



## BETWEEN FORUMS

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### Origins of IR

“The National Institutional Research Forum, the forerunner of the Association for Institutional Research, was conceived on 14 July, 1960 at a luncheon meeting of interested persons in Tallahassee, Florida,” according to L. Joseph Lins in the *Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Forum of the AIR*. Just as Archbishop Ussher’s calculation that the creation of the world occurred around noon on April 1 in 4004 BC has been amplified in the last 275 years, it is possible to elaborate on events which surrounded that historic moment in Tallahassee.

Two things had been happening: (1) self-study of institutional problems, which already had a considerable history at selected colleges and universities, was emerging at more and more institutions, and (2) certain educators and administrators were interested in speeding up institutional organization for the purpose of conducting such studies regularly.

The watershed year for institutional research (IR) may well have been 1958-59. Winslow Hatch at the U.S. Office of Education (USOE) and Elmer West at the Office of Statistical Information and Research (OSIR) of the American Council on Education (ACE) had conducted national inventories of institutional studies by 1958, and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) was similarly surveying institutions in the Western states. The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) had just received a \$450,000 grant from the Carnegie Corporation for a regional program on research and training in higher education. One of the stated policies of that project, directed by John Folger, was that “the major emphasis by the SREB will be stimulating and facilitating research among colleges and universities, rather than focusing on research by the Board staff.”

In the summer and fall of 1958, SREB staff conducted a field survey for a closer look at IR in a sample of Southern colleges and universities. Although central IR offices existed at only three of the institutions visited, all were found to have produced studies of some kind—sometimes simply the reports of ad hoc committees. The USOE’s request to all institutions for copies of institutional self-studies had netted

126 documents from a total of 39 institutions which responded in the South. SREB's "closer look" accounted for 109 studies at 17 institutions, several of which had been chosen for their reputation as IR pioneers in the South.

A few AHE members interested in the pursuit of IR had met for several consecutive years during the annual meetings of the AHE (now AAHE) in Chicago. During the 1959 AHE sessions, a meeting to discuss strategy and tactics for stimulating IR was attended by a small group of representatives from the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE), SREB, WICHE, OSIR, USOE, and also Ruth Eckert of the University of Minnesota, John Morris of the University of Mississippi, John Dale Russell of New York University, Hugh Stickler of Florida State University, and Robert Wert of the Carnegie Corporation. The group adopted a resolution urging the OSIR of ACE to "expand its activities to serve as an informal center for communication between research workers in higher education." Specifically, it called upon OSIR to undertake (1) preparation of an attractive brochure—aimed at presidents and other top administrators—setting forth some of the advantages of institutional study as an aid in administration, (2) organization of a conference in fall 1959 on the problems of measuring faculty load, and (3) distribution of case studies on the organization and accomplishments of institutional research.

A faculty load conference took place at Purdue University in November 1959, and an informational brochure authored by A. J. Brumbaugh was published by ACE and distributed in 1960 under the title *Research Designed to Improve Institutions of Higher Education*. Brumbaugh's concluding comments appear to have stood the test of time:

(1) To be of the greatest service in improving higher education, institutional research must be well-planned. To plan well means that a comprehensive overview be taken to identify the crucial issues with which the institution is confronted. Research projects related to these issues may then be formulated. (2) Responsibility for the over-all coordination and direction of institutional research should be centralized. The lack of central coordination is likely to result in wasteful duplication. (3) Even though responsibility for institutional research is centralized, provision should be made for wide participation by members of the faculty and administration in planning and conducting projects. Participation by the faculty in institutional research not only educates the faculty member to the issues with which the institution is confronted but also prepares him to consider sympathetically the implications of research findings. (4) Institutional research must be adequately financed.

Meanwhile, WICHE and Stanford University, in summer of 1959, co-sponsored a regionwide Institute for College and University Admin-

istrators on Institutional Research on the Stanford campus, the first of a series which resulted in *College Self-Study, Lectures on Institutional Research*, now a collector's item.

Hugh Stickler, at the Chicago meeting on stimulation of IR had offered Florida State University as host to a future workshop on IR. This invitation became a reality with the first Southern Institute on Institutional Research in July 1960, co-sponsored with Florida A & M University and the SREB. Like the Brumbaugh brochure, this institute was directed particularly at college and university presidents and other administrators. The Tallahassee Institute was the occasion for the luncheon meeting to which Joe Lins has ascribed the conception of "NIRF," as the brainchild of that historic meeting came to be known.

Specifically, it was agreed to hold an informal national meeting in the spring of 1961 to provide an opportunity for those responsible for institutional studies meet to discuss methodological problems. Participation would be by invitation, and the United States would be divided into four areas for the purpose of extending invitations. This first National Institutional Research Forum (NIRF) was held just before the meeting of the AHE in Chicago on 4-5 March, 1961. In attendance were 16 persons from the Northeast, 10 persons from the South, 9 from the West, 9 from the Midwest, and 2 from the USOE—a total of 46 persons.

A second Southern or, more particularly, a Southwestern Institute on Institutional Research was cosponsored by SREB and the University of Texas at Austin on July 19-22, 1961.

The second NIRF was held on 3-4 March, 1962 in Chicago, with an attendance of 50. The group suggested that the planning committee consider expanding the annual sessions to include all those actively engaged or vitally interested in institutional research work in colleges or universities. The planning committee voted (1) that attendance at the 1963 meeting be opened to 200 persons, (2) that the meeting consist of both general and workshop sessions, and (3) that no formal organization be recommended at that time.

A third SREB Conference on Institutional Research was cosponsored with the University of Kentucky on July 15-18, 1962. The third NIRF was held at Wayne State University in Detroit, on 5-7 May, 1963. The theme was *The Role of Institutional Research in Planning*.

Although the incorporated body known as the AIR was not formalized until the Fifth NIRF in Stony Brook, N.Y., two years later, open meetings with a national attendance and regularized publication of proceedings, dated from the Detroit Forum. Within three years after its conception under the moss-festooned oaks of Tallahassee, the brainchild NIRF had become the bouncing baby soon to be christened AIR.

More important than AIR's growth, of course, was expansion of the IR profession itself. IR is people—people who know how to ask relevant questions and to research them, who are able to provide answers based on research for sound educational decision-making. The dissemination of case studies on IR accomplishments, which the OSIR had in 1959 been advised to undertake, may not have materialized, but once IR veterans were thrown together with new recruits to IR at regional institutes of SREB and WICHE or national meetings of NIRF and AIR, their function as role models served well in propagating the craft of IR; this interaction, in effect, provided the live case studies which could have the greatest impact. The reading and discussion of papers at professional meetings is the mode whereby junior members of a discipline have always sharpened their wits and by which senior members have kept abreast of innovation.

Both the Brumbaugh brochure and the proceedings of the first Stanford Institute had been given titles which were thought necessary for explaining to the uninitiated what IR consists of—*College Self-Study* and *Research Designed to Improve Institutions of Higher Learning*. With the incorporation of the AIR, whatever ambiguities of identity may still have remained for the profession were finally laid to rest—the term “institutional research” now became an educational byword.

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