



INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH: MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Abstract

This paper is intended to provide IR professionals with a better understanding of the factors influencing the role and importance of IR on campus and outline considerations in developing a more proactive role for IR – particularly in the areas of informing decision-making and planning. The paper draws on a little history of PSE and IR, addresses the evolving role and responsibilities of IR, outlines some of the key organizational challenges in academe, and then wraps-up by summarizing some of the factors that may help IR professionals play a more proactive role in decision-making and planning.

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Preface

This paper had its origin in a presentation prepared for the Colleges Ontario Heads of Institutional Research Professional Development Day in June 2015. At that time I was asked to ‘kick-off’ the day with some thoughts about ‘making a difference’ and that necessarily led me to some ‘thinking time’ about Institutional Research (IR), the important role it plays in successful colleges and universities, and the key factors that influence the success of IR ‘shops’ and IR individuals.

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## Introduction and Overview

In an era characterized by rapid technological change, straitened finances, heightened interest in evidence-based decision-making, ‘big data’, and data analytics, one might automatically think that Institutional Research would be regarded as a critical component of institutional decision-making and planning with IR directors playing key supporting roles. And in some institutions that is case; in others, perhaps not so much. Results of a survey of IR directors in the United States conducted by the National Association of State Heads (NASH) in collaboration with the Association of Institutional Research (AIR) indicated that “IR offices are running hard and yet many are still falling behind, deluged by demands for data collection and report writing that blot out time and attention for deeper research, analysis and communication.”<sup>1</sup> I hear similar comments from IR colleagues in Canada, sometimes accompanied by expressed concerns about the lack of IR impact on campus decision-making.

This paper is intended to:

- i) provide IR professionals with a better understanding of the factors influencing the role and importance of IR on campus; and
- ii) outline considerations in developing a more proactive role for IR – particularly in the areas of informing decision-making and planning.

To tackle those topics this paper will draw on a little history of PSE development and IR, address the evolving role and responsibilities of IR, outline the key organizational challenges in academe, and then wrap-up by summarizing some of the factors that may help IR professionals play a more proactive role in decision-making and planning.

To begin, however, it may be instructive to spend a minute on the topic: What is IR? There are many definitions and there is a tremendous range of responsibilities and functions which tend to be institution specific. That basic question ‘What is IR?’ has been the source of debate for many, many years and could be the topic of a separate paper altogether. To answer the question, for this paper, we turn to one of the most trusted sources in the digital age for the answer...Wikipedia;

- Institutional research is a broad category of work done at schools, colleges and universities to inform campus **decision-making and planning** (emphasis added) in areas such as admissions, financial aid, curriculum, enrollment management, staffing, student life, finance, facilities, athletics, and alumni relations. (Wikipedia, May 1, 2015)

The Wikipedia definition will suffice because it captures two of the main roles of IR – “to inform 1) campus decision-making and 2) planning”. But translating those roles into reality is sometimes more difficult than it might appear on the surface. While IR Offices, by definition, have the role “to inform

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<sup>1</sup> Gagliardi, J., and Wellman, J., *Meeting Demands for Improvements in Public System Institutional Research*, National Association of System Heads, February 2015

campus decision-making and planning”, fact is their effectiveness varies by institution and has varied over time.

### **PSE development and Institutional Research: A brief history**

To develop a better understanding of the many factors that affect the development and effectiveness of IR it may be instructive to provide a brief history of PSE development and IR in general. In the beginning.... actually, I'm not going to go back to the beginning, but rather to the era of the 1950's and 1960's when a number of factors were influencing the expansion of higher education in Canada and the United States. Readers are no doubt familiar with the important role of WW2 veterans in the expansion of post-secondary education in the post-war period, and the impetus sparked by Sputnik and then the baby boom. Those factors sparked new and sustained interest in higher education and led to an unprecedented expansion of PSE. And the focus of a lot of IR work at the time was exactly that – expansion planning focused on enrolment projections and the development of methodologies to forecast enrolment, capital needs, and requirements for faculty and staff. Individuals involved in IR tended to have backgrounds in quantitative disciplines and utilized the tools of operations research, business, and statistics. And this was the era of the Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System (PPBS), introduced into the U.S. Department of Defense in 1961, and beginning to catch the imagination of central planners everywhere. Much of the initial focus of IR was at the level of postsecondary 'systems' (provincial/state) where there was considerable interest in the cost and logistics of expansion and greater likelihood of developing the technical capacity to actually carry-out large scale modelling exercises. Around the same time, a number of states and provinces began studying, and then introducing, funding formulas and the mechanics of such formulas took on added importance driving the focus of further IR development. At the institutional level the IR 'function' was often part of the job of a President's advisor or a senior administrator (often an academic administrator) wearing multiple 'hats'. Information Technology was in its embryonic stage as a 'tool'. Registrars and Budget/Finance personnel were to varying extents involved in what might be thought of as 'IR activities' but few institutions had a formal IR office.

By the early 1960's the 'IR profession' had emerged in the United States with the National Institutional Research Forum (NIRF) holding national conferences that culminated in the establishment of the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) in 1965. The same year the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP) was formed, with an emphasis on facilities planning, and by the middle of the next decade formal academic organizations had been established to 'study' higher education (CSSHE, ASHE).<sup>2</sup> The emergence of distinct entities examining various parts of higher education reflected the emphasis placed on what might be called the 'academic' and 'administrative / management' arms of higher education as well as the emergence of higher education in its own academic field within the Education discipline.

In Canada the formal establishment of a national IR organization occurred somewhat later than in the United States. The Canadian Institutional Research and Planning Association (CIRPA) was formally established in the early 1990s and reflected greater interest in IR as a profession. Since that time CIRPA has grown to well over 200 members. The time 'lag' in the Canadian scene was related to the absence of a critical mass of individuals engaged in the IR function at the institutional level and the active presence of existing regional entities such as the Council of Ontario Universities COU (1962), Conference of Rectors and Principals of Quebec Universities, (CREPUQ), the Ontario Council on University Affairs

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<sup>2</sup> Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education (CSSHE) 1970 and the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) 1976.

(OCUA) (1974), and the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC) as well as the important presence and activities of Statistics Canada. There were, of course, some institutions with IR capacity but the number of IR 'shops' was limited, tended to be relatively small operations, and generally confined to some of the larger institutions for much of the period from the 1960s through to the 1980s.

By the late 1960s a key issue in higher education was very much oriented to revamping Senates (and governance generally) with faculty assuming a more proactive role in Academic Planning matters. In that environment IR, particularly in Canada, tended to focus on the 'nuts and bolts' of administrative / management decision-making that was directly related to budgets and planning. While there was growing interest in the 'academic side' of IR (e.g., student performance, equity/accessibility, program design, academic planning, faculty appointment, promotion & tenure) the interest translated into the emergence of entities such as the Higher Education Group (HEG) at OISE (1969)<sup>3</sup> and the establishment of the CSSHE mentioned earlier.

While interest in cost studies had characterized much of the decade of the 1960s, as both a necessary requirement for expansion and an input into funding formulas, by the mid-to-late 1970's heady expansionism had given way to the economic realities of 'stagflation' (high inflation, low economic growth). Discussions of 'cost' emphasized cost containment and program planning was undertaken in the context of constraint, rationing both programs and spaces. Funding formulas were revised and in some cases abandoned. IR took on a decidedly 'budget planning' focus as institutions coped with the economic realities and projections of enrolment declines that were slated for the 1980s. The projections turned out to be wrong – big time – with increases in participation rates (female, rural) more than compensating for the decline in the size of post-secondary age cohort. The 'miss' on enrolment projections had major impacts on IR; more attention was devoted to this most fundamental input into higher education planning. And institutions began investing to increase their own capacity to better understand the enrolment situation on their own campuses; about that time the term 'enrolment management' crept into the post-secondary lexicon – initially in the U.S. but then over time the basic idea found its way to Canada.

The 1980's also ushered in the expansion of a federal presence in research and development (R&D) in Canada and was mirrored in some provinces by increased interest in R&D at the provincial level. IR involvement in R&D was limited but the increased interest in R&D started the journey towards much more complex entities involving multiple funders, partnerships, ownership and commercialization of intellectual property, and increasing expectations about the role of universities as regional, provincial and national economic and social catalysts.

By the latter part of the 1980s the term 'accountability' was also creeping into the post-secondary lexicon. In Ontario, for example, inspection audits of three universities by the Provincial Auditor ultimately led to the establishment of the Task Force on University Accountability. By the time the Task Force produced its report (Broadhurst, 1993) a new government was in power (Rae - NDP) and a recession resulted in greater scrutiny of public sector expenditures and concerted efforts to change post-secondary public finance. Tuition fees began to increase at a pace that outstripped inflation. The post-secondary sector was subject to absolute reductions in operating grants and within a few years another government (Harris - PC) changed the PSE landscape dramatically by slashing grants further and de-regulating (to a point) tuition.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/lhae/Programs/Higher\\_Education/](http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/lhae/Programs/Higher_Education/) (retrieved January 21, 2016)

The 1990s also marked the advent of media ‘rankings’ in Canada. The introduction of the Maclean’s survey in 1991 and the Globe and Mail’s ‘University Report’ a decade later added a new dimension to the IR function. IR ‘shops’ scrambled to understand and explain rankings methodologies, lobbied for changes in the methodology and indicators, and inevitably generated their own institutional specific indicators (with some implicit and explicit comparative rankings) to augment or counter the perceived impact of the rankings on recruitment (students and faculty) and reputation.

In the new millennium the mantra of accountability took on added import with the introduction of accountability frameworks, performance indicators, accountability agreements, and strategic mandate agreements. Requirements for quality reviews and formal assessment processes resulted in quality assurance frameworks that also impacted on IR. In the U.S. the advent of increased accountability requirements ultimately led to the emergence of ‘new’ entities on campus focused on “institutional effectiveness” and often directly linked to, or encompassed, the office with IR responsibilities.

Together the changes in the policy and regulatory environments along with the significant increase in postsecondary enrolments and research activity and the increase in public interest have had profound impacts on colleges and universities over the period. When coupled with changes in provincial funding support and changes in the funding mechanisms, colleges and universities seemed to be subjected to an unending series of external ‘shocks’ – that posed significant challenges to administrators and governors alike and underscored the power of the government and the tools it could use (funding, policy, regulation) to influence the post-secondary sector. At the same time, however, the shift in funding towards a much greater reliance on tuition fees in most jurisdictions sparked renewed interest in students (partially because students demanded more say) and the student learning experience resulting in demands for IR to take a renewed interest in supporting enrolment management initiatives.

The past 60 years also saw a revolution in technology and the incorporation of the technology into everyday life, empowering individuals, and facilitating the decentralization of data management and analyses. And, transforming the classroom and the lab. The ‘tools’ of the IR trade have become increasingly sophisticated and, at the same, increasingly widely available. IR’s role as a primary user of institutional data has given way in many institutions to a more decentralized approach where institutional data is widely available for operational and analytical purposes in data warehouses.

Finally, it is worth noting that over the past 60 years, the PSE community has been subjected to a litany of what Robert Birnbaum called ‘management fads’ – all promising to provide improved efficiency and decision-making. From PPBS through, Zero-based Budgeting (ZBB) and Management by Objectives (MBO) to Total Quality Management (TQM), Strategic Planning and more recently Integrated Planning and Responsibility Centred Management. Those ‘fads’ have impacted IR (directly or indirectly) given their emphasis on data, analysis, measurement, and one can argue about the overall institutional impact. Birnbaum, for example, suggests that: “Higher education does not need more management techniques. It needs more good managers.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Organizational Challenges in Academe**

The present day Canadian university, and PSE in general, is considerably different from the landscape of the 1960s and 1970s. The term “multiversity” was first used over 50 years ago and applied, at the time,

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Birnbaum, *Management Fads in Higher Education*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2001 p.239

to a handful of research based universities in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Today the term applies to many institutions in Canada. And it carries with it a complexity that is difficult to fathom for individuals outside academe. Managing that complexity requires ‘information’. Institutional mandates have expanded at the college and university levels. The community college of the 1960s may still be seen as ‘local’ but it may attract students from around the world, have international branch campuses, actively engage in applied research and developed a variety of public and private partnerships at the local, regional, national and international level. Similarly, the local university is now likely to have a significant international ‘flavour’, and have strong ties to local, regional, national and international communities. While ‘teaching’ and program delivery are key components, added emphasis has been placed on research and external service. Public expectations regarding the roles of PSE institutions as local, regional and national economic and social catalysts has increased markedly over the period spurred on by the institutions themselves but also spurred on by government and media interest in all aspects of the ‘knowledge economy’.

One of the consequences of expanded mandates, increased size, and rising expectations is ‘complexity’. And adding to the level of complexity over the same period has been the increase in collective agreements / unionization. Universities and colleges have responded by creating organizational structures that are complex and multi-layered. A typical organizational chart now reflects a broader management structure where new positions/functions have been added (Vice-President Advancement/External, Vice-President Research) and a layer of management that was seldom present thirty years ago. The ‘provost model’ along with expanded mandates and greater emphasis on access, under-represented groups and students, in general, has meant the expansion of Academic Support structures and Student Services far beyond the levels of the early 1990s.

The increase in the size of management, by itself, should not necessarily be seen in a negative light. Many of the activities are new, important, and require an institution-wide oversight and presence. However, the unintended consequence may well be more organizational ‘silos’ and formalization of bureaucracy – two developments that may impact directly on the effectiveness of IR.

### **IR Roles and Responsibilities**

The preceding very brief history of PSE covers a period of over 60 years, highlights some of the factors that influenced both PSE and IR development and helps set the context for the present day. A brief scan of present day IR ‘shops’ indicates responsibility for a variety of activities as follows:

- Various facets of the student life cycle from modeling and forecasting enrolment, supporting recruitment, admissions and registrations (admissions funnel/yield), modeling and forecasting enrolment trends at various levels throughout the institution (from total enrolment to discipline specific credit unit registration), modeling and predicting student progression and success rates, surveys of student engagement and/or student satisfaction, and surveys and analysis of alumni.
- Analysis and modeling of human resources, predicting retirements, hires, staffing levels, peer comparisons, and, in some institutions, providing support for collective bargaining.

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<sup>5</sup> Clark Kerr coined the term “multiversity” in 1963 to try to capture the reality of large universities that had evolved to be a “whole series of communities and activities held together by a common name, a common governing board and related purposes”. Kerr is acknowledged as one of the architects of the modern public university – and, in particular, the American research university. He served as Chancellor of Berkeley and then President of the University of California (1958-1967) and was instrumental in the development of the California ‘Master Plan’ – a plan that recognized the distinct roles of community colleges, state universities and the ‘flagship’ University of California system.

- Financial analysis as related to resources available to colleges/faculties and departments across all fund types (operating, special purpose, ancillary, capital and research). Some IR offices are very involved in budget planning and development.
- Space planning and analysis as it relates to program development and the development of capital plans including deferred maintenance.
- Support for, or administration of, program and unit review processes.
- Support for Strategic Planning activities and/or support or responsibility for Integrated Planning.
- Comparative studies of any of the above with peer institutions.
- Internal and external reporting.
  - Internal reporting typically centers on the production of a Statistics Book, and/or data warehouses that form a compendium of activity on campus and is regarded as the official set of information for the campus.
  - External reporting often includes involvement in the production of numerical reports leaving the institution such as reports to Statistics Canada, provincial governments, the (Postsecondary Student Information System (PSIS), University and College Academic Staff System (FT-UCASS) and Financial Information of Universities and Colleges (FIUC) – the latter a joint undertaking between Statistics Canada and the Canadian Association of University Business Offices (CAUBO).
  - Working with public relations / government relations personnel on advocacy issues.

The range of activities suggests that IR continues to play an important role in many institutions. But there are major differences in the activity set by institution. Some IR ‘shops’ play a major role in planning and resource allocation and those activities serve as the foundation for a set of related activities including comparative studies, institutional surveys, accountability reporting and advocacy. Other IR shops tend to play a more limited data coordinating and reporting role. The differences can be attributed to a number of factors including size of the institution and the size of the IR office as well as, how IR is ‘seen’ within the institution – the latter factor a critical piece of the effectiveness ‘puzzle’. Is the head of IR part of the senior leadership team? Does IR ‘fit’ in the institution’s organizational structure as a key resource to senior leadership, specifically the Provost or President? Is the head of IR recognized as proactive, and someone who facilitates the ‘work of the university’?

The preceding questions help focus attention on the components of an effective IR function and IR professionals. Drawing on key pieces of the literature, my own work in the IR field, and as higher education consultant, the following section focuses on providing some guidance for IR professionals as they strive to ‘make a difference’ in their chosen profession and overcome some of the challenges.

### **Improving effectiveness**

On the topic of ‘effectiveness’ a survey of Institutional Directors in the United States around 1990 sounded a familiar tone when asked to comment on the obstacles they faced in trying to increase effectiveness. A scan through the ‘obstacles’ speaks to their relevance a quarter-century later.

The biggest obstacles to increasing the effectiveness of these researchers’ offices were inadequate staff size and expertise, campus leaders’ lack of appreciation for data and research, inadequate technical resources, researchers’ lack of access to decision makers, external reporting demands and (a related barrier) lack of time, researchers’ not being seen as part of the institution’s leadership team, insufficient identification of issues, and campus politics.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> William E. Knight, Michael E. Moore, Corby A. Coperthwaite, Knowledge, Skills, and Effectiveness in Institutional Research, *New Directions for Institutional Research*, no. 104, Winter 1999 © Jossey-Bass Publishers referencing Huntington, R. B., and Clagett, C. A., *Increasing institutional research effectiveness and productivity: Findings from a national survey*. Paper presented at the meeting of the North East Association for Institutional Research, Boston, MA. (1991).

The obstacles, whether new or not, are very real and one could no doubt add to the list. In many institutions an increase in senior leadership turnover poses a significant challenge for IR offices that serve the senior leadership and depend on that link to validate IR activities and set direction on sensitive planning / information issues (resource allocation, compensation negotiations). The challenge of trying to keep up-to-date on research literature and the challenges associated with managing increasingly complex institutions simply add to an increasing workload and impact on effectiveness.

The NASH survey referenced at the beginning of this paper also raised concerns about the skillsets of IR 'producers'.

Both IR producers and users express a concern that the types of skills needed for the data collection and report writing function are not the same as the skills needed to address emerging policy issues about overall performance, nor to communicate effectively to multiple audiences.<sup>7</sup>

Reading through the NASH report one cannot help but come away with a sense that there is a disquiet growing on many campuses regarding the IR function.

...the demand for work increasing exponentially, against a field that is not well positioned to meet the needs of the future. Institutional leaders see weaknesses in IR inhibiting their ability to address basic and legitimate questions about performance in higher education being asked of them by their boards, legislatures, and consumers.

Similar questions are being asked by institutional leaders in Canada. And many IR shops in universities and colleges have made tremendous strides in helping address some of the questions. But, 'improving effectiveness' is likely to be the IR watchword in the coming years and with that thought in mind we turn to a brief overview of effectiveness as it applies to IR.

Terenzini, building on the earlier work of Wilensky and Fincher, articulated what he called the three tiers of organizational intelligence - "personal competence and institutional understanding" - that are necessary for effective IR.<sup>8</sup> Those three tiers together - technical/analytical intelligence, issues intelligence, and contextual intelligence - are important ingredients that IR professionals need to keep in mind. Technical/analytical intelligence speaks to the foundational knowledge of the institution and the technical skills, including research skills that are prerequisite for the job. Issues intelligence

... involves most of the substantive problems on which technical and analytical intelligence is brought to bear.... Such issues include the importance of, and rationale for, such managerial activities as enrollment goal setting; faculty workload analysis; resource allocation and reallocation; physical facilities planning, management, and maintenance; pricing (at private institutions); salary determination and equity issues; program and institutional planning; assessment, program evaluation, and institutional self-study; budget development and execution, and faculty evaluation.... Issues intelligence also involves an understanding of how institutions function and how decisions are made. Perhaps most important is an understanding and appreciation of the essentially political character of the decision areas listed above.<sup>9</sup>

According to Terenzini, Tier 3 Contextual intelligence

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<sup>7</sup> Gagliardi, op.cit.

<sup>8</sup> Terenzini, P.T., On the Nature of Institutional Research and the Knowledge and Skills it Requires, *Research in Higher Education*, 1993, Volume 34, Issue 1

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5

...involves understanding the culture both of higher education in general and of the particular campus where the institutional researcher works.... It includes an understanding of the institution's historical and philosophical evolution, faculty and organizational cultures, informal as well as formal campus political structures and codes, governance, decision-making processes, and customs.... (it) also entails a knowledge of the local, state, national, and international environments within which the institution must function and which both present it with opportunities and constrain what it can hope to accomplish or become.<sup>10</sup>

Contextual intelligence reflects an understanding of “organizational savvy and wisdom. It is the form of intelligence that earns institutional research and researchers legitimacy, trust, and respect.”

In 2012 Terenzini revisited his ‘tiers of institutional intelligence’<sup>11</sup> and suggested that while the basic framework is still valid, each ‘tier’ has developed its own new challenges. With respect to Tier 1 he suggests that given the availability of data and new technologies, IR professionals need to be careful about the ‘data tail wagging the dog’ and the “new and cool technologies (that) can be insidiously seductive”. He notes the challenges of low response rates in surveys and wonders about their impact on the reliability of such information for decision-making (or measuring performance). Finally he emphasizes the importance of focusing on the right ‘question’ suggesting that “Why is the information important to know, and who will care? must never be far from our consciousness.”

Reflecting on Tier 2, Terenzini argues that many of the current ‘hot’ topics in PSE are not much different than they were 20 years ago or 40 years ago.

- Evaluating institutions for accountability
- Assessing faculty workload
- Affirmative Action
- Nontraditional study and students
- Assuring academic progress
- Change human resource needs
- Measuring and increasing academic productivity
- Computer based systems models
- Improving departmental management
- Allocating resources
- Inter-institutional comparisons and peer groups

He urges IR practitioners to delve more deeply into the research on such issues to better understand the different perspectives. He acknowledges that institutions are considerably more complex and he also recognizes that “*in loco parentis*” has been replaced with a different, more challenging relationship between the institution, its faculty and staff members and students.

Finally in revisiting Tier 3, Terenzini acknowledges that it is this particular area that has changed the most over the 20 years and he argues it deserves “a much broader focus and a much heavier emphasis on the importance of awareness and analysis of an institution’s state, national, and international environments.” He sees his 1993 description of Tier 3 as being “seriously parochial and naïve”.

Terenzini’s 3 tiers of Organizational Intelligence is an interesting construct for identifying the skills and knowledge that are requirements for an effective IR professional. It emphasizes the technical aspects

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp.5-6

<sup>11</sup> Terenzini, P.T., “On the Nature of Institutional Research” Revisited: Plus ca Change...?, *Research in Higher Education*, (2013) 54:137-148.

somewhat more than what might be called the ‘soft side’ of IR – the importance of communication and interaction with personnel from the various offices the IR ‘shop’ serves and relies on. Think about it. Few if any IR shops stand on their own. They interact with IT, Finance, Human Resources, the Registrar, Deans, Vice-Presidents, and the President and many others. In fact one could argue that the most important attribute of an effective IR professional is the ability to develop interpersonal skills that are valued within the academy – good communication skills, a willingness to listen, and a determination to be helpful.

In summing up their own interpretation of Terenzini’s ‘organizational intelligence, Leimer and Terkla noted that Issues intelligence, in particular, needed to incorporate ‘working with others’ as a critical component to improving IR effectiveness. According to them, Issues intelligence

involves knowledge of issues the institution must address, such as enrollment management, budgeting, assessment, and strategic planning. In addition, it is helpful to understand how the institution functions, how it makes formal and informal decisions, and how to work effectively with institutional managers who undertake these activities. **Such knowledge and abilities are a distinct skill set and are not inherent in analytical or technical skills. Without such organizational knowledge and interpersonal abilities, institutional researchers will find their effectiveness and influence extremely limited.**<sup>12</sup> (emphasis added).

Leimer and Terkla’s emphasis on “interpersonal abilities” carries over into all aspects of ‘getting the job done’. For example, Robert Delprino, in outlining the key features of successful Strategic Planning efforts suggests that,

...most things that take place in organizations happen by and through people. The flip side is that most things that get screwed up in organizations also happened by and through people. This premise applies to strategic planning in higher education.<sup>13</sup>

People, people, people. More often than not, many of the organizational issues in PSE – including failed strategic planning initiatives and ineffective management can be traced to the three P’s – people, process, and policies – with the people issues, by far, ranking as #1 and the lack of process/policies, or cumbersome/outdated process/policies ranking #2 or #3 depending on institutional specific circumstances. Managing the increased complexity of an institution demands people engagement and excellent communication to overcome the increasing inclination towards silos, specialization and added layer(s) of bureaucracy.

‘Making a difference’ then, focuses on a few key factors that can improve effectiveness. While it is clear that IR professionals need to have the skillsets noted in Terenzini’s ‘3 tiers’ it is also important to recognize the importance of some basic operational practices that focus on people and relationships – the softer side of IR.

### **Be helpful**

The next time someone comes calling be helpful. Rather than emphasizing the difficulty in obtaining data and/or the limitations and challenges and queue of outstanding jobs, use the opportunity to find out exactly what the individual is looking for and why it is important. Such conversations may lead to

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<sup>12</sup> Leimer, C., and Terkla, D.G., Laying the Foundation: Institutional Research Office Organization, Staffing, and Career Development, New Directions for Institutional Research, no. 143, Fall, 2009 p.44

<sup>13</sup> Delprino, R., The Human Side of the Strategic Planning Process in Higher Education, SCUP 2013

'more work' but may just as easily lead to other solutions to meet the apparent needs – and on the way by you will have gained some insight into challenges faced by others in the organization.

### **Network, consult, co-ordinate**

Get out of your office and spend some time meeting with people from other administrative areas and academic units. Serve on institutional committees and, to the extent possible, provincial and/or national committees. Inside the institution make an effort to let people know what IR has to offer, the available information, and ask questions about the data – how valuable is it to the user? What other information would be helpful for operational and planning purposes? Given the significant amount of administrative data available from various sources, it is incumbent on IR to play the role of coordinator – meeting with IT, finance, human resources, student systems etc., to ensure appropriate data and *information* is available in a timely fashion.

### **Interpret**

The 'value added' from IR is no longer simply retrieving and compiling data. The *interpretation* of the data is the 'value' proposition and is derived from IR's access to various kinds of data and information and a skillset that allows one to paint a more complete picture. As noted in Stephanie McKeown's article in the June 2015 CIRPA newsletter,

Institutional researchers are well-positioned to be the interpreters at our institutions with an increased focus on the plausibility of the conclusions drawn from the evidence.<sup>14</sup>

### **Anticipate**

Be proactive in providing information and highlighting particular issues. IR shops do not often operate in a vacuum. Day to day interaction with senior leadership and familiarity with institutional data and operational 'cycles', and regular scans of news/updates in the PSE sector all lend themselves to anticipating data/information needs and making senior leaders aware of particular issues.

### **Be careful... organizational politics**

The more successful you are in improving your own effectiveness the more you will garner attention and the greater the likelihood you may find yourself at, or directly supporting, the decision-making 'table'. But in academe it is important to recognize that IR's role is supportive and, regardless of its effectiveness, secondary to the real work of the university – teaching, research and service. Accordingly, while 'making a difference' will enrich your work-life and career prospects it also opens up the possibility of being 'caught up' in organizational politics, and personnel conflicts – particularly during times of senior leadership turnover.

### **Concluding Comments**

The IR profession is a career worth pursuing and offers a chance to be part of an ever-changing, interesting environment in an industry that is critical to Canada's success. 'Making a difference' carries with it both risk and reward but ultimately leads to a more interesting work-life and opens up the possibility of advancement into other management areas. People skills – the soft skills of IR – are transferable to management levels throughout much of the academy and, when coupled with the other components of the IR skill set, represent an institutional resource that meets the management demands of postsecondary institutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Make a difference.

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<sup>14</sup> Stephanie McKeown, *Beyond Counting Data: It's How We Interpret Data that Counts*, CIRPA Newsletter, June 2015.