Basic Skills Outcomes Capacity Study

The use of evidence in California community colleges

In an effort to better understand the types of evidence colleges are collecting and how it is being used, this study surveyed representatives from over 100 California community colleges in Spring 2009. At each of these institutions, information was gathered from a broad range of professionals including CEOs, chief instructional officers, deans, managers, faculty, and institutional researchers. The opportunity to map data flows across the institution from multiple frames of reference provided insight into how research could be more strongly linked to practice at all levels of the institution.

The survey found that:

o Colleges are data rich and information poor. Although many colleges are successfully tracking metrics ranging from enrollments to student learning outcomes, few have the capacity to analyze the data and use them to inform decision making.
o There is a perception gap between administrators and faculty regarding the availability and use of assessment data. Furthermore, college administrators believe that information is more widely available and integrated into planning than those who work more closely with students.
o Although institution-level data is being reviewed regularly, data at the intervention level is used less frequently and by fewer individuals.

> We have a lot of data, but we need to apply the information more and communicate to a broader audience on campus.
>
> *Community college practitioner, responding to the survey*

Respondent identified several areas where support is needed to foster the use of evidence:

o assistance with interpretation and use of data and information
o additional staff to support the increased demand for research
o increased access to data and information

Finally the study indicated that there is a correlation between established research practices and a consistent integration of evidence throughout the college. Examples include:

o an established research office where staff serve on numerous college-wide committees
o widely available information through online systems and training on using evidence
o established mechanisms for requesting data and information, coupled with policies and protocols for conducting and using research on campus

Redefining the research function

The gap between the collection and use of evidence, the disconnect between institutional and student-level assessment, and the need for greater sharing and interpreting of information suggests that a redesign of the research function may be warranted. Most community college research offices have been explicitly engineered to support the collection of outcome data to facilitate the preparation of state mandated reports and strategic benchmarking activities. While analysis of enrollment management, productivity, and efficiency are key foundational pieces of information for college operations, they are somewhat removed from the core mission of the college – to optimize conditions for student learning, both in the classroom and through programs and services that enhance learning. It appears that a better balance might be struck between the various types of research, with an increased focus on research, analysis, and consultation that is closer to the practitioner level and more directly addresses student learning.

As a an interventionist discipline, institutional research must evolve to meet the emerging demands on community colleges to build data support processes that inform decision making at every layer of the institution. The path to ongoing innovation and a pervasive culture of inquiry requires that colleges broaden their definition of research to include the following five activities:

1. **Production** - gather and collect data, conduct analyses and write research reports that are both clear and informative.

2. **Dissemination** – have an infrastructure in place for the dissemination of data and information to appropriate stakeholders throughout the college and to the public.

3. **Interpretation** – help administrators, faculty and staff analyze and interpret the data and information and in so doing, assist them in evolving their research and inquiry skills.

4. **Translating Evidence into Action** – assist administrators, faculty and staff in using data and information to drive improvement and planning decisions.

5. **Closing and Widening the Loop** – ensure that decision making is translated into action and action is widely evaluated and based on data.
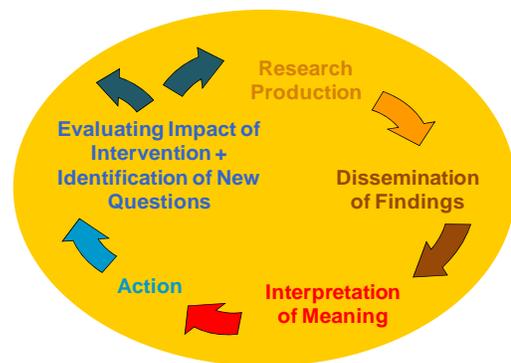
A recasting of research along these lines will require an expanded set of capabilities. First, the capacity and skills of institutional research offices must be expanded so that they can work more closely with practitioners. Second, faculty and student services professionals must become more fluent in understanding and acting on information, so that their expertise can be lent to defining research questions, interpreting data, and formulating action steps.

From ideas to action

In order to facilitate the reformulation of research capacity, the RP Group recommends three key strategies. These recommendations form the structure for the Bridging Research, Information, and Culture (BRIC) program, which launched in Fall 2009 with funding by the Hewlett Foundation.

1. **Increase the efficiency of institutional research offices to handle existing workloads.** The RP Group has hired an Institutional Research "Concierge" who is tasked with staying current on available and newly-developed tools that can create efficiencies for college-level researchers and with developing resources to support their work in all five research domains.

2. **Provide assistance that enables colleges to work more effectively with data and information.** The RP Group will provide technical assistance to support institutions in strengthening their capacities to collaboratively analyze and act on information, thereby strengthening cultures of inquiry and evidence. Teams of expert researchers and faculty will provide tailored support for up to fifteen California community colleges. Colleges will be selected through a competitive process in 2010.

3. **Develop an online and regional professional development structure that facilitates building cultures of evidence.** The budget crisis has resulted in deep cuts to the professional development infrastructure of the California community college system. The RP Group is developing a series of opportunities that can be easily accessed at little or no cost and that addresses the limited time that will be available for professional learning. Many of these resources will be tailored for non-research professionals and will address the value of research, data coaching, and using evidence for decision making.

Why this matters

The California community college system is at a crossroads. Faced with deep budget cuts and skyrocketing enrollments, colleges will need to restructure themselves to prepare students for college-level work, retrain adults who have lost their jobs, integrate the fast-growing immigrant population, and respond to heightened accountability requirements. The BSOC project gives a snapshot of this transition, highlighting the need to ramp up the role of research to enable colleges to make their transformations based on solid evidence. This research shows that developing the capacity to understand and act on information has been difficult even in the relatively generous funding environment of the past three years. It will be imperative going forward that colleges are able to streamline their reporting, enhance access and ability to understand data, and ensure that this information helps to shape future efforts. Ultimately this project, together with the new BRIC program, strive to formulate a roadmap for organizational change using key outcomes measures to facilitate improved success for the system's 2.9 million students.

Find out more

The RP Group has created a number of resources that address the themes that emerged from this study, including a streaming presentation, a full report, and a webcast. Please visit www.rpgroup.org/css/BSOC.html to access these materials.