Reflective (Ac) Counting:
Institutional Research, Evaluation, & Assessment in a Time of Cholera

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Institutional researchers and assessment professionals in higher education are living in interesting and challenging times, one might say in times of crisis. In the post–Reagan era government and its agencies and public professionals have come under fire for being ineffective and reluctant to reform and protected as special interests (House, 1993). As federal and state coffers have shrunk in a time of rising costs of higher education, university budgets are tightening while at the same time calls for accountability are increasing (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The discourse of higher education quality has changed to focus on "return on investment" as the criteria for college and university success. Free market economics take the spotlight off of private enterprises but shift attention of policy makers to public organizations and as House (1993) asserts, "As a consequence, higher education…is blamed for social and economic problems that originate elsewhere, such as in the economic structure itself" (p. 59). As a consequence, Terenzini (2009) asserts that assessment of student outcomes originating from external mandates is here to stay but that there are significant "conceptual, administrative, political and methodological issues" (p. 45) making such initiatives problematic. As a result, institutional researchers are caught in a conflicting press for efficiency, accountability and excellence. The research on the role of IR professionals reflects more emphasis on "accountability and performance" and "outcomes assessment" among other job tasks (Volkwein, 2008, p. 9). Here I attempt to offer perspective related to the "issues intelligence" as well as the "contextual intelligence" that make up the "organizational intelligence" of IR (Volkwein, 2008, p. 5; see also Terenzini, 1999).

As in other social arenas the use of the term crisis always requires close inspection. Crises are socially constructed and they offer an opportunity to examine what an institution is doing and how it is conducting its operations. When a crisis is declared, it stands to reason that we should ask who is defining the crisis. Is the crisis defined in such a way as to determine new solutions and new patterns of operating? Are the calls for greater accountability, evaluation, and assessment motivated by forces to improve or discipline higher education? In effect, times of crisis are good times to take a step back from the fray of day–to–day demands of standard operating procedures and examine what we are doing and why. This applies to evaluation and assessment professionals in institutional research and assessment offices within colleges and universities. We have to ask ourselves: Are our evaluation activities merely tools for "informing and legitimizing the unpopular steps that government must take, which often means budget cutting"? Are our evaluation activities merely lending scientific authority to questionable political decisions? "When professionals work in bureaucracies, their autonomy is often challenged. So professional versus bureaucratic interests is a central conflict. The conflict is increasingly manifested in the

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higher education system, a stronghold of professional knowledge and legitimation. Governments have curtailed funding and increased their control over universities" (House, 1993, p. 53). Do productivity and efficiency trump the needs of our clients? To what degree should institutional researchers follow government policy and to what degree must they follow the standards of their own profession? Ultimately these are matters of professional ethics and social justice" (House, 1993, p. 55).

The field of evaluation itself exists in a political and social context and is at a crossroads of sorts. Writing in the 1990s, House's (1993) words seem prophetic:

> Exactly in what form evaluation develops depends on how modern market societies develop. If these societies become more authoritarian, a distinct possibility in reaction to managing turbulent societies and sluggish economies, evaluation could be used for repressive purposes. On the other hand, if modern market societies become less ideological and more willing to consider new social possibilities, then evaluation could become more useful. …Being involved with

government programs means that evaluation is always connected to ideological and political issues (pp. 28-29).

The attacks on colleges and universities, "inspired by the ideology of the free market" and "... directed at the content as well as the costs, of higher education" (House, 1993, p. 59) are not solely from external bodies such as business interests, commissions, accrediting organizations, think tanks, or the media, they come from within the academy as well. When colleges and universities are criticized by researchers, working with foundation support, putatively because undergraduates don't learn much as a result of attending our universities (Arum & Roksa, 2011), the stakes go up and the press for assessment goes up as well. "Measures imply a need for action" (Stone, 2002, p. 167). We get forced into an efficiency and accountability frame with other frames such as equity and quality pushed from the discussion. The tendency is to become myopic in our vision and practice of assessment. In 1993, House wrote:

> …(T)raditional autonomy that higher education institutions have enjoyed is coming to an end. The question is not whether we should have accountability, but rather what kind of accountability and evaluation we can have that will protect the vital internal processes of research and teaching that are essential to the improvement of society, and that will help protect higher education institutions against the economic and ideological assaults that are certain to come (pp.71-72).

Many colleges and universities and their accrediting bodies are currently undergoing transitions brought on by changes in the economy and the political landscape with more and more universities acting like for-profit enterprises. The accreditation process has shifted from one focused on self-study primarily based on inputs to the educational process, to an evidence-based, external accountability-oriented, outcomes-based model which focuses significantly on student learning outcome measures and assessment. The pressures of the new economy bring new challenges to institutional research and assessment offices as they conduct traditional duties of

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program review, assessing faculty and student outcomes for accreditation and other accountability-related tasks. There is always the danger that evaluation, which has always been part of the legitimating functions of government, may devolve into mere institutional impression management rather than a useful tool for formative improvement. Will evaluation become a mere tool of "scientifically informing, legitimizing, and controlling" (House, 1993, p. 33)?

There is a tension between public and professional accountability in higher education. Institutional researchers and evaluators are often in "conflicting and ambivalent circumstances" balancing demands of state or public accountability, professional accountability and consumer accountability (House, 1993, pp. 34-35). Institutional researchers are often caught in the middle of varying definitions of quality held by faculty, accreditors, students, parents, government officials, and trustees" (Volkwein, 2010, p. 10; see also Terenzini, 2010). Changes in the current era of neoliberal ideologies may encourage tendencies to ignore tried and true methods of university program review that include the perspectives of faculty members in the process. Or there may be a tendency to measure types of student outcomes that are easily measurable but not very meaningful. Are evaluators' loyalties to central or local concerns or to political or professional authority?

Evaluation and assessment are traditionally approached as a highly technical-rational field dominated by assumptions of neutrality, objectivity, rationality and technical details of psychometrics. Rarely do we stop to examine the assumptions of our job and why we are doing it. In addition, in college and university settings, assessment is part of a top-down institutional framework where questioning basic assumptions is not rewarded and is often times counter-productive to expectations of job performance and persistence within the bureaucracy. However, scholars of assessment understand that the field is embedded in a social, political, and historical context that shapes how we practice. We are part of a profession with professional goals and responsibilities. This is discernable from the agendas of professional groups such as the Virginia Assessment Group's agenda for its 2011 annual meeting which lists among other goals:

- Engaging faculty in assessment policy and decision-making

- Developing leadership in assessment across campus

- Data quality versus quantity

Numbers and Data Quality

Institutional researchers attend primarily to quantitative indicators, survey data, assessment scores, performance data, and financial data. Most assessments and measures rely on numbers. Numbers are seemingly

technical, neutral, and rational but upon inspection, politics and interpretation are behind mere numbers. Numbers appear to have some cultural cache as the language of science. As Stone (2002) writes in her book *Policy Paradox*:

"Numbers…are measures of human activities, made by human beings, and intended to influence human behavior. They are subject to conscious and unconscious manipulation by the people being measured, the people making the measurements, and the people who interpret and use measures made by others" (p. 177). Stone explains why counting is political not technical:

• Counting requires decisions about categorizing, about what (or whom) to include and exclude.

• Measuring any phenomenon implicitly creates norms about how much is too little, too much, or just right.

• Numbers can be ambiguous, and so leave room for political struggles to control their interpretation.

• Numbers are used to tell stories, such as stories of decline ("we are approaching a crisis").

• Numbers can create the illusion that a very complex and ambiguous phenomenon is simple, countable, and precisely defined.

• Numbers can create political communities out of people who share some trait that has been counted.

• Counting can aid negotiation and compromise, by making intangible qualities seem divisible.

• Numbers, by seeming to be so precise, help bolster the authority of those who count. (2002, p. 176)

She goes on to warn us about reactivity in measurement because measures always carry "implicit norms." We attend to what we measure. When we have a hammer, everything becomes a nail. When we have the light of some off-the-shelf- assessment, we look for our lost keys there. Statistics are often used by those wishing to begin a reform effort (e.g., accountability in higher education), to show how bad things have become in order to support a narrative of decline. Numbers never stand on their own; they are always interpreted as part of a story line. Measurement exerts a strong force over behavior, and not always in a positive manner. Raising the level stakes of standardized tests means teachers will teach to the test or worse cheat on the test. The statistics and data we collect are collected in the interests of the organization and are

therefore often inseparable from the goals and agendas of those organizations. Stone (2002) laments: "Because policy measurement is always linked to benefits and penalties, the measured try to influence the measurers, occasionally with outright bribes, but more often with pleading, cajoling, and selective disclosure" (p. 182).

According to Stone (2002), so much of what we

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count depends on the categories we have constructed to count around. Category construction is a qualitative, interpretive, and ultimately a political activity. The discretion used in determining if one behavior fits in this or that category influences the numbers we produce, yet we rarely stop to question the category construction. Program costs can include just the cost of the program or it might also include the cost to design the program. The selection of measures almost always indicates some preferred solution to a problem. For instance, a foundation may be supporting research about the lack of student learning in higher education and may choose measurements that suggest a particular solution that positions the foundation to obtain more funding for its program of change and improvement.

In the current climate of defining higher education policy problems, measurement plays a strategic role. Critics assert the policy problem is that colleges and universities are inefficient and do not produce learning. Numbers constructed by researchers that purport to show that undergraduates do not learning much in their first two years of college (Arum & Roksa, 2011) are used to support that a policy problem is growing. Measurement is always tied to a purpose: accountability, program improvement, cost efficiency, etc. Stone (2002) asserts: "Numerals hide all the difficult choices that go into a count" (p. 177).

Volkwein (2008) proposes a typology of four possible IR purposes and roles. These vary by the purposes and audiences (formative/internal for improvement vs. summative and external for accountability) and whether the organizational role and culture emphasizes the administrative/institutional vs. academic/professional roles. If the role is one of administrative/institutional the job becomes one of describing and gathering facts about the institution (under the formative purpose) or to perform the role of spin-doctor in institutional impression

management. If IR departments and individuals take on the academic and professional role, the job becomes one of analyzing alternatives as the IR takes on the role policy analysis (under the formative purpose) and IR as scholar and researcher providing impartial evidence of effectiveness (under the summative purpose). Given the external conditions facing higher education in a time of neo-liberal ideologies, the commercialization of higher education, and increased political clamoring for accountability, I want to argue that institutional researchers engage the professional identity in terms of organizational roles (policy analysts and scholar/researcher) and that they think carefully about the use of numbers as they face the challenges of the new era in higher education. In the context of the massive changes in society that are having such a significant impact on higher education at this historical moment, we must ask: at what point does "thoughtful noncompliance" (Stein, 2004) enter into the thinking of institutional researchers? How will we use the authority of numbers?

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