

Chapter 16

Collaboration in Student Assessment Research: Beyond Data Collection and Reporting

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ABSTRACT

Institutional Research (IR) professionals have diverse roles and responsibilities in universities across the country. The Office of Institutional Research (OIR) at Small State University has evolved from an Office of Planning and Analysis whose primary responsibility was for collecting and reporting descriptive statistics to an OIR with growing responsibilities for outcomes research. In this chapter, the authors describe the transition of the OIR to provide more support to outcomes research and program/project evaluation. A particular case related to the university's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) and First Year Experience (FYE) efforts is described. For many universities, the primary and sometimes only outcome measure being assessed related to the First Year Experience is the Fall to Fall retention rate of students. At Small State University, faculty were interested in understanding more about how a particular FYE course and its learning community contributed to student success indicators beyond retention rates. Through collaboration between the OIR, the Associate Provost (AP), and the Associate Vice President for Learning Assessment (AVPLA), data regarding FYE courses and learning communities was assessed. The findings supported the skills learned through the FYE course and learning communities are mechanisms through which at-risk students can improve overall GPA and retention. This collaboration between the OIR, the AP, and the AVPLA provided a foundation upon which focused studies of student characteristics and outcomes assessment can proceed in the future. A framework for organizing the work of institutional research and learning assessment is proposed.

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BACKGROUND

Small State University, a public regional agricultural and mechanical (A&M) system institution, is the northernmost four-year institution of higher learning in Texas. As the only bachelor's and master's degree-granting state university within a 100-mile radius, small state university's primary service region extends beyond the Texas borders into the neighboring states. The University offers one doctoral program, 43 master's programs and 63 undergraduate degree programs. The University's primary responsibility is to provide a student-centered, learning community dedicated to educating tomorrow's leaders through innovative academic and co-curricular undergraduate and graduate programs, with primary focus placed on undergraduate education. Given the large number of first generation and non-traditional students, emphasis is placed on providing an educational experience in which there is personalized attention given to students.

The development of a student-centered philosophy is a dominant theme in both the strategic planning and curriculum assessment processes at Small State University. Student learning outcome assessment is a vital part of Small State University, and the institution stresses outcome assessment as a tool for curriculum planning and budgeting. Faculty, administrators, and institutional research share the responsibility for the development, implementation, maintenance, and review of assessment activities. The Office of Institutional Research was formed in the Fall of 2006. Prior to that time, duties were being performed in the Office of Planning and Analysis, but it was determined at the university level that more research functions were needed in order to meet the growing emphasis on assessment by accrediting bodies. Hence, the name of the office was changed to reflect the redirection in purpose. The Office of Institutional Research is responsible for the coordination of institutional data collection and dissemination. Specific expanded tasks include:

- Compiling university reports which are required by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board
- Collecting data for national surveys such as Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), U.S. News and World Report, and the Common Data Set
- Coordinating assessment and evaluation activities for the University.
- Provide data to administration as requested (reports on student demographics, course statistics, retention, grade distributions, program assessment, etc).
- Submit data to the Texas A&M University System as requested.
- Keep the entire Institutional Research computer programs updated to comply with changing requirements by the state and TAMUS

SETTING THE STAGE

With the increasing roles and expanded services offered by the OIR, the struggle to meet these needs with minimal staff and support added to the "growing pains" of the offices' size and new scope of responsibilities. This is typical of many smaller four-year institutions whose institutional research function is expanding. Delaney (1997) found that resources and expertise for conducting institutional research are most likely limited at small colleges and universities in her 243 institution study. However, some characteristics of the study's institutions were found to be statistically significant with an expanded role of institutional research including the *presence* of an institutional research office and the research expertise of the research director.

As Small State University's newly developing office engages beyond institutional reporting to conducting planning, policy, financial, and assessment studies, the audience of the reports also increase and has expanded to directors, deans and

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