



Development of the Duties &
Functions of Institutional
Research

ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH
Data and Decisions for Higher Education

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Development of the Duties & Functions of Institutional Research

I - Introduction to the project

The [Policy Governance](#) framework of board leadership, which AIR's Board of Directors uses to govern the association, guides an organization's governing body to develop a set of Ends that determine the work of the organization. AIR's Board of Directors developed a set of [Ends](#) that are interpreted by the association's executive director in utilizing various means to successfully conduct the work of AIR. One of the Ends developed by the Board reads:

Institutional researchers have knowledge and skills necessary to perform the duties and functions of institutional research, including: methods and tools; internal institutional effectiveness; external accountability; professional and interpersonal skills; and research and scholarship.

In order to successfully meet this End, it is first necessary to identify the duties and functions of institutional research in order to then identify the knowledge and skills needed to perform these duties and functions. Following the identification of these concepts, the work of AIR can be more successfully directed to meet the stated Ends of the association. In 2016, a group of AIR executive office staff and association membership worked together to define a set of duties and functions of institutional research. This document describes the process through which this list was developed.

II - Background

Review of knowledge and skills typologies from other higher education associations

As part of the background research for this project, knowledge and skills typologies from other higher education associations were reviewed and individuals who worked on these typologies were interviewed for their perspectives on the process. While none of the associations needed to begin with the development of duties and functions of their respective fields, their knowledge and skills documents provided helpful background for delineating between duties and functions and knowledge and skills.

The documents will be useful again in the next phase of the project, mapping knowledge and skills to the duties and functions. The associations whose documents were reviewed included:

- NASPA/ACPA, Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners
- NACE, Professional Competencies for College and University Career Services Practitioners
- ACUHO-I, Core Competencies: The Body of Knowledge for Campus Housing Professionals
- CUPA-HR Learning Framework

Review of institutional research literature

Many documents were reviewed as background for development of the list of duties and functions of institutional research, including:

- Historical definitions of institutional research: Lyons, 1976, Sheehan & Torrence, 1977, Saupe, 1981, Peterson & Corcoran, 1985, Saupe, 1990, Terenzini, 1993
- Terenzini's types of institutional research intelligences

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- Volkwein's roles of institutional research and golden triangle of institutional research
- Peterson's institutional research roles
- The Penn State survey of institutional research activities
- Knight's book on institutional research leadership
- Howard's (editor) *Handbook of Institutional Research*
- Multiple editions of *New Directions for Institutional Research*, particularly those focused on the future of IR

While many of these documents focused on the tasks associated with institutional research rather than duties and functions, collectively they provided insight into the evolution of the field. Duties and functions listed in the documents were reviewed and analyzed for frequency of mention. The resulting information was used to formulate the first draft of duties and functions that was subsequently reviewed and edited, as described later in this document.

Context within other AIR work

The list of duties and functions of institutional research was designed to reflect the current purview of the field while also forecasting future expectations. The development of the list occurred in tandem with a number of AIR projects. While the list is not a result of these projects, having them occur simultaneously allowed the list to be informed by these projects, including The National Survey of IR Offices and the study, *Defining Institutional Research*, which both provided different views of the current state of the field of institutional research, including tasks performed, services provided, capacity of individual offices, information on reporting lines, and other relevant details. Additionally, the *Statement of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research* provided background related to the function of institutional research in higher education.

III - Review of concept by institutional research thought leaders

On April 15, 2016, a group of thought leaders experienced in conducting, directing, and researching institutional research were brought together for a one-day intensive discussion to vet the concept document developed by AIR on the duties and functions of institutional research. Attendees at this meeting included the individuals shown to the right.

The meeting began with introductions, both of attendees and the topic. A presentation on the background and purpose of the project was shared, followed by a discussion on reactions to the framing of the project and utility of a list of duties and functions of institutional research. The afternoon was focused on a review of the draft list of duties and functions of institutional research as it existed at that point.

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Assistant Vice-President for Academic Affairs,
Springfield College
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 - *Brian Noland*
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 - *Donna Norwood*
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Results

The group provided some specific reactions to the list of duties and functions of institutional research that were reflected in the edited list shared in focus groups at the AIR Forum, detailed in the next section. In general, the group recognized the present and immediate future of institutional research in the list, while encouraging edits that clarified some items and placed more emphasis on particular duties of institutional research. More general feedback on the project included the following:

- The group recommended that AIR consider ways to do outreach to more non-IR staff to gather their thoughts on what roles institutional research should play, since the typology could look somewhat different based on whether the lens applied is external or internal.
- Finding a balance where data can be relied on (data quality is high) and how it can be made most useful (including issues of timeliness and training non-IR staff to better leverage data resources) is a key concern. How to think about ethics of data preparation and interpretation and the role of professional judgment is important.
- The eventual typology has to be something that members/practitioners can see themselves in – it isn't a recipe that fails altogether if each individual is not fulfilling each role, but it should reflect current activities (like compliance reporting) while also capturing the elements that IR needs to play in the future.
- This effort should amount to something, not just be a resource for internal discussion – possibly a white paper or other publication. Uses for AIR include planning the Forum and other professional development offerings and identifying grant opportunities. Uses for institutions include evaluating their IR function for accreditation, but also against their needs for data and evidence, and in organizing, structuring, and staffing it.

IV - Focus groups with AIR members at 2016 AIR Forum

A group of 40 AIR members who were registered to attend the 2016 AIR Forum were invited to take part in one of three focus groups scheduled on June 2, 2016 during a 45-minute concurrent session block at the conference. The invitation list sought to balance institution size and sector, including system representation. In addition, AIR members with positions outside IR offices and institutions of higher education were included. A number of these individuals were identified because of their previous experience working within an office of institutional research. Of the 40 invitees, the following individuals were able to participate in one of the focus groups:

- *Eric Atchison*
Director of System Analysis, Research, & Enrollment Management
Mississippi Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning
- *Angela Bell*
Associate Vice Chancellor for Research and Policy Analysis
University System of Georgia
- *Charlie Blaich*
Director
Center of Inquiry and Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium, Wabash College
- *Julie Carpenter-Hubin*
Assistant Vice President of Institutional Research and Planning
The Ohio State University

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- *Chris Cullander*
Director (retired) of Institutional Research
University of California-San Francisco
- *Jeremy Goodman*
Assistant Provost for Institutional Research & Decision Support
Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering
- *Braden Hosch*
Assistant Vice President for Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness
Stony Brook University
- *Pearl Iboshi*
Director, Institutional Research and Analysis Office
University of Hawaii System
- *Christine Keller*
Vice President of Research & Policy Analysis
Association of Public Land-grant Universities
- *Jillian Kinzie*
Associate Director, Center for Postsecondary Research and NSSE Institute
Indiana University-Bloomington
- *Bill Knight*
Assistant Provost of Institutional Effectiveness
Ball State University
- *Michael Le*
Research Analyst
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- *Terri Manning*
Associate Vice President for Information Technology and Research Services and CEO
Center for Applied Research, Central Piedmont Community College
- *Jamey Rorison*
Senior Research Analyst
Institute for Higher Education Policy
- *Bill Schneider*
Associate Vice President, Research and Performance Management
North Carolina Community College System
- *Tim Stanley*
Associate Director of Institutional Research and Information
Utah Valley University
- *Christina Whitfield*
Associate Vice President
State Higher Education Executive Officers
- *Mary Ann Coughlin* (observer/4.15.16 meeting attendee)
Associate Vice-President for Academic Affairs
Springfield College
- *Peter Ewell* (observer/4.15.16 meeting attendee)
President (retired)
National Center for Higher Education Management Systems

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Prior to the focus groups, attendees were given the draft list of duties and functions of institutional research and were asked to come prepared to discuss the tasks or activities they associated with each category on the list, as they interpret it. The focus groups then consisted of a discussion of these tasks and activities for each of the five categories, followed by a general discussion of characteristics of institutional research that the attendees felt were not covered in any of the five items. The purpose of this structure was to both understand whether the focus group participants interpreted the five categories in the way they were written and to begin to understand the types of knowledge and skills that might fall in to each of the five categories, in preview of the next step in the interpretation process.

Results

The focus groups provided specific feedback on each of the five draft duties and functions as well as general feedback on whether the list captured all of the duties and functions of institutional research. It was noted that not all IR offices are tasked with all of the duties and functions in the list, which is to be expected. The list is designed to broadly encompass the potential duties and functions, acknowledging that in some cases a different unit on campus may have purview for some of the duties and functions of decision support. It is designed to reflect an institution's or organization's function of institutional research, of which an office of institutional research is often a large part. The focus group data allowed for editing the list items for brevity while expanding the descriptions of each of the five duties and functions to provide clarity to the user. The final result is the list of duties and functions of institutional research, included below.

V - List of Duties and Functions of Institutional Research

1. Identify information needs

This functional area reflects the iterative process of identifying relevant stakeholders and their decision support needs. It includes anticipating questions through review of data, information, and research and policy studies, including those related to institutional, state, national, and international conversations around higher education. It also includes assisting stakeholders in developing and refining research questions.

2. Collect, analyze, interpret, and report data and information

This functional area reflects the technical tasks employed by institutional research to provide data, information, and analysis for decision support. It involves an understanding of the data available to answer pressing questions about student access and success and institutional operations and the process by which previously unavailable data are collected. The process of collecting and reporting required and requested data is encompassed in this area. This function also incorporates applied research methods to analyze data to provide information for decision making, including appropriate interpretation of analysis results.

3. Plan and evaluate

Planning may include operational, budgetary, and strategic planning in which institutional research collaborates with other units at the institution, state, or related organizations. It may also include program review, particularly for accreditation purposes. Formative and summative evaluation processes conducted at an institution use IR data and analysis for planning and decision making purposes.

4. Serve as stewards of data and information

This functional area highlights institutional research's role in ensuring an institution-wide data strategy. Compliance issues such as privacy and security and ethical issues such as determining what data and information should be used for various purposes, and whether interpretations are correct and appropriately used, are also critical to this area.

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This area also includes the contribution of IR to data quality assurance activities. IR's role in ensuring data are appropriately accessible and usable to those who need them to make decisions is inherent in this function as well.

5. Educate information producers, users, and consumers

This functional area encompasses the training and coaching related to the use of data, analysis, and information to inform decision making. Education can be focused on ensuring the ability to collect, access, analyze, and interpret information independently and in collaboration with other stakeholders. The function also includes a collaborative role in convening discussions related to information needs and connecting internal and external producers and users of data with one another for purposes of informing decision making. Scholarship to inform and improve data, information, and analysis for decision support is also included in this function.

VI - Next Steps

The duties and functions of institutional research will be publicly released by AIR in January, 2017 via an article in AIR's electronic newsletter, eAIR. The article will direct readers to a webpage on airweb.org devoted to the project. In addition to being used by AIR membership to discuss and frame the function of institutional research at their institution or organization, the association will begin to develop resources related to the list. As mentioned in the introduction to the project, the knowledge and skills needed to perform these duties and functions will be developed as a companion piece to the list as a next phase of the project.