



STATEMENT OF ASPIRATIONAL PRACTICE FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

2016

An Aspirational Vision For Institutional Research

Statement Of Aspirational Practice For Institutional Research

Using The Statement Of Aspirational Practice For Institutional Research At Your Institution

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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.

AN ASPIRATIONAL VISION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

The demand for data to inform decisions in postsecondary education is greater than ever before. Colleges and universities have significantly increased capacity to collect and store data about student and institutional performance, yet few institutions have adequate capacity for converting data into information needed by decision makers. It is even more challenging for them to produce decision support on the fast timelines that decision makers often face.

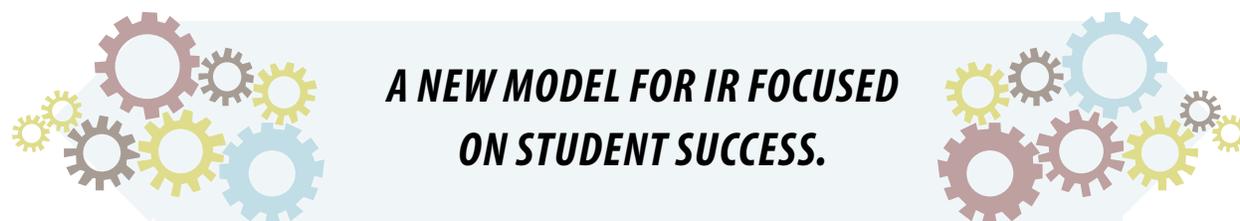
Is there a better way to organize institutional research? Are old models for institutional research positioned to meet the data-as-decision support demands of higher education today?

The *Statement of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research* grew out of IR practices already occurring at many institutions. First, there is increasing demand for decision support from faculty, students, program managers, and academic unit leaders—decision makers who have not been the primary customers of institutional research in the past. Also, recent advances in data distribution and analytic tools make it possible for a wide range of staff to engage in converting data into information. Simply stated, eager consumers and a ready talent base could expand IR capacity and the use of data in decision making.

Increasing the availability and use of data-informed decision making models is a core goal of the Association for Institutional Research (AIR). Yet meeting the growing demand for decision support is hampered by the cost of resources needed to build such capacity. These realities served as the backdrop for conversations between AIR and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which led to the development of an aspirational statement about IR as decision support that focuses on student success.

The *Statement of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research* is not offered as a prescription, but rather as a discussion starter. Readers will find suggestions for creating institutional conversations at the end of this document. It is my hope that such discussion will be the beginning of new models for IR, broader use of data in decision making, and greater levels of student success.

Randy L. Swing, Ph.D.
Association for Institutional Research



OVERVIEW

Data are everywhere across institutions of higher education, and access to analytical tools and reporting software means that a wide array of higher education employees can be actively involved in converting data into decision-support information. As such, models of decision making are changing, which opens new opportunities for wise use of data resources. This *Statement of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research* presents a hybrid approach in which offices of institutional research work in conjunction with other departments and units to produce an organization-wide institutional research function. This approach includes continuation of most current functions, reallocation of some resources, and the addition of new, focused approaches. Key to this vision are a

broadened definition of “decision makers” supported by institutional research, an intentional structure and leadership for data capacities, and adoption of a “student-focused” paradigm for decision support.

This approach builds on the 50-year collaborative nature of the institutional research field. It is a hybrid model of past traditions and new structures, founded on human resource capacities—within a dedicated office of institutional research and embedded in decision points across the institution—with focus on the collection, interpretation, and use of data to achieve an institution’s mission. The goal is for smart people to make smart decisions to improve student success.

STATEMENT OF ASPIRATIONAL PRACTICE FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

RANDY L. SWING AND LEAH EWING ROSS

AN EXPANDED DEFINITION OF “DECISION MAKERS”

Senior leaders have been, and will continue to be, priority consumers of data and information provided by the institutional research function. They are not, however, the only decision makers who impact an institution's achievement of its mission. Other decision makers include students shaping their own experiences, faculty shaping their teaching and interactions with students, and staff shaping program designs and direct interactions with students.

Top-down policies and structures alone do not ensure informed choices and commitments to successful pathways. Broadly engaging all stakeholders in data-informed decisions (tactical, operational, and strategic) is essential for institutional excellence. This hybrid model positions students, faculty, staff, and other decision makers as key consumers and clients of institutional research, and is foundational to a change agency vision of institutional research as a driver for institutional improvement.

Students as Decision Makers

Colleges and universities have responsibilities for assisting students in decisions about their educational pathways. These decisions include student choice to comply with institutional requirements and to select non-required pathway options. Students deserve access to usable information that is focused on their decisions, is of high quality, and is not so highly aggregated or obfuscated by higher education jargon to fail to be useful.

✓ Activating Data-Informed Student Decision Making

- Institutional research topics inform decisions students make (e.g., how to best use time, academic and extracurricular choices, and life decisions that impact collegiate success).
- Institutional research is produced and disseminated with students as the target audience and/or unit of analysis.
- The timing for release and promotion of institutional research products is intentionally aligned with the cycles of student decisions, which often differ from fiscal, multi-year strategic planning, and academic term calendars.

Faculty as Decision Makers

Faculty members are the frontline in achieving an institution's mission and they are the chief architects of the academic environment. Focused and intentional data management and institutional research provide timely and useful faculty decision support for curricula, teaching, and governance.

✓ Activating Data-Informed Faculty Decision Making

- Faculty and faculty committees have access to data and information to support decisions about policies and structures for which they have oversight.
- Individual faculty have access to data and information to support them in designing their work, with special emphasis on student learning outcomes.

Staff as Decision Makers

Staff members have frontline responsibilities for fostering student development of academic and civic behaviors, establishing challenge and support structures for many student learning outcomes, and minding the safety and well-being of individuals in collegiate spaces. Disaggregation of data by unique subpopulations and robust data on out-of-class and life experiences informs planning, design, and implementation of student success initiatives and structures.

✓ Activating Data-Informed Staff Decision Making

- Staff members and staff committees have access to data and information to support decisions about policies and structures for which they have management oversight.
- Individual staff members have access to data and information to support them in designing their work, with special emphasis on disaggregation of data to address the unique needs of specific students.

STRUCTURES AND LEADERSHIP FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

The complexity of modern higher education demands investment in leadership and staffing for strategic, tactical, and operational decisions. Use of data for institutional research cannot be restricted to one office. With greater access to data sources and data tools, and increased department-specific data, institutional research products are widely dispersed across higher education institutions already, even when a strong central office of institutional research exists. An increasing number of staff and mid-level administrators are expected to use data to inform decisions, and decision makers at all levels are establishing their own data collection processes and analytics. Where institutional research once took pride in being the “one source of the truth,” the reality is that the new role for institutional research is in coaching a wide array of data consumers, managing institution-wide data and analytical requirements, and orchestrating “the economics of institutional research” in balancing information supply and demand.

Building and Supporting an Institutional Research Function

The greatest potential for building effective institutional research is leveraging talent across the institution. The function of institutional research connotes the institution-wide use of data and analytics, and not just the products of an office of institutional research. Building the function requires coaching and professional development of employees across the institution in a purposeful and intentional process that increases capacity for data-informed decisions to permeate the institution. Coaching must differentiate an “auto-pilot” “data-driven” strategy from the intended “data-informed” strategy, which includes professional judgment, innovation, experience, theory, and wisdom in decision making.

The goal is for data literacy to be as ubiquitous as expectations for writing, speaking, and computer skills. These are reflected in position descriptions and performance reviews.

✓ Activating a Networked Institutional Research Function

- Data and analytic tools are available institution-wide to activate a broad network of institutional research aligned with strategic, tactical, and operational decisions.
- Human Resource practices identify the data literacy skills required of employees who produce and/or use data and information in their work assignments.
- Institutions provide training and continuing professional development of data-related skills for all employees. 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.

LEADERSHIP FOR THE INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH FUNCTION

A Chief Institutional Research Officer (CIRO), at a commensurate level of others who manage valuable resources (e.g., Chief Financial Officer and Chief Information Officer), is prudent to provide leadership to build and maintain the **institutional research function**. This role is broader than a traditional director of institutional research in that the CIRO is responsible for the tactical and strategic direction of the institutional research function.

The CIRO leads by supporting and coordinating all institutional research, institutional effectiveness, assessment, accreditation, mandatory reporting, business analytics, and other data-focused decision-support activities. The position assures an effective institutional research function, internally-driven and resourced through purchased and shared services. It requires a significant focus on building relationships with individuals throughout the institution, understanding data and information structures and capacities, and connecting disparate pieces of information.

✓ Activating Leadership for the Institutional Research Function

- The Chief Institutional Research Officer (CIRO) institutes strategic plans for growing and maintaining an institution's analytic and data capacities.
- The CIRO communicates the value of data-derived information in a holistic model of decision making that includes professional judgment, institutional mission, and environmental factors.
- The CIRO is a leader of the institution's data governance strategy.
- The CIRO ensures that decision-makers have timely and useful information.

A STUDENT-FOCUSED PARADIGM

In this aspirational vision of institutional research, data and analytics are transparent and are intentionally focused on improving the student experience. Many of the past successes in institutional research have focused on students—enrollment management, retention, engagement, and graduation rates. Yet that focus can be further enhanced by **intentionally** grounding institutional research initiatives and reports in a student-focused perspective. A key question to be addressed in all institutional research is “how does this exploration serve students?” An essential component of communicating these results is making clear their underlying student-centered purposes.

✓ Activating a Student-Focused Paradigm

- The selection and design of institutional research is predicated on a commitment to the success of all students.
- Using expertise in communications, institutional reports demonstrate effective strategies for “telling the data story” and intentionally connecting all exploration to the student experience, including learning outcomes.
- Institutional research avoids “silo” approaches that fail to recognize that students experience an institution holistically and not as individual administrative functions and units.

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SUMMARY

This *Statement of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research* is not a prediction of a distant future; rather, it reflects changes that are already observable. It is not a critique of institutional research functions that have served higher education well over the past five decades. These ideas address and support the rapidly growing culture of data-informed decision making and provide a starting point for a new vision for institutional research in higher education. The ultimate goal is institutional engagement, not a prescription for a specific path of change.

The future role of institutional research is creating demand for decision-support and balancing it with the supply of information to meet that demand. While celebrating the success of institutional research in shaping colleges, universities, and state and national educational policies, this aspirational statement is intended to promote active re-envisioning of the institutional research function needed for the short- and long-term future of post-secondary education.

BACKGROUND

The *Statement of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research* calls for a new vision of effective IR. Built on decision support for student success, and an awareness that the field of institutional research is changing, this effort engaged IR leaders and external consultants in the establishment of necessary conditions for successful IR functions. Elements of the statement are in place at many colleges and universities, but much of the statement remains “aspirational” for most institutions.

The statement was developed through crowdsourcing about the necessary conditions of an effective institutional research function focused on student success. More than 260 individuals participated in this project in myriad roles related to the formation and vetting of concepts included in the statement:

- AIR members responded to an open call for aspirational statement ideas in Fall 2014;
- six subject matter experts (AIR members) met in Fall 2014 to provide guidance on the crafting of the aspirational statement;
- the statement was pilot tested in Spring 2015; and
- AIR peer reviewers offered feedback on the revised statement in Fall 2015.

The Association for Institutional Research expresses deep appreciation for the ten institutions that vetted the statement by convening meetings of individuals who produce and/or consume data for decision making. It was the rich conversations among senior leaders (presidents, provosts, vice presidents, chief information officers, directors, etc.), academic leaders (provosts, deans, department chairs), students, and institutional research professionals that confirmed most of the ideas, rejected some ideas, and help set the final tone and structure of the document.

FOUNDING INSTITUTIONS

The ten institutions that participated in pilot testing and are recognized as the **Founding Institutions of the *Statement of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research***: Bridgepoint Education; Elgin Community College; Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis; Olin College of Engineering; Spelman College; Spokane Falls Community College; University of Denver; University of Nevada, Las Vegas; University of Wisconsin-Stout; and Utah Valley University.

USING THE STATEMENT OF ASPIRATIONAL PRACTICE FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH AT YOUR INSTITUTION

CREATING A CALL TO ACTION AT YOUR INSTITUTION

Note: The process each campus uses may vary based on context/situation.

STEP 1

Host a small group discussion about the *Statement of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research* within the Office of Institutional Research. Allocate 2-3 hours for this conversation, led by the director of institutional research (or similar). If a dedicated Office of Institutional Research does not exist, the discussion should take place among individuals at the institution who comprise the institutional research function—that is, individuals who work in assessment, reporting, institutional effectiveness, business intelligence, and other data and analytics-related units.

STEP 2

Vet the *Statement of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research* with a group of decision makers at the institution. This group should be comprised of individuals who are charged with making decisions for consumers of IR data and/or managers of IR functions, including the president, provost, and vice presidents. They should represent as much variety as possible among decision-makers on campus, including student functions, faculty administration, and department/college leaders. Examples of individuals who could offer useful perspectives—in addition to the senior leaders listed above—include enrollment managers, retention coordinators/planners, accreditation liaisons, deans, department chairs, student affairs professionals, business officers, and student leaders.

Allocate two hours for this conversation led by the chief institutional research officer, director of institutional research, or similar. Provide the statement as advance reading, and start the meeting with a presentation that features the key components of the statement. The focus of the meeting should be to determine if the core elements of the statement would improve the IR function at the institution. Conversation should focus on three key topics: identification of decision makers, where IR capacity can be increased using existing staffing and resources, and need for senior-level oversight and management of the function. Also, the group is encouraged to consider the “activation” steps outlined in the statement with due consideration to feasibility and action planning, and identify potential outcomes their subsequent value.

✓ Small Group Discussion Questions

- What are your overall impressions of the statement and its value and importance to this institution?
- What actions, if any, are needed to implement different components of the statement?
- What obstacles, if any, prevent the institution from fully implementing or achieving the different components of the statement?
- How aspirational is this work for our institution?
- What are the potential outcomes and values of achieving the components of the statement?

STEP 3

Craft a summary report of the meetings held in Steps 1 and 2. Seek feedback on the report from meeting participants, and distribute a final copy of the report to stakeholders. The report should include:

- An assessment of the statement’s level of importance for the institution, including potential outcomes and value.
- Identification of the levels of aspiration tied to each component of the statement. That is, are there “low hanging fruit” that the institution could easily achieve in support of this new vision for institutional research? What areas require longer-term plans?
- Acknowledgment of obstacles and barriers related to realization of the key themes of the statement.

FOLLOW-UP

The result of these meetings will be a specific action plan that incorporates the statement into the regular work of the institution. Groups should also plan to revisit the statement at future dates to regularly assess the institution’s activities related to the statement.



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The pilot conversation had a startling positive effect: As we discussed a focus on students, how we might communicate current information to them, as well as new information we might generate with them in mind, everyone in the room was filled with ideas. The conversation was optimistic and enthusiastic. If the purpose of the *Statement of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research* is to inspire and excite—it worked. **The focus on students, both as an audience and a general orientation, captured the imagination of executives and institutional research colleagues alike!**

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—UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY

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Every institution should have students and their success as the primary focus. There is great value in identifying institutional research functions and institutional practices that will help maintain this focus throughout our work.

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—ELGIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

“ This is a real **paradigm shift**. This is not just continuous improvement, but **reengineering of the institutional research function**—a cultural change. Attaining this vision will entail changing our roles as institutional research leaders to facilitators of training, workshops, and forums on the appropriate use of data and understanding of definitions, cause and effect vs. correlation, etc. This re-visioning of institutional research also entails making sure that we put time and effort into understanding the anatomy of decision making about student success. ”

—INDIANA UNIVERSITY-PURDUE UNIVERSITY INDIANAPOLIS

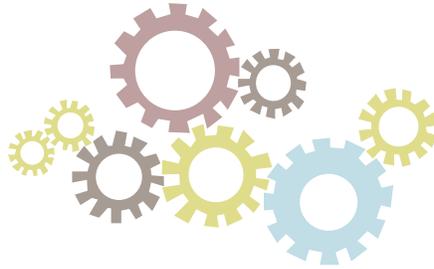
“ One colleague’s comment encapsulates the value of this aspirational statement: ‘We have to expand decision makers, and in a parallel process, improve data literacy. Eventually we hope for convergence between expanding decision makers and improving data literacy.’ Further, taking steps to **recognize students as decision makers** is regarded as **‘the most relevant and important piece** of the entire statement.’ ”

—BRIDGEPOINT EDUCATION

“ **Widening the conceptualization of a “decision maker” will greatly benefit the institution in the long term.** Expanding access to data across the organizational hierarchy will improve faculty and staff members’ ability to carry out their work and responsibilities. Increasing student access to data will help empower students to take control of their education, make better decisions, and ultimately be more successful. ”

—UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS





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