaluate their areas. As part of developing an online mini-journal that would document assessment efforts and findings, I invited this very creative campus community to help me name the publication. I extended the offer via general campus e-mail and offered \$50 to the person whose submission most closely matched the intent of the journal and was the most creative. I received a few hundred submissions, named the journal, rewarded and recognized the winner, and both he and I received praise and laughing comments for a long time after. This high-profile launch spurred journal article submissions as well.

Be assertive. Prompt discussion. You may need to collaborate with others to do this, if you don't have venues or authority to facilitate discussion. And, you definitely need to know your institution's executives and consider the issues it may raise or action it may require of them. Alert them. Share your reasoning for the need for discussion with them. Ask their advice. Request that they take the lead or prepare an opening for you to present your work.

Don't be afraid to contribute to a controversial issue (if you have relevant data or research). IR professionals should not be afraid to put their work out in the middle of a storm. But we must do it strategically. We must think about how our data fit in, who the best person or group is to receive it and when. Such conscious choices are necessary in order to use data both appropriately and most effectively.

Build Value/Create Need

You don't have time to do this, you say? Taking the time can make the difference between being an institutional reporting shop and an institutional

research shop. It does take more time to think through, focus, and strategically target and write reports than to pump out data tables or statistical software output or graphs and pass them along. But, the payoff is worth it. When our results get used, the ramifications can ripple.

An approach I recommend is to choose a high visibility project. Select an issue that is important to an executive or your supervisor or that has wide recognition among campus groups. Spend as much time as you need working it through, thinking about implications, and placing the data in context. Then target it and launch. If feedback isn't forthcoming, follow up. Ask if the project was useful. Ask why or why not. If it didn't get their attention, it may be time to find a job elsewhere. If it did, ultimately, they'll ask for more. When they do, you can make your case for staffing, contractors, shifting reporting responsibilities elsewhere, or whatever will help you give them more of what you've shown them they need.

Author

Christina Leimer is Associate Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness at California State University, Fresno. She is a former journalist with 15 years of experience as a newspaper reporter, editor and freelancer for regional and national magazines. During her 16 years in institutional research, she has drawn on this experience to make IR products accessible to multiple audiences, thereby prompting discussion of results, occasional action, and lots of praise for the user-friendliness of her work.

Additional Resources

Bagshaw, M. (1999, Winter). Teaching institutional research to the learning-inhibited institution. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 26, 73–82.

This article uses individual and organizational learning theory to discuss why colleges and universities fail to learn from institutional research. It offers suggestions for how IR professionals can make inroads such as connecting their research with the resolution of problems; using the knowledge generated to create meaning and relevance for individuals and the institution; matching the interests of specific individuals with particular IR projects; focusing presentations; thinking strategically about how to use IR products; distinguishing learning opportunities; and proactively shaping the role of institutional researchers.

Billups, F. D., & Delucia, L. A. (1990, Summer). Integrating institutional research into the organization. In J. B. Presley (Ed.), *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 17, 93–102.

These authors propose methods for integrating IR into the institution to maximize the use of information for decision-making. Their strategies include knowing the institutional culture and its decision-making process; knowing the audience, the questions being asked, the channels of communication, and IR's place in the organization; developing people and presentation skills; being a team player and facilitator; involving the audience; and marketing IR services and products.

Chambers, S., & Gerek, M. L. (2007, February). IR activities. *IR Applications*, 12.

Chambers' section calls on institutional researchers to improve their issues and context intelligence, and presidents offer their observations and advice about how IR can be most effective.

Firnberg, J. W., & Lasher, W. F. (Eds.). (1983, June). The politics and pragmatics of institutional research. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 38.

The theme of this issue is that the political nature of institutions, institutional research, and information must be understood if IR is to be influential and see its work used in decision-making.

Heath, C., & Heath, D. (2007). *Made to stick: Why some ideas survive and others die*. New York: Random House.

This book uses numerous examples to promote simplicity, unexpectedness, concreteness, credibility, emotions, and stories as techniques for making ideas and information memorable and engaging.

Norris, D. M. (1983, Spring-Summer). Triage and the art of institutional research. *AIR Professional File*, 16.

Norris says a clear, thoughtful presentation with the minimal information needed to fulfill the purpose is what separates successful institutional researchers from those whose work goes unrecognized. Ten maxims gleaned from the experience of long-term institutional researchers are intended to help others get their work used by decision-makers.

Ruggiero, C. W., Elton, C. F., Mullins, C. J., Smoot, J. G. (1985, Spring). Effective writing: Go tell it on the mountain. *AIR Professional File*, 21.

In this article, writing teacher and consultant Ruggiero sets the stage for the other three authors to address different aspects of writing. Elton discusses with humor the fear of rejection, common reasons papers are rejected for publication, and how to remedy those problems. He emphasizes the importance of titles for focusing and organizing a paper. Mullins offers advice for writing more efficiently and effectively by working with a partner and speed editing. The first strategy helps gauge whether you are communicating clearly by asking someone outside your field to read a draft. Speed editing is a technique that involves reviewing a written work to determine its purpose and audience. Smoot gives suggestions for how to make writing clear and simple.

Seybert, J. A., & Bers, T. H. (1999). Effective reporting. *Resources in Institutional Research*, 12. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED443315)

This book explains the factors that affect our understanding of information and provides ways to make written and oral presentations effective.

Teodorescu, D. (2006). Institutional researchers as knowledge managers in universities: Envisioning new roles for the IR profession. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 12, 75–88.

This article distinguishes between data, information, and knowledge. Teodorescu suggests the use of meta-analyses of IR projects, qualitative research, and stories; incorporating discussion and recommendations in IR reports; and the need to know the audience.

Terenzini, P.T. (1999). On the nature of institutional research and the knowledge and skills it requires. In J. F. Volkwein (Ed.), *What is institutional research all about? A critical and comprehensive assessment of the profession. New Directions for Institutional Research*, 104.

This is the classic work that categorizes IR skills into three types of intelligence: technical and analytical, issues, and context. Issues and context intelligence are critical to getting IR data and research used for decision-making.



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The AIR Professional File—1978-2011

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- Formula Budgeting and the Financing of Public Higher Education: Panacea or Nemesis for the 1980s? (F.M. Gross; 6 pp; No. 3)
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