

ON THE PREDICTABLE CRISES OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

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The origins of institutional research can be dated without too much distortion from the research revolution of the late 1950s and early 1960s. That brief era perceived scientific and technological progress as the key to economic development and the production of knowledge as one of the nation's growth industries. Research and development (R&D) were seen not only as "big business" but as "good business."

As corporate industry, the federal government, and private foundations plowed more funds into research, the embarrassment to American colleges and universities became more noticeable. Ostensibly the source of most research and development efforts, institutions of higher education were often chided for their lack of concern with their own internal operations and functions. Prestigious research universities were said to study everything but themselves.

But institutional research is also a product of a managerial revolution that quickly followed the R&D movement. The "lavish funding" of higher education by the federal government in the mid-1960s brought a concomitant demand for efficiency and effective management in institutions thought immune to notions of efficiency and unprepared for any suggestions that their effectiveness should be demonstrated. The Henle Report (1967) can be read, in retrospect, as a manifesto for managerial control, public accountability, and governmental supervision. Institutions of higher education were then perceived as national resources that were essential to national security and pride, economic prosperity, and general well-being, State and federal government dare not fail to support higher education and surely could not fail to regulate.

Rourke and Brooks (1966) can still be read for an understanding of the pressures fostering and encouraging institutional research. The rapid growth and expansion of higher education produced an obvious need for a better understanding of internal processes and a more direct

knowledge of outcomes, impacts, and benefits. The application of systematic, quantitative research methods was not only logical but seemingly inevitable.

The development of institutional research throughout the past two decades need not be described as progressive or systematic but it can be regarded as continuous. As a research specialty, institutional research has known its good days and its bad days. Yet there is reason to believe that the specialty has continued to grow, develop, and mature. **There is even reason to believe that its developmental stages, if accurately traced, will provide an interesting story when the specialty is old enough to appreciate its roots and early passages.**

Judging the age of institutional research as being "about twenty," a number of questions concerning its development or maturity will readily follow. There can be advantages in viewing institutional research as a professional specialty in its "young adult years" and there ought to be interest in asking such questions as how rapidly is it maturing, how well does it meet its adult responsibilities, and what are the "predictable crises" that might well be expected as it progresses? There are excellent reasons to believe that organizations, academic disciplines, and professional specialties have their own developmental psychology. It makes sense to speak of developmental or growth stages, and it is not absurd to borrow insights and viewpoints that have been gained in other disciplines or fields of specialized study. Reasoning by analogy need not be the sin once scorned by logical positivists if it either provides a better sensitivity to problems and issues or gives a more intelligent anticipation of future difficulties.

Questions asked about the maturity of institutional research need not receive flattering answers but they should be asked openly and frankly. The arrival of other professional or academic specialties is often announced with particular attention to indexes or status symbols that signify certain stages of organizational or disciplinary growth. Among these are an accepted societal need, a body of specialized literature, and an association mediating the interests of its members and the general public.

As a professional specialty, institutional research can be scored safely on all three. If an accepted societal need for institutional research has not emerged from within institutions of higher education over the past two decades, **it has clearly been visited upon those institutions from without. Many offices of institutional research owe their beginnings to federal funds of various sorts and to the demands of statewide planning and coordination.**

Critics may disparage the degree of specialization in institutional research literature, but the literature is nonetheless existent. Practitioners

in the field of institutional research vary greatly in their reading habits and attitudes, but there is a continuous effort to "define the field" and to share its successes. Membership in the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) is not obligatory for practitioners in the field, but a failure to "pay one's dues" is viewed with some suspicion. As a spokesman, AIR has been instrumental in federal policies and guidelines significantly affecting the specialty.

Questions about the increasing status and recognition of institutional research, its selection of novitiates, its standards for training and preparation, and the quality of its communications network are not as easily answered. Observers will disagree on the extent to which institutional research has improved its status and recognition over the past decade. If at one time the duties and responsibilities of the institutional researcher came equipped with vice-presidential status, the visibility of the function may have lessened in recent years. A more accurate assessment might be that the 1970s have not permitted a high degree of visibility for any administrative function.

Newcomers to institutional research continue to represent a broad spectrum of abilities and interests in academe, but graduates of educational and training programs related to institutional research are increasingly visible. Communications within the specialty are often limited to personal contacts and informal arrangements among practitioners. The nature of institutional data dictates a "code of confidentiality" within groups and a "track record of credibility" among individuals. Yet papers presented at annual forums, regional meetings, and at special conferences have increased noticeably and observers will not doubt the efforts of institutional researchers to communicate.

The success of *Research in Higher Education* as a refereed journal for quantitative analyses, the expanded publications program of the Association for Institutional Research, and the resulting affiliation of the two are indicative of the communicative bases that undergird developing specialties. Future issues of *Research in Higher Education* will contain a section specifically devoted to the conceptual and methodological issues of institutional research as a developing professional specialty. The intent is to provide a continuing forum with which general concepts and principles can give a new perspective or enhance the old one.

Numerous directions can be taken in the effort, but the emphasis should be on research and scholarship within the specialized field of institutional research, as opposed to professional or associational matters that are discussed elsewhere. In general the effort should be an opportunity to view critically those trends and developments bearing directly upon institutional research as a developmental process. Occa-

sions may be taken to discuss the "state of the art" or "twists and turns" that seemingly lead astray. The development of institutional research as a much-needed function in higher education should not be played too heavily as a theme, but such a theme should be in the background.

Specific forms or vehicles that might be chosen include critical analyses of significant trends and events, reviews of books that cast important issues in a better light, research notes in which promising leads or possibilities might be presented, methodological notes in which significant departures might be called to the attention of the profession, summaries of particularly important studies, and critical reactions to specific studies or viewpoints in the professional literature.

If the professional specialty of institutional research is in its "young adult years" there should be interesting events and experiences to discuss. As it follows the path of growth and development that other professional specialties have followed, there will indeed be "predictable crises" that should concern practitioners of the art.

REFERENCES

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