Webber, K., & Calderon, A. (2015). *Institutional research and planning in higher education: Global contexts and themes.* **New York, NY: Routledge.**

Pp. xv + 247   ISBN: 9781138021433

Reviewed by Victor J. Sensenig
Washington College
United States

Like the personal computer and Facebook, the institutional research office is an American invention that is now a fixture of higher education. In 1955, only ten colleges or universities in the United States had this institutional feature. A decade later there were 115 research offices, and they have since become universal in the United States and an increasingly common feature of higher education institutions around the world. Institutional research offices range from one- to two-person offices at smaller schools that engage in mandated reporting and modest number crunching to the large professional bureaucracies of research universities that boast the division of labor into specialties and engage in sophisticated research projects. Though these offices may use alternative terms in their titles, such as assessment, accountability, or effectiveness, the central function is widely embraced—providing information to support decision making by higher education leaders. The work of institutional research offices in the United States is diverse, often involving critical examination of teaching procedures, admissions practices, and factors affecting costs.

Institutional Research and Planning in Higher Education

Global Contexts and Themes

Edited by
Karen L. Webber and Angel J. Calderon

A minor industry of books on the theory and practice of institutional research (IR) emerged in the 1960s, and the scholarly contributions of such higher education researchers as Patrick Terenzini (1993) and Fred Volkwein (1999) have become canonical. The Association for Institutional Research was formed in 1965 and went on to publish books like *The Primer for Institutional Research* (2003), which addresses topics like faculty salary analysis and enrollment management. The authoritative *Handbook of Institutional Research* (2012) offers an overview of the core aspects of IR, including its history and theoretical foundations and its data sources and tools. To this shelf, *Institutional Research and Planning in Higher Education* adds a consideration of IR variations and commonalities across countries as well as description of the new demands that will be placed on IR offices as more institutions operate across borders. The book is an expansion of an earlier volume edited by Webber and Calderon, *Global Issues in Institutional Research* (2013), with some of the same authors revisiting topics as well much new material.

The book's eighteen chapters are divided into three sections. The first section outlines the central tasks of IR and the divergence of IR from educational research. The second section takes a tour of the IR landscape in nine world regions: North America, Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, the UK and Ireland, Australia, South Africa, Latin America, Eastern and Southeastern Asia, and the Middle East. The third section looks to the future by addressing a range of issues—such as data use—and points to ways that practice could be strengthened.

In the first section, contributors outline several important features of IR practice. First, IR is best defined as a set of activities and roles, which receives varying degrees of emphasis depending on the needs of particular institutions. As a result, IR practitioners have no defined identity and operate instead as "blended professionals." Second, in its earliest forms, IR was conducted as a professional practice rather than as a branch of the academic discipline of higher education research. However, there is significant overlap in the applied research approach of both IR and education research, and institutional researchers often deal with a tension between these two approaches to studying their institutions. Third, the increase in transnational IR collaborations, particularly through global rankings and benchmarking, has intensified one of the essential concerns of the profession—ensuring the equivalence of data and definitions. As the practice spreads across borders, there is a growing need for common understandings. In addition, as institutions move toward the status of "global university" by diversifying students and staff, internationalizing the curriculum, and introducing cross-border study, the role of government becomes more significant as regulatory requirements are multiplied rather than transcended.

In its overview of nine world regions, the second section uses the United States as the baseline for comparison. The sketches are swift ("Institutional Research in Europe" is given about 10 pages), but points of contrast are clear. Compared to the United States, IR has not yet developed a distinct professional profile in Europe. The work of European IR is often dispersed among a variety of positions. IR is at an even earlier developmental stage in South Africa and Latin America, where government funding for higher education information systems only began in the last 20 years. On the whole, centrally directed systems have been slower to develop formal IR capacity, but the landscape is changing. In Central and Eastern Europe, higher education has become more autonomous since the 1990s, with regulation of internal organization and conduct supplanted by more performance evaluations and demands. The need for IR is also growing as countries like the UK move toward a higher education market. In such a market,

institutions need increased intelligence in order to beat the competition, and IR meets this need.

IR development in Asia, and the Middle East in particular, has been accelerated by rapid increases in enrollment. In these regions, the accreditation and quality assurance functions of IR have received the most emphasis, in contrast to the American concern for data-based decision making. The authors of these chapters raise an intriguing question in the course of this discussion. Should the region develop an Asian-style IR or an American-style IR? Should it maintain a focus on quality management or shift its focus to data management?

The book has an implicit answer to these questions—the likelihood of global convergence rather than a future of IR diversification. By closing the book with a section on the best practice of IR, the editors seem to suggest that IR offices have spread so quickly and share so many features because of the common challenges faced by colleges and universities around the world, including enrollment booms, fierce competition, and sharper demands for evidence of effectiveness. The future, according to contributors in the third section, is an enhanced role for IR that encompasses analytic work, the synthesis of information, and understanding of public policy. IR will evolve to include such efforts as a knowledge footprint framework that captures an institution's impact on the economy, society, and the environment. The expanded scope of IR work will require information systems that combine data gathering and storage with analytics and that democratize data reporting and sharing, making data manipulation much less likely.

Institutional Research and Planning in Higher Education delivers admirably in what it sets out to do. The reader puts it down with a better understanding of the institutional researcher's world and how it looks from different places on the planet. But the relationship between the conceptual pairing of the title—institutional research and planning—remains a puzzle. Why has IR flourished and not something else? In fact, research and planning are separate facets of higher education. It is quite possible to do strategic planning—that is, determining direction for the institution and specifying needed steps—without involving institutional research. Yet these facets have become more entwined over the decades with the increasing recognition of IR as a means to enable decisions based on evidence, and this recognition has occurred across higher education systems that differ immensely in their degree of centralization, funding mechanisms, and accountability structures.

This book advances a technical or functional explanation, and it is compelling. From this perspective, IR is a global phenomenon because it solves a pressing problem, the need for human intervention to determine useful data and manipulate it to create information in a hugely complex and competitive endeavor. In short, human intuition is fallible, and the higher education enterprise is too large to run on intuition and improvisation. Wittgenstein's Ribbon is the most compelling demonstration of the limits of intuition that I know. Try this thought experiment. You've passed a ribbon around the earth (assumed to be a perfect sphere), but find yourself with one extra meter of length. You distribute the resulting slack evenly around the earth, so it's above the surface an equal distance around the globe. How far above the earth does the ribbon hover? For many of us, our intuition steps forward with a wrong answer: the ribbon will hover the tiniest fraction of a millimeter above the surface. A few minutes of calculation using basic geometry will deliver the right answer: about 16 centimeters. Institutional research as a professional practice is based on the conviction that we make better choices and decisions when we have more extensive knowledge and evidence.

However, if anything is missing from this volume, it's a stronger sense of a deeper

cultural force behind the IR phenomenon. It seems to me that the IR function is also spread as part of an influential global higher education culture. The IR office is part of the larger bundle of basic ideas about education that circulate in the wider global environment. From this perspective, higher education systems do not primarily turn to IR as a direct and inevitable solution to local concerns and problems like the pressures of growing enrollment or increased accountability. Instead, this is a story of the penetration of a set of cultural ideas. In particular, the spread of the IR across the world is a striking example of the triumph of the bureaucratic model and the rationalization of activity. This is a world in which higher education leaders determine how to act not by tradition (based what's been done in the past) and not by affect (based on feelings or emotions). Instead, they operate with an instrumental rationality, calculating the greatest probability of success for particular moves. It is interesting to consider the implications of an Asian-style IR versus an American-style IR, but it is just as interesting to wonder why higher education institutions feel compelled to make the choice at all.

References

Howard, R., McLaughlin, G., and Knight, W, eds. (2012). *The handbook of institutional research*. San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass.

Knight, W, ed. (2003). *The primer for institutional research*. Tallahassee, FL: The Association for Institutional Research.

Terenzini, P. (1993). On the nature of institutional research and the knowledge and skills it requires. *Research in Higher Education*, 34(1), 1-10.

Volkwein, J.F. (1999). The four faces of institutional research. In J.F. Volkwein (Ed.), *What is institutional research all about: A critical and comprehensive assessment of the profession*. New Directions for Institutional Research, (No. 104). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

About the Reviewer

Victor J. Sensenig is Assistant Provost for Institutional Research and Assessment at Washington College in Chestertown, MD. He received a PhD in Educational Theory and Policy from the Pennsylvania State University. He has published and presented work on a wide variety of topics in education, including the rates of return to higher education, the effects of merit aid programs on enrollment, and the role of public libraries in leveling the playing field in early literacy.

education review // reseñas educativas

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

editors: gustavo e. fischman /
melissa cast-brede / gene v glass

Supported by the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University