

Meeting the Institutional Effectiveness Challenge



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The accountability demands on community colleges continue to intensify. Federal and state policy makers, accreditors, and the public are demanding that colleges demonstrate effectiveness at reaching institutional goals, achieve higher levels of student completion and employment, and, at the same time, bring effective programs to scale. The rising emphasis on Institutional Effectiveness is creating novel challenges for many research and planning offices, and is increasingly at odds with the intent and structure of research, planning, and evaluation processes currently in place at many community colleges.

Within the current structure, the research office can often be an afterthought to major transformation initiatives, planning activity is often parochial to a program's specific needs, and research is often shaped by independent data requests defined by multiple end users. *Ultimately, under the current model, opportunities to provide leadership on how to understand the impact of individual strategies on college goals and student outcomes can be missed.*

This article is a summary of a working paper on an emerging Institutional Effectiveness (IE) model that is a response to the current landscape's pitfalls. It is also an invitation to start a dialogue on the topic for the purpose of gaining feedback, insight, potential best practices, and also identifying any possible support needed for the field to move the needle.

A Developing Disconnect

If we allow the term "Institutional Effectiveness" to encapsulate the suite of activities and processes focused on improving college outcomes that enable the institution to accomplish its mission, it forces a conversation about how to best synthesize accumulated knowledge, align efforts, and enable new leadership in pursuit of a common goal.

Today, most IR offices are at capacity and producing a steady string of

research findings that, in the aggregate, often result in a fragmented patchwork of disjointed insights that can't be easily stitched together to support discussions of the big picture, nor effectively inform strategic planning.

This structure can lead to a Tower of Babel environment where knowledge acquired through research in one area of the college cannot be easily communicated to other areas, leading to disconnect, redundancy and a misalignment of activities that can result in islands of innovation not integrated into the broader institution, and resulting also in programs lasting only as long as funding is available.

To meet the growing demands for improvement in institution-wide performance and student outcomes, colleges and districts may have to consider redesigning some age-old structures and processes.

Challenges with the Current Approach

1. Cannot easily assess Institutional Effectiveness; evaluation is often limited to individual projects
2. Can lead to the expansion of favored and popular programs, but programs for which there is little or weak evidence of having impact on IE
3. May serve to reinforce silo perspectives and inhibit the college's ability to bring effective programs to scale
4. May limit the opportunity for organizational learning

Forging a Strategic Response

Even when political pressures and societal demands supply the necessary incentives, institutional and cultural change will not just happen. Leadership across the institution, vision, transparency, and a commonly shared direction are critical. New structures and processes designed to facilitate change are necessary, as are communications, collaboration, data and research, patience, time, and sustained effort.

Of all the ingredients necessary to improve progress toward greater Institutional Effectiveness, two appear particularly important: an agreed upon organizing principle and an effective leadership structure.

Identifying a Framework

Given the steady stream of initiatives coming from the state – CAI, OEI, EPI, BSI, SSSP, Equity, Strong Workforce, and AEBG – it can be a challenge for colleges to manage the flow in a manner that brings alignment and coherence to all strategies and activities.

An organizing framework can guide and inform evaluation activities on how – and to what degree – programs are moving the needle on IE. It can also create common understanding about how all initiatives connect and reinforce each other.

Under an IE model, leadership, planning and evaluation processes speak a common and coherent language that address IE demands and aspirations of each college/district.

An Illustration of the IE Model:



Evidence on the Advantages of the IE Model

A study conducted last year by the Association for Higher Education Effectiveness (**AHEE**) found that among colleges that have established Institutional Effectiveness offices, college President's cited the following advantages associated with the switch to the IE model:

- improved effectiveness and efficiency of decision-making
- improved institutional accountability and ability to establish priorities
- ability to carry out benchmarking and identify best practices
- greater timeliness, accuracy and richness of evidence
- durability of decision support processes
- better connection of people and systems
- heightened ability to focus on student success
- potential to influence policy

The Role of Leadership

Emerging research on organizational design and leadership is also beginning to identify the need for IR professionals to elevate their leadership roles and help shape evaluation practices and decision-making protocols to better support Institutional Effectiveness.

Other research reveals movement in this area already taking place. For instance, AHEE has recently documented a growth in the creation of IE offices and senior IE leadership positions across the nation. From 2005 to 2015 AHEE reports that the number of colleges/districts nationwide employing a chief IE officer, nearly doubled.

This leadership need not be tied to a job title and can take multiple forms. Indeed many research offices routinely provide effective leadership from the middle of the organization and are excellent stewards of Institutional Effectiveness.

However, most existing college structures did not anticipate the need for an institution-wide perspective on research and evaluation and these pre-existing structures can often inhibit a college's progress toward greater IEs.

Does Your Institution Follow an IE Approach?

There are many colleges and districts that believe they are committed to Institutional Effectiveness, pointing to language in their strategic plan, regular reviews of effectiveness data at planning councils, discussions of evidence at president's cabinet, and more, in an attempt to demonstrate an IE-based approach.

Even if these dialogues are authentic and there is robust follow-up, these practices by themselves are not likely to produce higher levels of Institutional Effectiveness.

Without a firm understanding of the mechanisms of change – the manner by which individual programs influence institutional outcomes, and the degree to which programs impact each other and downstream outcomes like student success, milestone completion, and credential attainment – resource allocation decisions are still largely blind, and efforts to improve institutional outcomes are built on a hope and a prayer.

Colleges may be successfully closing the loop on program evaluations, experiencing steady improvement in program-level performance, and still have outcome trends that remain flat year after year. A thriving culture of evidence and inquiry is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for achieving Institutional Effectiveness.

Key Questions to Ask

Absent the ability to synthesize results from independent evaluations and the deliberate intent to keep research and evaluation activities oriented toward institution's effectiveness, colleges will be challenged to answer increasingly important big-picture questions such as:

- Has the college's SSSP strategy been effective in reaching college goals?
- What programs have the biggest impact on IE?
- What has been the impact of recent equity funding on student completion?

Support Needed for the Field?

Emerging issues that have the potential to impact the field, warrant discussion and deeper insight. In this light, it might be fruitful for the RP Group to:

- Encourage discussion around, and flesh out, the topic
- Determine the depth and breadth of the issue and its importance, based on feedback and findings
- Provide relevant resources and education tailored to an IE strategic approach if needed

Your Perspective...

While typically, each issue of *Perspectives* plays home to many voices, in this issue, we ask for *your insight and voice*, and invite you to respond to this topic on our [RP Listserv](#) or directly to Gregory Stoup at gstoup@rpgroup.org. Discussion points could include:

- Are you experiencing any of these challenges at your institution?
- Do you feel that your college can answer the big picture questions related to student outcomes?
- Do current structures and processes at your college inhibit transformational (scale-level) improvements?

For questions, citations on research mentioned, or for a copy of the working paper, contact Gregory Stoup at the email address above.



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