



the Research & Planning Group
for California Community Colleges

Discussing Institutional Research

Findings & Discussion Questions on Community College Research Capacity & Focus

Introduction

In 2009, the RP Group conducted a survey and focus groups with Institutional Research (IR) offices in the California community college system, with the goal of documenting the staffing profile of offices, the types of activities in which IR offices are engaged, and the support that could help researchers become more effective. The study revealed a sector in transition: the scope of work of research offices is increasing despite flat or declining budgets. Three out of four of these offices are led by relatively new directors, whose level of research experience varies widely. Furthermore, the field does not agree on where the emphasis of the IR office should be, with equal numbers believing that their core function is reporting versus believing the emphasis should shift away from reporting to collaborative research.

IR offices are being asked to provide more evidence for a wider range of practitioners, but this is problematic. Practitioners need more support, different types of data, and tailored communications for this information to be useful, but researchers' time is largely spent on producing research and reports. As a result, there is little to no time to work with practitioners to understand and integrate research findings into practice.

IR staff members are looking for ways to gather data that are more specific than institution-wide measures, would like ways to assure that college and Chancellor's Office Management Information System (MIS) data are consistent, and to seek training that will enable them to be more effective in working with faculty members, particularly in supporting student learning outcomes (SLOs).

Over the past year since the survey, the RP Group has developed a series of resources to respond to these needs. However, the study points to the need for more work to define the role and value of research in the colleges, expand who is engaged in this process, and develop stronger support mechanisms for emerging research priorities.

This document presents the major findings of the survey and offers discussion questions that can be used among researchers to address changes in institutional research and to identify action steps that would make research more accurate, useful, and integrated into California community colleges.

Methodology

Ninety college and district IR offices responded to the survey (67.7% of the 111 colleges and 22 district offices) and 32 IR staff participated in focus groups. The findings of the 2009 study were compared to a similar survey conducted in 2006, which documented the size and scope of research offices in all of the California community colleges and districts. The majority of the respondents to the 2009 survey were from large colleges, with a headcount of more than 20,000 students.

Discussion of Findings

The survey and focus groups offer insight into activities that research offices are engaged in, the purpose these offices serve in the organization, and their ability to respond to college needs. Survey respondents and focus group participants also highlighted the areas where researchers need additional resources and support in order to work effectively. The following section offers a series of key findings and related discussion questions in four key areas: 1) scope of work, 2) staffing, 3) increasing effectiveness, and 4) desired resources and tools.

A. IR Office Scope of Work

The titles of research offices are shifting, with functions such as planning and institutional effectiveness more commonly occurring than in 2006. *While the scope of responsibility is increasing, respondents indicated that funding for IR offices was flat or declining.* Almost half of college offices and a third of district offices reported that there was no change to their budget due to the budget crisis, while half of college and nearly two-thirds of district offices reported budget cuts.

Survey respondents were asked to rank an extensive list of activities based on their level of priority at the IR office. The three top priority activities for college research offices were accreditation, program review, and institutional and/or department surveys. District offices reported their three top priorities were data extracts, data warehousing, and accreditation.

Survey respondents were asked to rank the amount of time they devote to different elements of the research cycle including production, dissemination, interpretation, translating evidence into action, and closing and widening the loop. Of these elements, *research offices spend the most time on data production and the least amount of time on closing the loop*, with moderate amounts of time going to dissemination, interpretation, and translating evidence.

Survey respondents were also asked whether the emphasis at their institution was on a collaborative cycle of research or on reporting, and whether this focus should change. Responses were split, with a quarter indicating the need to shift some of the time and resources currently spent on reporting to research, a quarter feeling that their offices were already balancing research and reporting activities, and a quarter asserting that IR is essentially reporting and saw no need

for change. The remaining responses either indicated reporting was done outside the IR office or described staff efforts to shift from reporting to research despite a college culture that did not share this value.

Discussion questions:

- How has your institution's research office's scope of work of changed in the last year? What has driven this change?
- In reviewing the various elements of research cycle listed above, where does your institution's IR office devote most of its time? Who determines these priorities?
- Is your institution's IR office able to balance collaborative research and reporting needs? What changes would be needed to achieve the optimal balance? Who might want the emphasis to shift and why? Who might be against such a shift and why?
- How have accreditation requirements affected the ability of your institution to respond to data requests or to assist practitioners with understanding and applying research results?

B. Staffing

Of the college and district IR offices that participated in the survey, a little more than a third are one-person shops. Twenty percent had two staff, and almost half had three or more staff. (Note: Since a third of the IR offices in the state did not respond to this survey, and most of those that did not respond were from smaller colleges and districts, these figures are skewed toward larger institutions.) When comparing the 2009 and the 2006 responses based on college size, it appears that the staffing of the IR function declined in all but the large colleges, with large offices showing only minimal gains.

The titles of chief research officers are becoming more consistent and are most commonly referred to as a director. *Nearly three-quarters of chief research officers have been in their position less than five years.* The experience level of chief research officers varies across the state. More than a third had five or fewer years of experience in research while almost half had more than ten years of experience.

Discussion questions:

- How has the size of your institution's research office changed in the last year? What impact has this had on meeting college and district needs?
- If your chief research officer is relatively new, what led to this shift (e.g., the previous person left, a new position was created, a different skill set was desired)? Is your institution facing a leadership transition in the research office? What is the impact of changes in research office staffing?
- What skill sets has your institution prioritized in hiring its research staff? What is it likely to prioritize in the coming year?

C. Increasing the Effectiveness of Institutional Research

Nearly two-thirds of survey respondents mentioned that more staffing would increase their effectiveness, with the most desired position being a research analyst. A quarter felt that changes were needed in the culture of their institution to support research.

The focus groups enabled further investigation of these issues and showed that the need for additional resources and changes in the college culture are linked, due to the shifting role of research. *Participants described an environment in which the number of requests for data is rising rapidly, but these requests come at short notice, with poorly defined questions or limited understanding of what types of research are possible.* Furthermore, if researchers are able to respond to the requests, the results are often poorly understood, disregarded, or remain unincorporated because there is not sufficient time to analyze their implications. Lastly, the researchers worried about the quality of the data in their college's or district's management information system.

When asked to share the challenges they faced in advancing their institution's research agenda and improving the ability to engage in evidence-based decision-making, the following themes emerged:

- Historically devalued perception of the research function
- Institutional priorities do not include research
- Practitioners' resistance to change
- Lack of awareness about research purpose, scope, and value
- Variety in practitioner abilities
- Lack of perceived relevance of data
- Disconnect between those who enter data and those who use data
- Limited resources

Researchers recommended a number of strategies for improving evidence-based decision-making, including:

- Shifting the level of analysis to the classroom or program level to make data more relevant
- Building practitioner ownership of evidence by engaging them in designing research and empowering them to collect their own data
- Tailoring reports to the specific concerns of sub-groups within the college
- Providing opportunities for practitioners to explore this data so that they are more engaged in new college-wide initiatives

When asked to share successful strategies for advancing the research agenda and improving the college's ability to engage in evidence-based decision-making, focus group participants described efforts to:

- Increase the number of people engaging in defining and analyzing data
- Distribute results using short, tailored, non-technical language
- Make data more accessible through websites
- Spend more time in data discussions with practitioners
- Make the research prioritization process more transparent

Discussion questions:

- How has your institution's research office responded to request for data? How have the results been integrated into practice? What could make this process more effective?
- Given that the most common tasks of college research offices are accreditation, program review, and institutional surveys, is there a way to integrate new requests for data gathering and interpretation into these existing processes?
- How reliable are your institution's data? What are some specific examples of how data errors impact the research office's ability to respond to data requests? What actions could be taken to increase data quality?
- How is research perceived at your institution? Is its purpose, scope, and value commonly understood? How can a case be made that research is an institutional priority?
- What could be done to make research more relevant and accessible to practitioners? How can this be done in the context of constrained resources?

D. Desired Institutional Research Resources and Tools

Given the tension of increased workloads and shrinking budgets, participants were asked about tools and resources that would help them with their work. In the survey, the top three reports, services, or tools requested were:

- Tool to enable student cohort tracking
- Models of learning assessment
- Tool to check MIS data with college data

Survey respondents were then asked to indicate which of the reports, services, or tools they suggested would have the biggest impact in their office. *Cohort tracking was seen as the resource that would be most helpful for addressing research needs.* Other common responses include a tool that would help compare/verify MIS data with college data, support for SLO assessment and accreditation, and ways to share information, resources, and reports across colleges.

When asked what types of training they would like to receive, researchers prioritized data tools and SLO assessment. Interest was also expressed in communication, changing college culture, and planning.

Discussion questions:

- What specific cohort tracking tools would be most useful at your institution? Can this need be met through existing tools such the Chancellor's Office Data on Demand or Cal-PASS' SMART tool? Do you have the ability to build additional tracking in-house?
- How would your institution use cohort tracking? What benefits would be gained? To whom would this information be useful? How could results be shared to maximize their usefulness?

- How has your institution integrated SLO assessment and accreditation? How are these responsibilities shared or coordinated among researchers and faculty? How can research offices partner with faculty and student services professionals to support SLO assessment?
- How does your institution address variability among data sources such as college data, MIS data, and Cal-PASS data? What would be the optimal way to align various data sources?

For More Information

For a full report of the study's findings or to read a more detailed summary, visit:

<http://www.rpgroup.org/resources/2009-ir-survey>.

The RP Group has conducted other studies that address issues of research capacity and the ability of colleges to act on the information they gather, including:

- A 2009 study of faculty, administrators, student services professionals, and researchers on the state of evidence-based decision-making in the colleges
- A 2006 study of research office sizes and functions
- A 2004 document outlining statewide trends that would shape institutional research at community colleges

All of these are available at: <http://www.rpgroup.org/projects/california-community-college-research-capacity>.

The RP Group's Bridging Research Information and Culture (BRIC) Initiative includes a host of free, downloadable resources to facilitate the use of evidence, including a suite of inquiry guides on issues such as "Assessing Student Learning Outcomes," "Maximizing the Program Review Process," and "Turning Data into Meaningful Action." Find out more at:

<http://www.rpgroup.org/projects/BRIC.html>.

The RP Group

The RP Group is a nonprofit organization working to build a community college culture that views planning, evidence-based decision-making, and institutional effectiveness as key strategies for student success. Visit our website at www.rpgroup.org to find out more about our research studies, professional development opportunities, and online resources.