NATIONAL SURVEY OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH OFFICES

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The **Association for Institutional Research** (AIR) is the world's largest professional association for institutional researchers. The organization provides educational resources, best practices and professional development opportunities for more than 4,000 members. Its primary purpose is to support members in the process of collecting, analyzing, and converting data into information that supports decision-making in higher education.

OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH OFFICES

A national survey of a professional field is an appropriate and logical undertaking for a professional membership association. It would be easy to miss the real importance of this effort as it could be justified for its obvious usefulness in program reviews of institutional research and in its value to presidents and provosts for making resource decisions about institutional research offices. A deeper look reveals how this project fits together with a second project, the *Statement of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research*, both of which were supported by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. These initiatives are independently useful, but collectively are far more important to the future of postsecondary education.

National Survey of Institutional Research Offices. The initiative is the most comprehensive survey of offices of institutional research ever undertaken. The goal was to collect information on the tasks, staff, organization, and resources of offices of institutional research as they exist in 2015. The data provide a detailed picture of IR offices and, in disaggregation, a nuanced perspective of those offices by sector and other institutional characteristics.

Statement of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research. The initiative presents a vision for institutional research as an institution-wide function rather than a concrete domain of a single administrative unit. The aspirational statement calls for institutional capacity for data-informed decision-support for a broad range of decision makers, including students. Offices of institutional research will continue to fulfill many of their current roles while sharing expanded responsibilities in data and analytics with a broad array of faculty, staff, and administrators.

Together these initiatives establish a vision for the future of institutional research that stems from the successes of the field over the past 50 years, and document the current foundation from which the new vision is launched. Readers are encouraged to review the *Statement of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research* to place the findings of the National Survey of IR Offices in that perspective.

Simply put, how ready are colleges and universities to pursue a student success-focused mission informed by data?

Not surprisingly, this work confirmed much of what was already believed about institutional research; there are vast differences in IR capacity and organizational arrangements that are idiosyncratic to individual colleges and universities. The survey data allow us to understand these differences more clearly. **The results challenge the common notion that structures and resources explain observed variances in institutional research capacity and efficacy.** Like much in life, the amount of resources we have matters less than what we do with our resources and how high we set the aspirational bar.

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REPORT OF THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH OFFICES

RANDY L. SWING, DARLENA JONES, LEAH EWING ROSS

There is no shortage of published scholarship and institutional documents offering definitions of the field of institutional research. Yet the popularity of a joke within the field that "even our families do not understand what we do" is evidence of the great variation of skills, responsibilities, and expectations in IR. It is not that the field has failed to mature in its 50-year history (AIR was founded in 1966); rather, IR reflects the changing landscape of higher education, the impact of evolving technologies, and an insatiable appetite for data to inform management decisions. The fluidity of the core IR mission is a compliment to the dedication and flexibility of institutional researchers, yet the institutional variations extract a toll on further developing the field to serve decision makers. Examples of challenges include:

- Searching for and hiring the best talent for IR positions at all levels
- Developing degrees and certificate programs to prepare students for IR careers
- Providing professional development for IR leaders and staff
- Evaluating performance of offices and individuals
- Establishing appropriate salary ranges for IR staff
- Managing and defining workloads for IR directors and staff
- Transferring IR knowledge between institutions
- Setting expectations for service and outputs
- Envisioning and strategically planning for the future of the field
- Preparing senior-level managers for the IR office

The purpose of this study is to capture a "real time" snapshot of the resources and capacities of institutional research offices. While the *Statement of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research* calls for IR to be an institution-wide function, no one is anticipating the demise of institutional research offices as specific units charged with significant data-related tasks. IR as a function may have left the IR office, but the IR office has not gone out of business. Understanding how IR offices change as postsecondary institutions increasingly use data to inform decisions will provide opportunities to contribute to effectiveness and efficiency in support of institutional missions.

This research is only a first step in creating a full picture of institutional research at this point in time and setting an agenda for its future development. The study narrowly focuses on resources of IR offices; it does not attempt to identify the institution-wide capacity for IR, which is a task reserved for future exploration. The current effort does not attempt to measure the quality or value of products created by IR offices.

This report contains three major sections: key findings from the 2015 study, interpretation of key findings with comparison to a survey from 2008, and the study methodology. Readers are advised that all survey results may be viewed from the AIR website: www.airweb.org/nationalsurvey.

FIRST LOOK AT THE NATIONAL SURVEY DATA

When two institutional research professionals exchange descriptions of their offices of institutional research (OIRs), the conversation frequently begins with descriptions of organizational structure, staffing, and scope of responsibility. The National Survey of Institutional Research Offices focuses on these items as key indicators of IR capacities. The following section presents survey findings as the current state of IR capacity at responding institutions. Institutions establish and support networks of data users and consumers who share good practices

and collectively advocate for the data, tools, and dissemination methods required to meet the institution's needs.

Although institutions from all sectors were invited to participate in this study, the findings that follow are specific to not-for-profit institutions (see the survey methodology section for more information.) The dataset used in this report reflects a 52% response rate from not-for-profit institutions for which valid contact information was available. As authors, we have high confidence in these findings as this response rate is very high for national research studies. Using the IPEDS Universe of not-for-profit institutions as the target population, respondents closely match the characteristics of colleges and universities overall (e.g., size and sector). Institutions that enroll fewer than 1,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) students responded at a rate of 38%, which is still a high response rate, but less than the response rates of other groups of institutions. As such, we encourage readers to apply these findings with caution for small enrollment institutions.

Reporting Structures

Half of OIRs report to the chief academic officer and 25% to the office of the president. Other IR reporting lines reflect a wide array of arrangements, including institutional effectiveness, enrollment management, development, business affairs, student affairs, and information technology (IT).

OIR reporting lines vary for 2- and 4-year institutions. At 2-year institutions, 22% report to the chief academic officer and 40% to the president. With 38% reporting elsewhere, 2-year institutions are more likely to break from traditional reporting lines. At 4-year institutions, 63% report to the chief academic officer, 18% to the president, and 19% elsewhere. For all institutions, the most common arrangement is for OIRs to report directly to the chief-level positions of the units they report to (73%) rather than to assistant- or associate-level positions.

Anecdotal accounts have called attention to OIRs being reassigned away from reporting lines of the chief academic officer or president. For example, this survey found that at present, 3% report to IT, and an additional 3% report to business affairs offices.

Staffing

OIRs commonly consist of a full-time director and 2.6 full-time equivalent (FTE) professional staff members. Only one-third of OIRs have administrative staff support; even fewer have graduate or undergraduate student employees.

A popular conception that 2-year institutions are more likely than 4-year institutions to have very small OIR staffs is not supported by the current findings. 82% of total respondents report OIR staffs of fewer than 5 FTE (director and professional IR staff only). The proportions by sector are similar: 87% of 2-year institutions and 80% of 4-year institutions report OIR staffs of fewer than 5 FTE. Larger offices (5 or more FTE) are not common at 4-year institutions (20%) or 2-year institutions (13%).

Director and Professional OIR Staff	2-Year Institutions	4-Year Institutions
Less than 1 FTE	1%	1%
1 FTE to fewer than 2 FTE	17%	18%
2 FTE to fewer than 3 FTE	41%	35%
3 FTE to fewer than 5 FTE	28%	26%
5 FTE to fewer than 10 FTE	12%	17%
10 FTE or more	1%	3%

N = 1,261 responses (394 responses from 2-year and 867 responses from 4-year institutions)

On average, OIR directors have been in the senior leadership role at their institutions for 6.5 years and have 11 years of experience in the field of IR. 89% have a graduate degree (master's 46%; doctorate 43%). Directors with doctorates are more common at 4-year institutions (47%) than 2-year institutions (33%), but do not constitute a majority in either sector.

Scale and Scope of Responsibilities

The greatest variance in OIRs pertains to the scale and scope of their responsibilities. OIRs report a relatively small set of tasks for which they are primarily responsible, and a far broader set of tasks in which they participate with other units in shared responsibilities.

The variance in levels of responsibility for tasks creates a distinct picture of the work of OIRs. The primary responsibilities of OIRs are dominated by reporting functions.

PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY

83% data reporting – federal mandatory (81% primary responsibility for IPEDS reporting)

81% data reporting – guide books/rankings

81% institutional fact books

80% data reporting – state mandatory

74% enrollment reporting and analyses

64% data sharing with consortia

53% key performance indicators development/monitoring

Much of the work of OIRs is in the role of service provider. Participating in tasks as a contributor or collaborator without primary responsibility accounts for much of the workload of OIRs.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

67% contribute to accreditation studies

62% contribute to strategic planning

58% contribute to program accreditation

53% contribute to learning outcomes assessment

Equally defining are the data tasks with which most OIRs are not involved. That is, these tasks are part of the workload of a minority of OIRs.

NO RESPONSIBILITY

69% student financial aid modeling

65% institutional budget/finance modeling

61% student borrowing/debt studies

60% class scheduling/demand studies

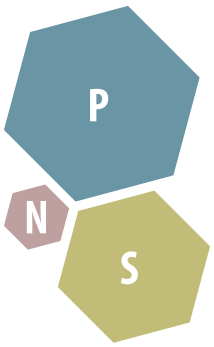
60% space utilization studies

57% salary equity studies

In combination, the relative size of these three components present unique "personalities" of OIRs. It is easy to discern three patterns:

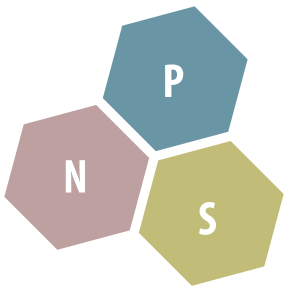
BROAD

These units have **broad** portfolios with clear sets of tasks for which they hold primary or secondary responsibility, if not leadership. They are engaged with nearly all data initiatives.



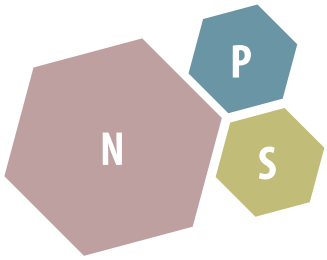
FOCUSED

These units are **focused** on a concrete set of tasks and serve as the primary leaders for some, and as contributors for others. Outside of their focus is a significant set of activities for which they have no responsibility.



LIMITED RESPONSIBILITY

These units have **limited responsibility**, and that responsibility is largely centered on reporting functions. They have small sets of tasks for which they share responsibility, and they are excluded from many activities that other OIRs handle.



Access to Data

An additional indicator of the scope and scale of OIR responsibilities is the office's unrestricted access to data sources. While OIRs are often referred to as "the" source of institutional data, this study reveals that many offices have only partial or restricted access to institutional data.

A majority of OIRs have unrestricted access to national survey data (86%), student collegiate academic records (80%), student satisfaction surveys (71%), and admissions records (60%).

Some data are not available to OIRs, or are provided with restrictions, which highlights the challenges many OIRs face when engaged in student success studies, cost-benefit analyses, and a wide array of institutional effectiveness projects. Examples include:

No Access	Restricted Access	Data Type
57%	15%	Class Attendance
49%	22%	Student early warning alerts
43%	22%	High school transcripts
43%	25%	Academic advising data
38%	29%	Human resource data – personnel, not salaries
23%	36%	Financial aid data

Financial Resources

Most OIRs (91%) manage funds specifically allocated to the unit through an institutional budgeting process. Few receive additional funding based on services provided (9% external grants; 4% internal grants; 5% fees for services). Most OIRs (68%) manage small budgets of less than $25,000, not including salaries. A few OIRs have larger budgets (16% $25,000–$49,999; 11% $50,000–$99,999), but budgets of $100,000 or more are rare (approximately 9%).

These data are confined to documenting budgets and do not reflect the total cost of operating an OIR, which would include technology support, space, and many other institutional costs that are not directly billed to administrative units.

Likely, after purchasing consumable supplies and unique software applications, most OIRs have limited funding for professional development and other elective spending choices. It is not uncommon for OIRs to seek "one-off appropriations" and one-time special requests of funds from their supervisors' budgets.

Consumption of IR Products and Services

The major contribution of OIRs to decision makers across institutions is provision of routine and ad hoc reports, analyses, alerts, and forecasts. The survey results show that use of OIR data and analytics is nearly ubiquitous (80–97%) among consumers, including academic affairs, presidents, enrollment management, assessment, and academic colleges/departments. Wide use (50%–79%) is attributed to boards of trustees, student affairs, registrars, finance, human resources, advancement, athletics, and career services. Less use is reported for alumni affairs, veteran services, faculty senates, information technology, housing, and facilities.

The findings are confirmation that OIR products are widely used across an institution, and that OIR is depended on for a broad range of decision support, monitoring, and mandatory reporting.

Beyond the technical aspects of reporting and providing data, OIRs often seek to make higher order contributions by consulting with decision makers to interpret reports, translate evidence into action, and engage in the "use" side of IR products. The results of this study show only minimal activity for OIRs in the consulting role. From a list of 26 offices and functions (e.g., president, faculty senate, human resources, admissions), less than half of respondents report that OIRs provided any consulting services to those units in the last year. Even with reporting lines to presidents and chief academic officers, fewer than half of OIRs provided consulting (interpreting reports, translating evidence into action, and helping in the use of IR products) to their supervisors. Boards of trustees were among the least likely to receive consulting services from OIR with only 18% of respondents reporting that they provide such services.

It is widely believed that decision makers are asking for more data and more support in using data, but this survey did not attempt to measure the institutional demand for such services. Additional research is needed to explore that demand, and to further illuminate the findings of this study to determine if they reflect a lack of resources, weak data cultures, or other factors.

BEYOND STRUCTURES: CORE DRIVERS OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

RANDY L. SWING

Surveys tend to raise as many questions as they answer, which is certainly true for the National Survey of Institutional Research Offices. The first goal of this effort was to establish a reliable method to identify the resources, staffing, and task assignments of offices of institutional research (OIRs). In the absence of data, OIRs are viewed through unique lenses that often are colored by a few high profile exceptions rather than the norm. Based on the survey results, the following findings may be useful in advancing conversations about how best to support and create deep campus cultures for data-informed decisions.

Additionally, this research should be read in context of AIR's *Statement of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research*, which calls for a senior-level officer to be charged with oversight of a campus data strategy, including a decentralized IR function that reaches all decision makers. Indications are that OIRs will be key components of such strategies. Readers are cautioned that the current research was singularly focused on dedicated offices of institutional research, and not the institution-wide function called for in the aspirational statement. Anecdotal reports indicate a growing movement in new organizational structures, but such was not a focus of this study.

Prior surveys of OIRs—though valuable and informative—were limited to convenience samples or targeted to specific regional groups. Readers may wish to consult Chapter 2 of the *Handbook of Institutional Research*, "The Structure and Functions of Institutional Research Offices" (Volkwein, Liu, and Woodell, 2012) for a brief overview of previous work in this arena. The most robust study was supported by AIR and conducted by Volkwein and colleagues (2008) using a convenience sample of 1,100 responses. Differences in the various studies' research methodologies and survey items limit the usefulness of comparisons in longitudinal perspectives, but several points of interest are included in the following review of OIR structures and subsequent discussion of their implications.

DO REPORTING LINES MATTER?

Across the 1,506 survey respondents, the most common reporting line for OIRs is to the chief academic officer, although direct reporting to the president is not rare. Different reporting lines were most frequently found in responses from 2-year institutions. In spite of anecdotal reports of OIRs being reassigned to units other than the chief academic officer or president, and specifically to information technology (IT), reporting to IT remains a rare arrangement.

The current results are similar to Volkwein's 2008 study referenced above, which noted that 22% of OIRs report to the president, 41% to the chief academic officer, and 11% to chief technology officer. Differences likely reflect the variation in survey design (e.g., the 2008 study employed a convenience sample) rather than indicate trends. Contrary to popular speculation, there is no support for the belief that OIRs have been significantly "downgraded" from reporting to presidents in the years since the 2008 study.

The most important discovery related to structures is that reporting lines are not very predictive of how OIRs relate to senior leaders and the rest of the institution (e.g., services provided and consumed, tasks assigned, level of responsibility for tasks). These findings should inform long-standing convictions that OIRs that report directly to presidents have an advantage over those reporting elsewhere. Positional power may have less impact than other aspects of the OIR.

DO STAFFING FTEs MATTER?

Most OIRs are 3-person organizations, which are small staffs compared to other administrative units at colleges and universities. Certainly additional staff members increase the possibility of OIRs serving more stakeholders and carrying larger portfolios of work. Given that mandatory reporting tasks are ubiquitous and time consuming for the OIR, efficiencies in handling those tasks may be as important as the number of staff in determining an office's capacity for other responsibilities. These findings illuminate common beliefs about reporting burden being a function of mandates rather than efficiencies. In terms of the range of tasks accomplished by OIRs—in addition to basic reporting functions—some small staff OIRs appear to outperform their peers, and some large staff OIRs appear to underperform compared to their peers. That is, some offices appear to be more productive based on number of tasks and FTE staff. More research is needed to understand what efficiencies and practices allow small OIRs to carry larger workloads than would be expected for their staffing levels.

With regard to graduate degrees held by OIR directors, findings of the current survey are similar to the 2008 study referenced earlier. In 2015, 43% of IR directors reported that they have doctorates, compared to 46% in 2008.

The current survey found that over the prior three years, most (52%) OIR staff sizes were unchanged, one-third (34%) increased, and 14% reported losses in staff positions. Volkwein and colleagues (2008) found a similar rate of change for the two-year period prior to their survey. These data do not support beliefs that increased data demands have been addressed with additional institutional research staffing. It is likely that the increased reporting demands placed on unchanging OIR staff sizes have further limited available time for any duties other than meeting reporting demands.

The field continues to have a mix of early career and late career individuals serving as directors of OIR. The 2015 survey found that 54% of directors had 10 or fewer years of experience, and the 2008 survey found that number to be 59% (likely a difference in survey populations rather than trend). The current study revealed that 29% of directors have 11 to 19 years of experience, and 17% have 20 or more years, which indicates that it is likely that leadership of OIR will be a slow change process.

HOW DO TASKS AND RESPONSIBILITIES VARY?

Previous AIR research (Lillibridge, Swing, Jones, and Ross, 2016) that included review of position descriptions for OIR directors found a very wide array of expectations and desired skills for IR directors. The current research further confirms that there is great variance in assignments and responsibilities across OIRs. Yet the survey also shows that there is a core set of tasks that are so common as to be useful in describing the field as it functions today. Reporting (routine, ad hoc, and mandated) is the base of the field. Only 2% of OIRs have no involvement in mandatory federal reporting, and 3% have no involvement in responding to rankings/guidebook surveys.

Furthermore, the Volkwein (2008) study and the current survey used different approaches in identifying tasks common in institutional research, yet both found that reporting tasks dominate the work of OIRs. For example, a majority of OIRs are primarily responsible for the production of institution fact books (73% in 2008; 81% in 2015), responding to guidebook/ranking surveys (68% in 2008; 81% in 2015), and federal data reporting (68% in 2008; 83% in 2015).

RETHINKING WHAT MATTERS FOR OIRs

This national review of the capacity of institutional research offices confirms that there is variation in OIR structures and available resources, but calls into question whether structures and resources are the most important differences in how OIRs function and serve institutions. Except for a small set of outliers, there is more consistency in size, resources, and task assignments across OIRs than is popularly believed. **It is time to focus on more than just resources as the way OIRs fit into the data ecosystems of institutions.**

Office size and reporting lines do not explain why or how the various "office personalities" develop. Offices with fewer than 2 full-time equivalent (FTE) professional staff appear in each of the types identified earlier in this report (broad 22%; focused 43%; limited responsibility 35%), as do offices with 5 or more FTE (broad 30%; focused 52%; limited responsibility 18%). Offices that report directly to the president also appear in all groups (broad 31%; focused 45%; limited responsibility 24%). More research is needed to understand these arrangements and their impact on the success of their institutional research missions.

The highest degree earned by the director of the OIR and the years of experience in the field do not explain the various "office personalities" either. Offices with directors who hold doctoral degrees appear in each of the groups (broad 29%; focused 47%; limited responsibility 24%). Early career directors (5 or fewer years in the field) appear in each of the groups (broad 27%; focused 44%; limited responsibility 29%), and late career directors (20 or more years in the field) do as well (broad 28%; focused 43%; limited responsibility 29%).

There are several potential explanations for why and how OIRs vary in institutional impact and workload capacities. Testable hypotheses are that the management/leadership styles of senior IR officers, the comfort of senior institutional leaders in using data in decision making, and/or institutional data cultures shape the degree to which IR "plays well with others," is trusted by the academic community, and has skills and capacities to contribute decision support in addition to acumen for reporting tasks.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

A 251-question survey was created to capture information about the structures and functions of Offices of Institutional Research (OIRs) in U.S. postsecondary degree-granting institutions. AIR members and staff were involved with the construction of survey. More than 70 AIR members suggested items for the survey in response to an open call for input; 10 individuals served as subject matter experts during in-person development meetings to identify critical areas and topics to include; 42 peer reviewers critiqued drafts of the survey instrument; and 26 institutions pilot tested the instrument and provided feedback, which shaped the final version of the instrument used in this study. This crowdsourcing approach ensured that the language and constructed items were understandable by, and reflective of, professionals working in institutional research and related data functions.

AIR staff identified contact information for senior leaders of institutional research at 3,291 post-secondary degree-granting institutions (65% of the 5,064 degree-granting institutions in the U.S.) Institutions of all sectors, types of control, and sizes were included in the target population.

An online survey system was used to collect data from August 18, 2015 through December 7, 2015. Multiple reminder emails were sent during this time to encourage responses. A total of 2,053 responses were received. Incomplete or duplicate responses (478) were removed from the dataset. Because of a low response rate from the for-profit sector, the 52 responses from for-profit institutions are not included in this report. (An overview of the data from the for-profit sector is available at www.airweb.org/nationalsurvey.) Also, 17 responses from administrative units are not included in this report. The findings presented in this report are based on 1,506 responses, which represent 1,609 public and not-for-profit institutions (a small number of OIRs serve two or more institutions). The final dataset used in this report reflects a 52% response rate from not-for-profit institutions for which valid contact information was available.

The final pool of responses included in this report consists of 459 2-year and 1,047 4-year not-for-profit, public and private, degree-granting postsecondary institutions. The following chart groups the institutions by number of full-time equivalent (FTE) students.

Distribution of Responses	2-Year Institutions % of Total	4-Year Institutions % of Total
Fewer than 5,000 FTE students	65%	67%
5,000 to fewer than 10,000 FTE students	24%	14%
10,000 or more FTE students	11%	19%

N = 1,506 (459 responses from 2-year and 1,047 responses from 4-year institutions)

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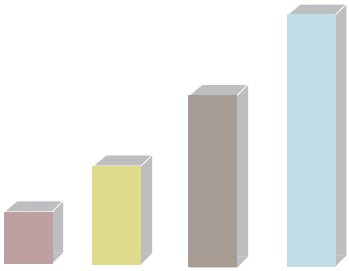

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