

2009 Survey of Institutional Research Offices in the California Community College System A Summary of the Findings

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. Ninety-one 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. This document provides a summary of the study findings and spells out action steps that the RP Group has taken or plans to take in order to respond to the needs of the field.

Overview

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 MIS data are consistent, and seek training that will enable them to be more effective in working with faculty, particularly in supporting student learning outcomes.

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.

Staffing and Budgets

The majority of the respondents were from large colleges, with a headcount of more than 20,000 students in Fall 2009. A little more than a third (36%) of both college and district IR offices responding to the survey are what is commonly known as the “one-person shop,” with slightly less than two thirds of these offices having more than one person. Since we do not have information for all the IR offices in the state, we were not able to conduct a thorough analysis of changes between 2006 and 2009. However, when comparing the 2009 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. Overall, most IR offices responding to the survey have one full-time research analyst and colleges are more likely than districts to have two analysts. In contrast, most responding IR offices did not report having clerical support.

Job titles for chief research officers (CRO) are becoming more consistent and are usually referred to as a director. Nearly three-quarters of CROs have been in their position less than five years (72%), with experience doing research varying widely across the state. More than a third of CROs had five or fewer years of experience in research. Most CROs in college offices report to the president (58%) or a vice president (27%), whereas the majority of CROs in district offices report to a vice or assistant chancellor (54%) or the chancellor (23%).

Respondents indicated that funding for IR offices was flat or declining. Forty-three percent of college offices and 33% of district offices reported that there was no change to their budget due to the budget crisis, while 47% of college and 58% of district offices reported budget cuts.

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. Nevertheless, research and planning are only explicitly linked in the office title of half of the 2009 respondents.

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 research including production, dissemination, interpretation, translating evidence into action, and closing and widening the loop. 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.

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. One-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 and act on 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 input and those who use data
- Limited resources

Researchers recommended changes such as:

- 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

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 (94%)
- Models of learning assessment (90%)
- Tool to check MIS data with college data (88%)

Survey respondents were asked to indicate which of the reports, services, or tools they suggested would have the biggest impact in their office and why. Cohort tracking was the most frequent response to this question. Other common responses include support for SLO assessment and accreditation, a tool that would help compare/verify MIS data with college data, and ways to share information, resources, and reports.

In the focus groups, further information was gathered on tools or resources that would assist researchers in their work. Once again, cohort tracking was the most popular response, with the following considerations identified for such a tool: how it would interface with MIS and non-MIS systems, how to keep it flexible, keeping in mind that some colleges are self-sufficient and do not require such a tool, and how to approach issues of inter-college data sharing. Peripheral questions included how to define a program or identify a cohort, how to work with practitioners on these definitions and identifications, and how to explain the difference between various sources of data.

Institutional Research Resources and Support

Commonly Used Tools and Reports

Survey respondents indicated that the mostly commonly used community college data resources are ARCC, the Data Mart, the MIS Data Element Dictionary, and Data on Demand (each was used by more than 80% of respondents). Among those responding to this question, all reported using the California Department of Education (CDE) online tools (Data Quest, Ed Data, Longitudinal Data) for K-12 resources.

More than 80% reported using the Accrediting Commission's (ACCJC) website and resources, CPEC's online tools (transfer pathways, quick data, custom reports), Basic Skills Initiative's website and resources, and NCES/IPEDS peer institutions and data cutting tools. Other popular resources included the US Census population and demographic data, California Labor Market Information, and the California Department of Finance (DOF) state and county population. Seventy-one percent of survey respondents reported accessing resources from the Association for Institutional Research (AIR).

RP Group Services

Respondents gave feedback about their experiences and desires for specific types of resources.

Regional Research Groups

Over 75% of the college and district offices have attended a regional research group. Those who had not participated primarily reported logistical issues such as scheduling, lack of funds, workload concerns, and distance to the meetings; however, the lack of useful information sharing and interactive topics was also cited as a reason for choosing not to attend.

Training

Thirty-five percent of survey respondents indicated an ability to attend in-person trainings similar to the Drive-In Workshops that RP offered in the past, with data tools and SLO assessment being the most desired topic areas. Interest was also expressed in communication, changing college culture, and planning as topics for these trainings. The top three preferred web-based training formats were downloadable reference documents (100%), live webinars (96%), and recorded streaming sessions (75%).

Publications/Written Communications

Over half of the college and district offices read every issue of *Perspectives*, the RP Group online newsletter, while approximately 10% of these offices never read it. Half of respondents read the *Journal of Applied Research in Community Colleges* (JARCC), and 20% share it with others. What is interesting is that district offices reported reading and sharing JARCC in higher proportions than college offices. All of the respondents indicated that they like to receive updates via the listserv, while 62% indicated that they liked short, targeted newsletters, and 59% liked posts to the website.

Website

Respondents were asked about their use of the RP Group website (*note*: this information refers to the website before its redesign). The most widely used segments of the website are tips and tools, information and materials from events, and research studies, with at least three-fourths of respondents accessing these segments. More than half reported that they never accessed the RP Group Awards, regional research group websites, or job postings.

RP Group Actions

As a result of responses from the survey and focus groups, the RP Group has engaged in the following activities during 2010:

1. Moved from a static to dynamic website with a more robust resources repository, tag-based organization of the resources, and discussion forums to enable knowledge-sharing and build an online community
2. Increased the amount of downloadable reference documents by:
 - developing a series of nine inquiry guides that outline guiding principles, offer various models, have pre-developed discussion questions, and a provide series of resources surrounding critical

- collecting hundreds of resources and placing them on the website
 - enabling registered members of the RP website to upload resource materials thereby broadening the ownership of the resources to the field
 - beginning the development of 20 online mini-workshops addressing specific data issues such as “integrating data into institutional processes” and “telling your story with data,” which can be used to lead campus-based discussions (these will be released in Spring 2011)
3. Offered regional workshops, developed sessions for the Student Success Conference, uploaded resources, and hosted a suit of annual awards with the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges to document effective SLO implementation
 4. Partnered with Cal-PASS to offer professional development opportunities around existing tools. For example, in November –December 2010, RP provided a series of statewide workshops and a webinar on Cal-PASS’s SMART Tool, which allows for cohort tracking.
 5. Used the needs identified in the survey and focus groups to structure a new conference specifically for researchers. This conference is now an annual event.
 6. Restructured *Perspectives*, the RP e-newsletter, to focus more on highlighting effective tools and studies in four areas: statewide issues, research, planning, and assessment, as well as increasing its frequency to a monthly publication
 7. Reinstated the RP Directory, which is now available on the RP website
 8. Built a communications plan that enables findings from a study or other announcements to be effectively communicated to a variety of target audiences (see, for example, the brief on RP’s study of transfer in Engineering)

Next Steps

Over the course of 2010, the RP Group’s efforts were focused on building resources that responded to the needs of the field. Our next steps will be to work with the field to ensure they know about the tools and to help integrate these tools into the work of institutional research offices.

Key to this process will be discussions among researchers about the role they play within their institutions and ways to balance the expanding demands on research offices. As a first step, the RP Group has developed a discussion guide about the evolving role of research and the realities of research capacity in the colleges to help further these conversations among researchers.

The RP Group will also further its advocacy role, working with other constituency groups such as faculty and administrators, to discuss the implications of the evolving role of research and to strengthen both practitioners’ ability to engage with data and their support for collaborative, action-oriented research. Through vehicles like the regional research groups, listservs, annual research conference, and our website, we will seek to provide a means for researchers to articulate their common concerns and recommendations for the California community college system.