

Texas Association for Institutional Research
28th Annual Conference
January 31 – February 3, 2006
Austin, Texas

INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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A Prelude

Good morning. And, it is a good morning for you. Without your knowing it, you have been blessed by the fact that this hotel does not have a piano. If it did have a piano you would now be singing new lyrics to the “Eyes of Texas” written expressly for this occasion.

Several weeks ago a colleague of my wife’s said he understood that I had a big gig in Texas and his comment caught me a bit by surprise...I’ll admit to not really knowing what a “gig” was and I thought he was talking about computers...until he went on to say that it was a really big deal to have an invitation to conduct in Texas.

My wife Ann, as some of you know, is a choral conductor and being asked to conduct in Texas really is considered a big deal in the world of choral music. I know that she considered it a great honor and privilege to conduct the 1994 Texas High School All State Choir. And, I know she is excited about any invitation to conduct in Texas. In fact, she was in San Antonio last weekend conducting and teaching at a music

gathering of some sort.

I explained to her choral colleague that I considered it an equally big deal to have been invited to speak at the annual meeting of the Texas Association for Institutional Research. I also told him that for me this is an even bigger deal since this my first invitation to speak at a TAIR Conference and TAIR is one of the strongest state institutional research groups in the profession. Of course there are more singers in Texas than there are institutional researchers and more opportunities for singers to gather than for institutional researchers, for good or for ill. On the other hand, I know some of those singers are institutional researchers. Bill Lasher comes to mind immediately as one of the original “Air Heads”, the name a group of singing institutional researchers called their ensemble. They entertained at several Association for Institutional Research (AIR) Forums among, I am certain, other less discriminating places.

I considered telling the choral guy about the robust choral singing on a bus ride back from a Southern Association for Institutional Research (SAIR) Texas barbecue that is still considered a really memorable event by those participating, but I thought better of it. Real choral musicians think in terms of singing in tune, singing the right words and ...this is critical...singing the right notes. Those things mostly don't happen at SAIR sing-a-longs. We know that and it doesn't bother us. I didn't think my wife's colleague would have been impressed by all of that information. By the same token, however, I have seen some “institutional research” produced by singers and in my opinion we do better “out of field” than they. I believe it is a function of that enthusiasm I mentioned earlier. We sing with enthusiasm but they don't usually do institutional research with

equal vigor and vitality and they are not particularly concerned about the institutional research equivalents of “text”, “tune” and “rhythm” either.

I would prefer you not talk about this to anyone you know who is a member of the American Choral Directors Association, but I figured that if I would open this session by leading all of you in a verse or two of some song...and I had chosen the “Eyes of Texas” thinking that most of you would know the tune (Marsha Kelman, who taught me the tune, assured me that all of you could sing it) so the next time I was asked by a musician about being in Texas for a meeting...I mean a “gig” ...and I can assure you that the topic would come up... I could say in all honesty, albeit modestly you understand, that I had been in Texas doing some conducting.

Even if you are not curious, the new lyrics to the *Eyes of Texas* go like this:

“The I Rs of Texas are around us
All our live long days,
The I Rs of Texas will surround us
Just to help us find the ways
Of IPEDS and accreditation,
Time to graduation too,
And there are always SACS and fact books
Just to help us earn our pay.”

INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

(Perhaps I should add the sub title, “*An Opera in Three Acts*”.)

The title of this paper reminded me of an old Spike Jones record from the mid 1950s. The song came to mind when I began to think about how I could put into context the past, present and future framework of institutional research. While the title and message of

the song make statements about past, present and future actions, it is not in a context that would necessarily inspire serious thought in spite of the fact that it does expose several serious philosophical concepts on the past, present and future constructs. The more I thought about the ideas I wanted to share with you the more I came to realize that it may only be institutional researchers who can give serious thought to critical concepts like the past, present and future using rather mundane references in the process.

On the other hand, it is probably just another one of those cases where, for the sake of a new or different approach to an idea, the tensile strength of a concept has been stretched to its maximum limits in an attempt to shed new light on important issues and ideas, something that has been in done in conferences like this before. I know, however, that institutional researchers, at least those of us who were exposed to “Zeke” anecdotes as part of our institutional research in-service training and education, thrive in such ethereal environments. In fact, I would suggest such “Zeke” training should be part of the in-service training of all new generations of institutional researchers.

Since I sense considerable bewilderment with my reference to “Zeke”, I think it is appropriate to take a moment to give you this brief historical “footnote” as background for that reference. Jim Montgomery; Dr. James R. Montgomery, PhD; General James R. Montgomery, retired, U.S. Army; James R. Montgomery, J.D, Attorney at Law, is Director Emeritus of the Office of Institutional Research at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. You should know, as part of this discourse, that many would say that the Virginia Tech office of institutional research, under the direction of Dr. Montgomery, was a among the most productive institutional research office during his

tenure and he would quickly add that if it were true it would in no small part be a result of the institutional researchers he assembled and trained during the mid 1960s to the mid 1980s. A list of the people who spent time in that office would include many whose names are already listed on the “who’s who” pages of the *AIR Directory* as holders of the prestigious AIR awards and as former AIR officers and regular AIR Forum presenters.

Even before Dr. Montgomery retired from Virginia Tech, went to law school and passed the Virginia bar exam, he was offering counsel to some of the more enlightened folk of the mountains, woods and farms around Blacksburg. Zeke was one of those people that Dr. Montgomery befriended early and often, although Dr. Montgomery always gave the impression that he learned more from Zeke’s observations on life than he was able to give Zeke in return. You will note that I speak of Zeke as though he existed. I never met Zeke nor do I know of anyone besides Dr. Montgomery who did, but he is alive and well in the minds of everyone who heard Jim Montgomery talk about institutional research.

One favorite Zeke “lesson” frequently cited by Dr. Montgomery went like this:

Zeke had been given some fancy liquor by one of the leading citizens of Blacksburg at Christmas time as a “gift” for the many odd jobs Zeke had done around the mayor’s house and lawn. While the mayor didn’t expect a thank you note from Zeke, he was interested in making the point that he had given Zeke the gift. So one day shortly after the holidays when Zeke was doing some work at the mayor’s house, the mayor asked: “Zeke, how’d you like that ‘shine I gave you for Christmas?” And, Zeke replied in his usual terse fashion, “it was jest right”. Puzzled by the response, and perhaps a bit put off by the lack of gratitude on Zeke’s part, the mayor responded “what do you mean, ‘it was jest right”?”

Without a moment's hesitation Zeke said "it was jest right: If it'da ben any better yah wouldn'ta give it to me and if it'da ben any worse I couldn'ta drunk it...it was jest right."

Zeke stories are/were, I suppose, the institutional research equivalent of Aesop's Fables. While it wasn't always clear what the point of the story was... and many thought that was the point... Zeke was a regular presenter at many institutional research gatherings and a legendary part of institutional research history and folklore in the South, if not the country and world, for that matter.

Unlike Zeke, Spike Jones developed his own reputation as a not so serious band director most noted for his comedy routines and his humorous interpretation of music and lyrics. He is, as far as I know, the only one who recorded the song that came to mind after Gerry Dizinno, the TAIR program chair, and I agreed to the title of this paper. The philosophical point of the song, and I have now come to think that it is probably deeper philosophically than I first realized, was in the song's refrain. In fact it may have been the title of the song. The song was sung by a male vocalist who sang and sounded like he was a drink or three past intoxication. The message was a simple statement of a past, present and future occurrence: "...I haven't been home for three whole nights" the inebriated sounding singer confesses, "last night, tonight and tomorrow".

There are some parallels, I believe, between the suggested implications of "last night", "tonight" and "tomorrow night" in the Spike Jones recording and the past, present and future time frames for institutional research. At least I will suggest some basic philosophical and practical considerations that might help us understand where we

have been in institutional research, where we are now as institutional researchers and where the profession and we as institutional research professionals may be going in the future. Please pardon the personal reflections that follow, but they will give you a context for my remarks on institutional research, past, present and future that will follow.

“Last night” and Institutional Research Past

I can remember some of my “last” night experiences, although it helps if they don’t go past my bed time. I remember less about “last” nights that are more than two or three days past. I am always amazed, however, that I remember some things that others who shared the “last” night experience with me don’t remember, or I don’t remember the events of “last night” in the same way they do. I guess if you are sitting at different tables the discussion may take a different turn or two even if you are hearing the same speaker and reading the same power points. And, of course, just because you first learned to complete HEGIS reports when they were done with a “pencil” doesn’t mean that you are now prepared to submit IPEDS data on line. All this to say that even the “same” last night experience may provide a different action and reaction for different people and institutions at different times.

“Tonight” and Institutional Research Present

I can usually focus on details related to “tonight”, although I have been known to forget minor things like where I’m suppose to be and when. The “here today gone tomorrow” reality of the “present” is generally more real when “today” is the deadline or due date for a project, but in almost every case, the “tonight” or “today” of institutional research is often a not so gentle reminder that there simply aren’t enough hours in the day, which

quickly becomes “not enough days in the week” or “months in a year” to get everything done that would, could or should be done to make everyone happy and/or satisfied.

I discovered in typing this paper that the spelling check on my computer as well as my *Webster's*, don't give a plural for “tonight” and that reinforced my idea that we really only get one chance with the institutional research events that happen “today” or “tonight” before they become history. We might deal with what happened “today” tomorrow, but that usually means we are too late to change the outcome of the event even though we can use it as an opportunity to see if we can prevent it from happening again, providing we learn from today's experience. It might also be fair to say, that “today” or “tonight” provides the “history” for consideration of “tomorrow”. Of course if it was a good thing that happened, we will try to get the “stars” correctly aligned again for a repeat performance or outcome. Still, the “present” of life and institutional research is technically a minute by minute proposition with a here today gone tomorrow time frame.

“Tomorrow Night” and Institutional Research Future

My growing concern is with the conceptual premise of “tomorrow” night. It might be because at my age there are more “last” nights to remember than there is a reasonable expectation for an equal number of “tomorrow” nights to experience. While I know there are more “future” nights for institutional research than I have, it is a rather sobering realization that all of what I, and my generation of institutional researchers, had hoped to accomplish or simply complete may not get done in our time. Actually, that might be something about which we should all be thankful...namely that I am not responsible for resolving all of the “lingering”, “persistent” and “unanswered” questions of institutional

research and higher education. Just the same, it was not my intent, or the intent of others of my I R generation to leave the next generation of institutional researchers with a bunch of problems our generation should have solved or resolved on our watch. Or, perhaps, things that wouldn't have happened at all if we had done our work in a good and timely fashion.

The truth, however, is that we--my generation-- haven't been able to resolve all of the issues with which we have had to deal. But, it is also true that we have really not had the opportunity to solve some of the problems our institutions faced simply because we were never given the "problems" for consideration, examination or resolution. While there are any number of reasons this was true, the fact that we were often not given the problem to work on or not given all of the information necessary to deal effectively with the issue when/if it was brought to our attention is the one that troubles me most. In some cases it was simply because some faculty member, committee chairman, fellow "administrator" or student or group of students, didn't know that we...institutional researchers...were available for help. And, in some cases we weren't. I understand that at some institutions, institutional researchers only do work for the central administration. I hope we aren't still fighting that issue, but I have reason to think that we are. Perhaps we should be known as "The Institution's Office of Research" in an attempt to give the impression to the entire campus that we don't just serve the administration. Now, I understand that isn't the rule on many campuses, but shouldn't every faculty member, administrator and/or student, have the opportunity to benefit from the best information and insight available to them as they carry out their work on student, faculty, department,

school/college committees and other deliberative groups or committees of the institution? I think the answer is “yes”, in case you were wondering. Perhaps it is just a matter of our “advertising” our services. I do hope that my concern about the issue of access for institutional research service to the entire campus is short lived, but my therapists suggest I should just get over it. And, it is hardly a cause to champion among colleagues I know have more to do than they have time for now. But, if you had the resources wouldn't you be interested in helping everyone on campus who has an institutional responsibility to getting things right that institutional research can help? It might even be an argument for more resources for some institutional research offices.

I found nothing more frustrating...well other than computers that were never advanced enough to figure out what I really meant for them to do even if I didn't tell them correctly how to do it...than having the feeling that some administrator knowingly “withheld” some vital piece of information or context that should have been shared up front if the issue was to be resolved. Granted that there are always issues that decision makers would rather not deal with, but in 45 years of studying higher education I can't remember any institutional problems that really went away when ignored, albeit they were generally replaced with others problems or issues far more serious. I do understand the wish administrators have for things to “just go away” and the necessity to keep some confidences. But, ignoring institutional problems simply because one doesn't want to deal with the consequences seldom solves any problem at all. All that to say, some people don't seem to want to deal with some/any issues anytime...last night, tonight or tomorrow. In fact I was reminded by one of our colleagues that we, institutional researchers sometime become part of that “game” when we are asked to do a survey or a

study or some other related project just to “stall” the issue long enough for it to go away. The unfortunate consequence of such practice is that it reinforces the idea that institutionally we spend time more trying to avoid the issues than we collectively do trying to solve them. In the end, it seems that we spend more time trying to make the problems “go away” than we do trying to solve them or trying to prevent them.

In some cases, institutional researchers have not been given issues to study because the problems were viewed as causing larger or more complex problems than some decision maker wished to deal with and, perhaps, with good reason. And, rumor has it that some institutional researchers have avoided filing any reports that have any negative institutional implications simply because historically the messenger is sometimes punished for delivering the bad news. So, even if we might argue that an ounce of “institutional prevention” is worth “a pound of institutional cure” our studies continue to be more “after the fact” investigations than “anticipatory projections” to avoid problems.

In fact, the term “planning” seems to be less often used as part of the title of institutional research offices than it once was and, from what I hear, the planning activity seems to have disappeared from the work of many institutional research offices. I hope, however, that is not an indication that institutional research is “outside” the planning process. That would not be in the best interests of the institution’s future in my mind and it would effectively mean that the assessment, evaluation and review of any new institutional initiatives, programs or activities would always be playing “catch-up” with any attempt to determine effectiveness.

All of that to say that all of the problems facing institutions, institutional research and

institutional researchers have neither been identified, sufficiently examined nor satisfactorily resolved during my tenure. I am convinced, however, that we have left an interesting future for the younger generation of institutional researchers to enjoy. I think the least that my generation of institutional researchers can hope to have accomplished is that we prepared the way for those who will come after us. We may be leaving you unanswered questions and unresolved issues, but we have left you some tools with which to work. Jim Firnberg tells the story of E. H. Hull, the third President of AIR, who shortly after becoming director of institutional research at Indiana University was called into the President's office and given a copy of the Indiana University annual financial report and asked by the President to study and analyze the report for him. A few days later the President called Hull into his office and asked him for his opinion of the University's financial report. Hull is reported to have said, "Mr. President, I have studied the Indiana University financial report using the tools, techniques and standards of my profession and found the annual financial report of Indiana University free of grammar and punctuation errors". Hull was a Professor of English before he became the IU Director of Institutional Research.

Even those in my generation of institutional researchers basically started with a clean slate of issues, tools, techniques and expertise related to the conduct of institutional research. While others had recognized the issues we were to deal with, for the most part there were no answers and in many cases there weren't many sources for finding the data and then processing it if it could be found and used. Ah, the joys of watching an electric desk top calculator grind the numbers out for an enrollment projection.

Future generations of institutional research may well discover that methods and materials that worked for us aren't appropriate for the higher education enterprise of tomorrow.

While my I R generation basically dealt with questions and issues for the first time...or at least the first time when it was likely with the aid of a good "programmer" to get the data from the "state of the art" contrivances that then passed as a "super computer" and actually had a chance to "process" the data and provide output that was more than a simple listing with a "total" in the bottom right hand corner... all we were really doing was generating a new set of questions that were often waiting for the next generation of computers to answer. Obviously, the issues were not created by bigger computers, or by desktop computers and "open" access to many data files, but those tools have contributed to more and better questions and to more and better answers. Ultimately, more data and greater access to the data have contributed to more and better institutional research. And, often they contributed to research done by researchers that were not and would not want to be labeled institutional researchers.

This would seem like a logical point to comment on the "education and training" of institutional researchers. In my opinion there are three great truths to keep in mind when preparing for a career in institutional research: (1) more professional training/education is needed than most I R practitioners get...or think they need; (2) knowing the cause of the problem is fundamental to finding a solution to the problem; (3) there are virtually no universal answers or absolutes in resolving the issues facing higher education that will apply to all institutions with the same results. These conclusions rest in institutional research past, they are conditioned by the present and they are likely to remain fixed in

the future of institutional research. Some combination of institutional research experience, knowledge of higher education, the requisite computational skills and tools, a tolerance for high levels of ambiguity, and an unflappable patience will be required for success. I must quickly add, however, that successful exceptions to the suggested profile are in great abundance within the profession.

Future institutional researchers are likely to discover new issues rising like a phoenix from issues, reports and the “solutions” my generation thought had solved the problems. And, I might quickly add, I hope it is a phoenix and not some disaster that rises from our dust. The “tomorrow nights” of institutional research, however, are simply plans which may or may not materialize no matter how well planned or prepared. And, as I have suggested, the “statistical history” of higher education, which has now been reasonably well quantified by institutional researchers and historians, would suggest that new issues will arise from our old solutions.

Last Night, Tonight and Tomorrow Night as a Foundation for Institutional Research

There is a reality about “last” nights that clearly mark them as “past” experiences. To the extent that we can remember them, we can deal with the reality of them. But, they are “done and gone”, “over with”. They are old news and we are free to repeat or delete the message even though we often have to live with the consequences. The good news, theoretically, is that we can learn from them. We don’t have to repeat them if we don’t want to, but we can if we so choose. In either case, we don’t have to make the same mistakes tonight or tomorrow night that we made last night, at least if we pay attention to what happened last night. Perhaps that is the reason we study history. And, perhaps,

it may be one of you that documents the institutional research response to the major issues that have faced higher education to date. Anyone here need a dissertation topic?

The fact that we can improve on future “nights” based on our experiences with “last” nights gives value to their retrospective review. If it’s good enough for the historians, it ought to be good enough for institutional researchers. At least historians tell us that is why we should study history. Sounds like a good reason for “studying” institutional research as well. As I was cleaning out my office in preparation for Christopher Morpew, the new occupant, I spent more time than I should have looking at some of the old institutional research reports I had completed. I found myself wishing I could go back and rewrite several of the reports indicating the success or lack thereof in suggesting the causes, and cures, for the issues covered in those studies. In short, we can learn from the events of the “last nights”---the past---of institutional research, not necessarily with the idea of repeating them, but with the knowledge that we can improve on them the next time based on what we learned the first time.

Simply put, we all need to be more conscious of institutional research history. There is much to be learned from the past of our profession. Some of it we can build on, some of it we don’t need to repeat, and some of it we can simply forget until it is time to reminisce. The wisdom we are searching for is the ability to recognize which lessons from the past apply, which don’t and which can be adapted to a new situation. I’ll begin with a history lesson or two we can apply to institutional research present and future derived, of course, from institutional research past.

Lessons From Institutional Research Past

In a paper presented last August at the 2005 Mid-America Association for Institutional Research (MidAIR) Conference, Joe Saupe, no stranger to those of you who are familiar with the history and literature of institutional research, presented the best historical summary of institutional research and its beginnings that I have read. The bibliography of the paper is as valuable as his commentary. If you are not familiar with Dr. Saupe's work you would be well served by discovering it. Two of his monographs published by the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) are classics: "*The Nature and Role of Institutional Research---Memo to a College or University*" (he teamed with James Montgomery to do a second edition of that publication, both published by AIR in 1970) (1) and "*The Functions of Institutional Research*" published by AIR in 1981 (2). Both are available from the AIR web site (airweb.org). I encourage you to read them and even to re-read them if it has been some time since you first read them.

Saupe's latest paper "*How Old is Institutional Research and How Did It Develop?*" (the one he just presented at MidAIR) (3), deals directly with the interesting issues of the time, place and participants of institutional research past. In his paper, Saupe lets the reader choose the "beginning" of institutional research based on the evidence used to illustrate that institutional research was in use. Consequently, Saupe provides several dates that can be used to identify the beginning of institutional research depending on what one wants to accept as evidence that institutional research had "officially" begun. The first option Saupe gives the reader is "evidence" of institutional research activity, and he quotes the noted higher education scholar W.H. Cowley who claimed the first "evidence" of institutional research was in the work done by the founders of Yale in

1701. (3. p. 2).

Saupe suggests that the first evidence of offices established and charged with the responsibility of conducting institutional research as a prime function would probably be found at Big Ten institutions with the establishment of the Bureau of Institutional Research at the University of Illinois as early as 1918. Saupe's conclusion is that the 1920s were "...the decade that saw the beginning if the institutionalization of the function of institutional research" (3. p.4) He identifies the decade of the 1960's as "a period of significant growth" with "...national conventions, regional meetings, workshops and similar activities..." reflecting "...a developing interest in and encouragement of institutional research"...a time when the "first two national Forums on institutional research were held in Chicago in 1961 and 1962 in conjunction with the annual meeting of the American Association of Higher Education." These Forums Saupe notes "were invitational; attendance was by invitation only" (3. p. 4) but they led to open meetings in Chicago in 1963 and Minneapolis in 1964 "...where the foundation for AIR was laid." (3. p. 4)

In addition to Saupe's historical "calendar" of institutional research inspiring activities he notes several other early events that encouraged and helped develop institutional research, including the regional accreditation agencies, which directly and indirectly shaped the issues and questions that focused institutional research: the New England Association of Colleges and Schools in 1885; the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools in 1895; the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Schools in 1917; and the Middle States

Commission on Higher Education in 1919.

Unrelated, as far as I know, but interesting for its subject matter is Calvin French's 1914-1916 search for the hallmarks of the "efficient college".

Later, in the mid 1900's, regional organizations were established, including the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) in 1948, WICHE, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education in 1953) and the New England Board of Higher Education in 1955, created to further develop and support higher education. These regional groups not only raised issues and questions about higher education, but took an active role in finding solutions to the problems, most of which required what we now call institutional research. It seemed that the issues needed "data" to define the cause and the cure for the problems being identified and few institutions had the information. Hence, the need for institutional research became even more apparent and encouraged.

The mention of SREB requires a comment on the role of SREB and most notably the care and guidance of E. F. "Tex" Schietinger, Associate Director for Research at the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) who was largely responsible for the development of the Southern Association for Institutional Research. Like many good things, institutional research in the south was as much a consequence of serendipity as it was a "grand" plan. As early as 1960, SREB was co-sponsoring "orientation" meetings in institutional research and one of them, sponsored by SREB, AIR and hosted by LSU was so successful that the participants, according to Jim Firnberg who was hosting the gathering for LSU where he was the Director of Institutional Research, had created so

much enthusiasm that the “delegates” encouraged Dr. Schietinger to continue the workshops even when the grant money ran out. Tex offered the SREB conference room as a meeting place and the rest, one might say, is the history of “organized” institutional research in the south. The SREB conference room could get 25 chairs around the table and hence the Southern University Group of 25, SUG 25 as it was and is known, began. In addition to the fact that other institutions in the SREB region were eager to join the group and the SUG 25 members were convinced that their office staff could benefit from the SUG meetings, the Southern Conference on Institutional Research was organized and held its first meeting in Atlanta in 1974. Glynton Smith, Coordinator of Institutional Research at Georgia State, literally the God Mother of SAIR, made arrangements for meeting space, food and beverage and even “exotic” entertainment for those gathered for the SCIR meetings. When it became clear that the SCIR was getting to be more like the tail wagging the SUG 25 dog, the Southern Association for Institutional Research (SAIR) was formally organized and held its first meeting in Nashville in 1978. It was then that SUG 25 became a “special interest group” of SAIR, simply reversing the organizational roles of the two groups. If you will pardon the pun, one could say that the evolution of SUG 25, to SCIR to SAIR was a real case of “SAIRendipity”.

Not long after SAIR was organized, state institutional research groups were formed to provide even more opportunities for the exchange of ideas, general professional and “political” training and the development of new, and old, institutional researchers. Often the state institutional research groups were organized and supported (on, in some cases hindered) by higher education system offices within the state who were interested in more and better data for dealing with political realities.

It could, and probably should be noted in passing, that the “politics” of institutional research were also in their formative years during this period, but that is clearly a discussion for another time and place. But, I’m certain it would make for a very entertaining session. I know that Dr. Firnberg will go into more detail on this subject in his 2006 A I R Forum presentation.

It is also noteworthy that SREB has been credited with influencing the first national invitational meeting of institutional researchers. Jerry Miller, a colleague of Dr. Schietenger’s at the SREB, along with Hugh Stickler at Florida State University, are reported to have who been responsible for organizing the first national meeting of institutional researchers, an invitational event held in Chicago in 1965.

Other important factors, in no particular order, influencing the development of institutional research include: the SACS requirement of an evaluation of institutional research and institutional effectiveness (mid 1980’s); the HEGIS and IPEDS reporting requirements of and for the federal government (1960s); the introduction of “fact books” into the world of college publications (early 1960s) and the *US News and World Report* ranking of colleges and universities. With the exception of the *US News* college rankings, the major influences on institutional research were “public” initiatives ostensibly intended to improve the accessibility and quality of public and private higher education which in turn fueled the need and energies of institutional research and shaped their research agendas.

My guess, however, is that the *US News* rankings, a private venture, caused more creative

institutional research and reporting than all of the others combined. And credit should be given to Robert Morris who faithfully attends institutional research meetings to hear the debate about what is good and, more frequently, “bad” about the rankings. At least he pays attention to the criticism. And the *US News* rankings have captured the interest of college and university administrators who before the rankings hadn’t given much thought to the reporting and use of institutional data.

I encourage you to read Dr. Saupe’s MidAIR paper in its entirety to get a richer sense of how institutional research developed and how it may have been influenced along the way. And, I would be interested in what you think the “message” is that comes from that institutional research history lesson.

Before I leave this brief overview of I R past, however, I want to call your attention to a session at the AIR Forum in Chicago May 14-18, 2006. For an interesting and entertaining view of the beginnings of the Association for Institutional Research, you will want to put Dr. Jim Firnberg’s presentation on your Forum session schedule. According to the preliminary Forum program that is session 23-673, “A Lighthearted Look at Some Early AIR Forums”. It will be an historical reminiscence of Forums and institutional research by one of by one of institutional research’s great story tellers and one of its most influential pioneers, advocates and contributors.

“Now”, however, “I have a different horse to ride”. I’m not certain what that means but I heard a cowboy-looking person use the phrase in the Austin, Texas, airport and I thought I needed to work it into my paper. I think it fits here because I want to talk about the lessons from the past that haven’t seemed to teach us anything yet.

Hangovers From Institutional Research Last Nights

These “old” issues just don’t seem to go away and consequently continue to haunt us in our work and play. While they are old issues, they remain to raise anew the issues that have yet to be resolved. Not that we can’t work without resolving them so much as they leave an ugly ring around the bath tub just when we think we have everything “cleaned” up.

I will begin with the idea that institutional research activity didn’t happen until we gave it a name. Consequently we have overlooked earlier versions of institutional research activity...and even some current research activity... that have served higher education well but which is not generally called institutional research and hence is not considered institutional research. I was reminded of this when I read Joe Saupe’s MidAIR paper.

In a presentation at the 2005 SAIR Conference, I gave credit to Harvard, founded in 1636, for doing the first institutional research. While I have no evidence to my claim and absolutely no intention of debating the issue against the work of Cowley and Saupe, which I just quoted but was unaware of at the time I made my SAIR presentation: if I had known of the Saupe paper at that time I wouldn’t have made the Harvard claim, but I might have used some European university as the example instead of Harvard

One of the important points of Saupe’s MidAIR paper is recognition of the fact that institutional research did take place before we called it institutional research. Remember that Cowley’s claim for Yale was for the first “*evidence*” of institutional research, not the first research that was called institutional research. My argument for Harvard being first

was that it was the “first” and my assumption was that something as “big” as opening a college even in 1636, and, in retrospect, particularly Harvard, would have been based on careful thinking of some kind and since it involved a “college” it could logically be called “institutional” research. A kind of “a rose by any other name” logic. I haven’t lived in Boston long, but I am more keenly aware now of the fact that Harvard doesn’t do much it doesn’t recognize as research and it could be assumed that Harvard didn’t open its doors to students with out some careful consideration of the act and the consequences of the decision. And, even at Harvard, what is research if is not the careful consideration of a situation and its consequences. I didn’t make the same argument for the European universities which predate Harvard and Yale by several centuries simply because I didn’t want to blame the Europeans for not knowing what institutional research was/is. In fact, based on my attendance at a limited number of EAIR meetings (EAIR is the European Association for Institutional Research, not the East Amarillo Institutional Research group) I have found their concerns and interests to be of a higher level, or at least a different level...in terms of organizational issues and concerns... than the concerns we deal with at our AIR Forums. If you have the opportunity, attend an EAIR meeting, and the sooner the better because the Americans are becoming a larger part of that meeting and rather than making the trip to hear about U. S. problems we should be going to learn more about the European issues and their response to them.

The point of this discussion is simply to recognize that not all of the institutional research that now takes place in our colleges and universities is institutional research if a requirement of institutional research is that it must be done by an institutional research

office or called institutional research by someone, presumably of some stature. Some of the best institutional research is done by higher education faculty or faculty in other disciplines, but you would be in big trouble if you told some of them that you really appreciated reading about their institutional research project in *Research in Higher Education*. In some cases the institutional research is done by an institutional committee...an institutional self study for accreditation, for example...or by a faculty member in student affairs or on the management faculty, or in the admissions office. I found a definition of institutional research attributed to Joe Saupe that would seem to cover the possibility of the action I've just described as institutional research. The fact that I found it on "Wikipedia" might taint it a bit, but the definition was on that site under the logo of the Office of Institutional Research at Notre Dame.

According to Saupe (4)

"Institutional Research is the sum total of all activities directed at empirically describing the full spectrum of functions (educational, administrative, and support) at a college or university. Institutional research activities examine those functions in their broadest definitions and in the context of both internal and external environments embrace data collection and analytical strategies in support of decision making at the institutions."

And, I'll add my list of institutional research activities, those things which we do to accomplish those (Saupe's) goals, which are: collecting, organizing, analyzing, interpreting and reporting data. (5) Activities, I will quickly add, which clearly are not limited to institutional research on any campus that I know.

In plain language, my argument is that not all institutional research is, or has to be done by people with the title of institutional researcher. I think it is enough that the research has implications for and practical application for the good of the institution and is

considered for the purpose of improving the institution or some aspect of institutional life. It would help, of course, if we could all agree to call all research on individual colleges and universities conducted with the intent of learning more about that institution, even if it is done by comparison to other colleges and universities, institutional research.

A faculty member in management or student development or history might do a book or article on some aspect of the college management, or student life, or a review of an extraordinary period in the history of the institution. Who would call that institutional research? I would, but then I gave Harvard credit for institutional research that has never been documented.

And, we all know that institutional self studies...the kind done for accreditation...are not called institutional research if for no other reason than they weren't done by the institutional research office. The exception, of course, was SACS, the Southern Association for Colleges and Schools, who championed the cause of institutional research by requiring it and by requiring that it be reviewed. While institutional research by name is no longer as prominent in the "language" of SACS accreditation as it once was it is no less important, and, in fact, perhaps more important in the accreditation process than before simply because it is now expected that all institutions are organized to do continuous assessment of programs and outcomes. I'd call that institutional research.

And, of course, if the Dean or a committee of a college or program within a university, or department within a school or college or even the even the student government does a study of some problem or issue, it is unlikely to be called "institutional research".

“If it wasn’t done by the I R office, it isn’t institutional research” at most institutions.

Fair enough, because some of the those examples of institutional research I just listed are just bad research regardless of what it is called. But, maybe that is a reason for the institutional researchers on campus to be more proactive in helping others on campus do better research whether or not it is institutional specific research.

Unfortunately, the very fact that institutional research is most often considered an “administrative” office will prejudice the work for some on campus who have a complaint with the administration for their treatment by the administration. And, as often as not, institutional researchers are guilty of not consulting with departments or programs they have been asked to review by a dean, vice president or the president herself and the department, usually when defending themselves, has a logical explanation for the offending actions. On that same coin is a side which would say maybe the I R office should seek “consultation” with faculty “experts” in some of the issues I R is asked to explore ...for the administration or not...or, simply invite faculty to review research and issues in areas that are more familiar to them than to the institutional researcher. And, unless the topic is something really “sensitive”, why don’t we make all...or at least most of our institutional research reports open to the campus community? When I ask that question of institutional research colleagues the usual answer is that the faculty and students don’t have the “insight” to judge or comment on the institutional research reports. If that is true, and I wouldn’t deny it, I must ask how will they ever gain the requisite “insight” if we don’t share our “findings” with them?

All of this to say, we...institutional researchers...need to do some friend building. If

we want more respect for our work and if we want to avoid those hangovers from our past “nights” into our present or future institutional research. How better than to simply open up our research to “our” public, the students, faculty and even alumni who might be interested or benefit from the additional data, insight and methodology and, in some cases, maybe most cases, our professional consultation. If institutional research doesn’t directly benefit from more openness there is always the possibility, and I would add, the likelihood that the institution as a learning community will so benefit.

Institutional Research Present

It is true that I really look at the “hangovers” of the past as problems for institutional research present. Since we can’t undue the past, the task is to resolve past issues in the present...certainly not to put them off to the future.

Maybe we would be even more concerned about our work as institutional researchers if we actually knew what people...our “clients” as one of our colleagues calls them ...another calls them her “patients”...if we actually knew what our client customers do with the reports we give them. You know, those department analyses, reports, projections, memos, fact books, planning documents and the rest of that analytical stuff. Did I miss anything? Do you know what happens to it? Do you get reports back on how the information was used? Are decisions made based on your data or, in some cases, even on your interpretations and/or recommendations? Are you ever involved the “clients” in your research and/or deliberations? Does anyone ever ask you “what if” questions based on your reports? And how many people on campus actually see your reports in the first place? Are copies of the institutional research reports available in the

institution's libraries?

Oh, I forget. Many of our institutional colleagues, librarians included, don't consider institutional research either research and/or literature. Forget I said that. We don't usually discuss such things in public. Just the same, it is important to recognize that no matter what it is called, the "literature"...oh, ok, the "reports" of institutional research... that provide the basics processes of research (fact finding, analysis and interpretation and conclusions based on and supported by the evidence) should be documented and preserved for the review of others pursuing the same inquiry. Unfortunately, access to "studies," or other "in house" institutional research reports, or similar reports of studies from other institutions with similar problems or issues, or similar reports from dissimilar institutions without the problems, or for that matter reports from any higher education institutions are not generally available. In fact, it is mostly by coincidence that anyone is aware of what institutional research other institutions are producing. No wonder the term "fugitive" literature so often is heard when discussing or describing institutional research.

A partial solution to the problem of "fugitive" institutional research literature is the institutional research conference. Unfortunately, unless one can attend every session forum or conference (impossible, of course because of concurrent sessions) of every international, national, regional, state and local (yes, local, considering the newly formed Boston Area institutional research group...yes, it is BAIR) chances are good you might miss the session that had the information, methodology, or proven solution for your institution's problem. Even then, power point slides might be the best one could get from the session.

Perhaps some day some one or some affiliated group might tackle the problem of accumulating, organizing and disseminating the papers presented at all of these conferences. There was a time when “conference proceedings” were published, but they were victims of too few presentations that ever got beyond the “transparencies” and later the “power points”. When someone suggested that the requisite for “presenting” at a conference was not a “proposal” but an actual “paper” the realists recognized there would be very little “program” and making a presentation is often the difference between getting funds to attend and not attending.

While I am the wrong person to be delivering this sermon, I am of the opinion that if we, institutional researchers and or our organizations, would devise a “referencing system” for institutional research reports we would see and hear more completed reports at all of the aforementioned gatherings of institutional researchers and fewer sessions with only power points to document the research effort and findings. Similar efforts have not been successful, but perhaps if there were some incentive...(like faculty have for publishing their research) we’d find a way to do it for institutional research.

I’m now willing to accept the fact that we must find an appropriate way to make our work available to our colleagues and to the field of higher education. Too much valuable work, study and “findings” are being lost to higher education for our work to go unnoticed and essentially unavailable to the higher education community and, more significantly, to other institutional researchers.

The concern, however, is not how many published reports one has at the end of the year

or career, but rather the accumulation of the findings, methodology and process by which the institutions are making decisions. Wouldn't it be just as effective, if not more so, to have an index of institutional research studies that could be used to guide the institutional research of others? Sure, each institution is different and each institution will have to accommodate those differences, but why start from scratch every time?

These "present issues have been around for a long time and I don't know as though they ever will go away. The organizational odds are against us, I fear, but, for that matter, I don't know if they should go away. Maybe if we changed the answers from year to year people would pay more attention to our reports. Or, heaven forbid, maybe if we paid more attention to what their issues and problems are/were as part of the higher education community we would gain more credibility if not respect.

More Issues for Institutional Research Present

The most difficult part of this presentation outline for me has been dealing with the concept of the "present". I didn't realize just how ephemeral the present is until I realized that the present is "now"...oops...some of it just became history...and not to worry, the end of this harangue is in sight.

The present is here today and gone tomorrow. Literally, the present is a day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute proposition, but It is easier for me to think of the "present" as a little bit of the recent "past" and a little bit of the future. For example, I would say that for all practical matters the present includes the "last nights" the "past" over which you still have some control...at least the several days in which a "thank you note" or an "I am really sorry" bouquet of flowers will carry a believably meaningful message; or the

period of time in which you can “recall” a memo or report and/or make corrections to fact or fancy that won’t substantially alter the message or cause major repercussions; or perhaps the length of time most people will remember significant ideas, concepts, facts or events.

I think the “present” also includes recollections of the accomplishments of our contemporaries who may no longer be present to speak for themselves but whose contributions need to be recognized, continued, carried forward and advanced. Fortunately, the real “pioneers” of institutional research as we know it, those who were paving the way in the 1950’s, ‘60s and ‘70’s have left an unmistakable legacy. We need to make certain that under our watch we at least keep their legacy alive and growing but also strive to advance what they began. And no small part of that appreciation should be a record of the contributions, both philosophical and practical, of John Dale Russell, Elmer West, John Stecklein, Paul Dressell, Mary Corcoran, Cameron Fincher, Lois Torrence, Marvin Peterson, Joan Stark, Charles Elton, Joe Saupe, Jim Montgomery and Jim Firnberg to name just a few, and not to forget the effort of Tex Schietinger and Glynton Smith in putting together the pieces for the Southern Association for Institutional Research. Who can tell me who the founders of the Texas Association for Institutional Research were? Have you thanked them lately for making your work easier and more enjoyable?

So, I would include in the “present” of institutional research, which I have suggested literally is a here today and gone tomorrow phenomenon, an extension into the future that includes the time all of us have as individuals to contribute to the profession. In a

sense, I am suggesting that the “present” in this examination of the “past”, “present” and “future” of institutional research is the equivalent of your career. Defined, in a practical way, the time each of us has to make a contribution, to make a difference, is roughly equal to the time we are actively pursuing our careers. That is our “present”, and not only is it our “present” in the concept of time, it is also our “present”...our gift... to our institution, our profession, to higher education, to generations of students and to society. It is also a way we can say thank you...indeed, thank you very much... to our mentors, colleagues and friends.

And you can now be thankful that I am done.

Institutional Research Future

This is where I stop talking and I start listening. The future of institutional research is in your hands, not mine. You need to start thinking about what you want institutional research to do, to become, to accomplish before your career is “institutional research past”. What are your plans and goals to make institutional research better? How will you help advance the profession, your institutions and the students and society they serve?

You tell me what you have in mind for the “tomorrows” of institutional research. They belong to you, not to me. That is not intended to be a “cop out”. I am and I hope to remain an active observer of and contributor to institutional research present and future and I intend to be a “nag” about reminding everyone what was good...or not so good... about institutional research past. But, like those who paved the way for me, and there were many, the profession is now going to be what you will make it.

You can start with institutional research past, bring it into the present to make it viable, but then please make a commitment to leaving institutional research in a better position to enter the future than you found it when you began.

So, tell me what you have planned for “institutional research future”.

I'd like to know.

I'd like to help.

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