Meeting Demands for Improvements in Public System Institutional Research:
Assessing and Improving the Institutional Research Function in Public University Systems

July 12, 2015
The creation of CIMA is timely given that people are awakening to the power of data.

There is more data than ever before.

More people are using it, differently.

Infrastructures and users aren’t well connected.
We at NASH see real and diverse value in data…

<table>
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What do you think data can be best used for?

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NASH is engaged in building the value of data by working with our systems and institutions to leverage decision analytics.

4.5 million NASH undergraduates comprise over 75% of the US undergraduate population attending 4 year institutions …

… across 45 systems

… in 36 states
Systems have played clear roles in the past

- Regulators
- Allocators
- Coordinators
Some have questioned the value of systems as costs rise, outcomes remain flat, and state investments stagnate

- Large and bureaucratic infrastructure
- Too authoritative and centralized
- Compliance driven
- Stifle innovation and contextualization
- Frayed relationships with many stakeholders
Despite skepticism, systems and institutions have begun to change in support of one another, focusing on student success.
Systems are serving as learning organizations that act as mechanisms for scaling and diffusion

- Strategically using financial resources
- Promoting smoother pathways for students
- Optimizing system and campus infrastructures
- Partnering in policy and strategy development
- All hands on deck relating to closing equity gaps
- Communicating the value of higher education to key stakeholders
Systems act in partnership with institutions to identify and scale best practices; data is critical to that

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<th>External Stakeholders</th>
<th>Boundary Spanners</th>
<th>Campuses</th>
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<td>Private Sector</td>
<td>Governing Board</td>
<td>Campus</td>
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<td>Civic Society</td>
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Systems and institutions can transform together by focusing on data-informed decision making and continuous improvement.
Recognizing the potential of IR, NASH went about understanding the state of the function.
IR could be an ideal partner in transformation efforts as a result of their ability guide decision-makers using data and intelligence.

**IR functions have the potential to:**

- Produce and communicate customized data, analysis and narrative across systems and campuses
- Aid in the identification of evidence-based practices worthy of scaling
- Empower systems and campuses by promoting a culture of data literacy and customization
- Create powerful narratives and analytics that are prospective rather than retrospective
However, to get there, barriers must be overcome

IR functions currently:

- Produce and communicate regulatory and compliance reports
- Lack the capacity to focus on creating analyses and tools that create a culture of data across systems and campuses
- Are beholden to the, “one true answer”
- Have difficulty stitching together topically stovepiped data
- Have natural tensions with functions such as IT and the registrar
- Are drowning in a sea of demands
- Lack the support to fully make the transition from an auditing function to an analytical one
While overcoming such challenges can be difficult, there are positive signs that IR is evolving.

Both system and campus IR offices report that the work on student retention and graduation has been well connected to decision makers and has contributed to improvements in institutional performance.
Some functions focused on compliance, others focused on policy and analysis, and many fell in between.
Moving across that spectrum is no easy task; offering IR functions tools to help guide them is especially important.

SO HOW DO YOU BRIDGE THE DIVIDE?
The findings of the surveys, interviews and site visits led to the design of self-assessment rubrics focusing on transformation.

In addition to the cultural and political dynamics swirling around IR functions, two premises about the direction of the field guided the development of the rubrics:

1. **The IR function is evolving to encompass continuous learning and improvement**

2. **Robust decision analytics require strong leadership that empowers the work by leading through data and inquiry**
These rubrics will have the greatest benefit if they are completed by several individuals who produce or consume IR products.

The rubric can be used in a number of ways:

- As part of a group exercise within IR
- As an element of a more strategic assessment and planning function
- To create dialogue within the system office and across institutions
- For planning, monitoring, and budgeting
- To develop staff
- As part of an external review
These rubrics are categorized by four groups of functions and leaders most likely to be in a position to influence change:

- System/State Relationships
- Intra-system Organizational Dynamics
- The Role of IR Within the System and Among Campuses
- Data quality and the IR-IT Nexus
Within each group, we sought to identify key actors, roles, and traits that characterized IR functions across the spectrum.

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<td><strong>Who:</strong> State policy officials, legislators, Governor, system head, system board</td>
<td><strong>Who:</strong> System head, Vice Chancellors/Vice Presidents, campus Presidents, system board</td>
<td><strong>Who:</strong> Executive Vice Chancellor, head of IR, head of IT</td>
<td><strong>Who:</strong> Head of IR, head of IT, Vice Chancellor/VP of academic affairs and administration</td>
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<td><strong>Why:</strong> Robust IR does not develop within systems without parallel attention to data and performance from the state</td>
<td><strong>Why:</strong> Mature systems have evolved good working dynamics, understand where and how to use the system, have boards that help steer the agenda, and reasonable stability of leadership over time.</td>
<td><strong>Why:</strong> IR provides a service function to multiple offices in addition to carrying our its own agenda of analysis and reporting in cross-functional ways</td>
<td><strong>Why:</strong> Policies and practices on data stewardship, performance metrics, and data governance are well-established, and IR and IT work together well</td>
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A transformed IR function will work alongside all system and institutional units to highlight best practices and policies.

An evolved decision analytics function will:

- Create mutually agreed upon intervention definitions, standards of quality, and adoption thresholds.
- Establish proof-of-concept sites to test and scale interventions.
- Provide problem-solving support and troubleshooting as issues emerge in the pilots/rollout.
- Recognize and diffuse interventions and assist institutions as they work towards reinvention.
- Help guide and teach smaller analytics shops that are popping up across systems and campuses.
By sifting through hordes of data, IR can identify important trends that move the needle on completion.

Data needs to be:
- Disaggregated
- Closer to real-time
- Of quality
- Timely
- Contextualized

Key traits include:
- Monitor and track progress over time
- Emphasize closing gaps
- Create more nuanced benchmarks
- Balance between predictive and reflective
- Communicate effectively

As suggested by the panel and comments from the audience, IR functions can help promote improved student outcomes.
By leveraging the self-assessment rubrics, as well as the NASH team of experts, we hope to support the transformation of IR.

Collect Data
Refine Into Knowledge
Contextualize and Communicate
Create Policy and Inform Strategy
Act Collectively and Repeat to Continuously Improve
Poll Everywhere: Has your thinking changed at all?  
http://www.smspoll.net/poll.customise.chart.php?pollid=22824

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