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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING DRIVEN—BY DATA

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Have you sensed rumblings about mandatory reporting by colleges and universities of the percentage of recent graduates who are working in their major field of study *and* their starting salaries? This metric duo defines the business term, *return on investment* (ROI), and applies it to college education. Instead of having stockholders, per se, we have stakeholders.

Was it not so long ago that we were accountable for student loan default and graduation rates? Next were merit-based versus need-based grants, learning outcomes and cost of education. What's more, we're not just accountable to the federal government. *The National Center for Education Statistics* (NCES) in the *US Department of Education* has been posting our IPEDS data in a reviewer-friendly report that is accessible to everyone; it's called *College Navigator* (www.nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/). What was once between just us and the federal government is getting to the general public and our various constituents. Mainstream media discovered easy and reliable information sources, such as IPEDS and *The College Board*, to write provocative articles. There might be more to come.

For example, *College Measures* (www.collegemeasures.org) is spearheading an *Economic Success Metrics Program* in partnership with the *American Institutes for Research*. Open to the public, a reviewer-friendly search tool shows a breakdown of graduates' salaries by college and major field. Figures are already reported for Arkansas and Tennessee; Colorado, Nevada, Texas and Virginia are soon to be completed. This might pit school against school and major against major, possibly to impact critical mass for running major programs of study at any given school.

Additionally, the *Georgetown Public Policy Institute* publishes reviewer-friendly tables of median salaries by major for people with bachelors and graduate degrees in the major (www.cew.georgetown.edu/whatsitworth/). Through its *Employment Projections Program*, the *Bureau of Labor Statistics* publishes occupational outlook data, which shows growing and declining professions and occupations and which fuels articles about the employment prospects and pay for specific jobs that can be tied to major fields of study (www.bls.gov/emp/). Finally, results of the survey by the *Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools* are published in which employers rate the workforce skills of recent college graduates (www.acics.org/events/content.aspx?id=4718). Reporters have the fodder to present, and tie together, the elements of ROI for the general public.

With the flood of data directly available to the public and to mainstream media reporters to write provocative articles, there is already growing public awareness of ROI that is putting the collateral damage of college education, specifically, family loans (i.e., student loans <u>and</u> parent loans) on the radar for families to consider <u>before</u> they are indebted. Thus far, many families ac-

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cept the debt in their financial aid package because it is put on the table well after their student has his/her heart set on a school. What's next? There could be a paradigm shift in college choice by college-bound families. In presenting institutions' figures in the context of economic realities, reporters might reframe their thinking and influence their behavior. Regardless, the demand for data will only increase and the need for figures at our fingertips will be more and more crucial for accountability and for being proactive – even preemptive – versus reactive with strategic direction and in strategic planning.

Sometimes, however, even simple reporting is not so simple. As you may know, savvy schools return *The Common Data Set* (CDS), which populates The College Board's popular web site. It's a one-shot survey to publishers that reduces our reporting burden, it's free publicity and it promotes consistency in external reporting. How would it look if your school is called on the carpet over inconsistent figures for a bond issuance? You lose credibility. In the very least, schools that have been accused of reporting incorrect figures are embarrassed and dealing with corrections consumes time and energy that could be better spent. Moreover, completing these reports is tedious and time-consuming for data-disorganized institutions. Ironically, it is oftentimes data-disorganized offices in institutions that claim to be too busy to improve data management while, in reality, data management deficits make them busy.

In addition to IPEDS, and perhaps The CDS, many of you complete surveys for college rankings, and have a Fact Sheet and/or Fact Book. Many of you have a suite of internal reports that contain even more figures. Does your suite of reports give you all the information you need? How do you know whether you receive exactly what you need?

Consider this:

1. Does the information you glean from your suite of reports change how you do things?
2. How long must you wait for just one ad hoc report or an ad hoc request for just one figure?

Let's say we have a table of historic four-, five- and six-year graduation rates in our Fact Book. The table informs us of how we're doing; year-to-year persistence rates provide benchmarks. However, the table does not tell us how to increase our graduation rate. By itself, the table gives us no such insight. How do we influence this important outcome of interest – and others?

Let's continue with this example. A graduation rate is considered a <u>descriptive</u> statistic. Data-based/analytical research <u>explains</u> the statistic. It identifies the multiple predictors of this metric of student success and institutional effectiveness so we can develop strategies and tactics to influence it. Data-based research combines predictors of graduation into even more powerful applicant and student profiles. Profiles are "multivariate;" they consist of <u>sets</u> of predictors. With data that originate in the Admissions and Financial Aid operations we can identify profiles of *Best Fit* students for our school at the time we're making acceptance decisions. We can rate the probability of an applicant being at-risk for dropping, instead of relying solely on our "Early Alert" system, when the student is in free fall.

Research on our institution might confirm our suspicion, supported by higher education literature, that *ability to pay* is associated with persistence to graduation. Research will take us a step further and quantify just how much it matters for various pockets of students so we can award accordingly. First research identifies a "metric" for *ability to pay* that is significant at our school, a metric such as Expected Family Contribution" (EFC), and then research gives us the probability of graduating that is based on changes in EFC. When research proves a *bivariate relationship* between EFC and graduation, it helps to inform our tactic of providing grants to improve our graduation rates. Research informs the critical amounts of discounts based on EFC that will increase enrollment and persistence rates. Suppose that *ability to pay* is not the only heavy hitter in predicting graduation.

Institutional research might confirm our suspicion that *academic preparation* and *academic commitment* also affect persistence to graduation at our institution. Research identifies metrics for these constructs, too. Research takes all of these significant predictor-outcome relationships a step further when it combines all predictors into applicant and student profiles. Such profiles are <u>much</u> more powerful in predicting important outcomes of interest such as graduation. Now we can decide which applicants to admit and which applicants might benefit from a form of financial, academic and/or counseling support so that we can proactively impact our graduation rates instead of just reporting them. We track/

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assess the progress of our strategies, tactics and interventions by reporting year-to-year persistence rates, as well as GPA, which is one important measure of *academic performance*. We can more finely determine strategies, tactics and interventions, such as how to distribute our limited amount of financial aid to effectively and efficiently enroll and retain students who are the Best Fit for our institution.

Research can even develop an Academic Preparation Index of multiple measures of *academic preparation* to interface with EFC. The Academic Index and EFC can be used as parameters for a financial aid awarding matrix. Research will report figures in a matrix that is defined by *academic preparation* and *ability to pay*. You see historic enrollment, persistence and graduation rates in each "cell" of the awarding matrix along with average grants and loans. Your awarding strategy has been informed by data-based research on years of history and then you actively track progress toward your enrollment goals during the admissions cycle by populating the matrix with depositors every week or so. This gives you the chance to revisit your game plan and, perhaps, do some target marketing to shape enrollment instead of just waiting for the final enrollment report after the dust has settled. You might even have a different awarding matrix for different areas of study (e.g., nursing, law, education) or some other classification of interest.

Based on years of data history, you develop data-based tactics to market to students with Best Fit characteristics, i.e., student profiles that are associated with graduation. You might leverage financial aid to enroll them and retain them. You assess your student services as well as curricula, programs, courses, faculty and instruction. Methods of assessment might include a student satisfaction survey and course evaluations of learning outcomes and instructional delivery from your curricula, program and course review initiatives. These data bases are part of your Data Library. They must be managed so data can be analyzed and reported for utilization.

You follow this model for every one of the goals in your strategic plan.

1. Determine the desired outcome of each strategic goal and convert it to a metric or a <u>set</u> of metrics (i.e., multiple measures). Metrics are "observables", i.e., how success should look for each strategic goal.
2. Research guides you on how to impact each goal. When you understand the dynamics between predictors and outcomes, you can control your outcomes or at least manage them.
3. You assess and report progress along the way

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through benchmarks from baseline through target. You can drill down further to assess and report the efficacy of particular tactics, such as those for admissions marketing and those for instruction, which fuel your strategic plan.

This is a data-based institutional research, assessment and reporting system. In fact, data-based research also will tell you whether your strategic goals square with reality: Research informs strategic direction.

Eventually you build a comprehensive and cohesive data-based body of knowledge so you will know how a prospective change of strategy, policy or tactic will impact others without learning the hard way and senior management will be on the same page. Higher education has no shortage of people with opinions. Data settles debates that generate opposition and stalemates.

Does this sound easy? Given that data is the basis for research, assessment and reporting, you must, first and foremost, have the data. Asking for data-based research, assessments and reports without data is like putting Emeril in a kitchen with no food to make dinner. What's more, you need the right data elements archived at a point in time in which they capture the information you need; data elements must be formatted in a data file layout that lends itself to analysis. Take our metaphor a step further: Emeril cannot make chicken parmesan without chicken. If there is no chicken, Emeril must either go to the store to buy one or become a farmer. This delays dinner. You might figure that you need a "data warehouse." Picture what it would be like to deal with merchandise in a disorganized Wal-Mart warehouse. So, too, data warehouses must be organized. Think of your data warehouse as a carefully cataloged Data Library. You lay out a data file that lends itself to the statistical analyses and reports that give you the information you need.

Let's go back to our Fact Book table with four-, five- and six-year graduation rates by admission year. You should be able to make an ad hoc request for three years of five-year graduation rates of Hispanic female Pell-recipients and receive the figures in minutes for a major donor. (If you want to raise the graduation rate you can request research on how to do so). When data files in data warehouses are not organized to provide such information, your people must generate lists and do manual counts and that is if the data were archived. Your various offices keep data they need to run their respective operations. However, they also must keep data for research to inform strategic direction, planning, policy and decision-making and do so in a proscribed way. Again, *data-based institutional research, assessment and reporting* is an integrated system.

All operations must step up to the plate to cooperate with the coordinating office which the president and the provost must actively support. Have you been "living with" inaccurate enrollment and financial aid forecasts that throw off department budgets, classes (e.g., sections, sizes, and faculty), housing and more? This is symptomatic of substandard data collection, data management and/or analysis. Do you get a different figure every time you ask a particular question? Do different figures appear on various reports? Do figures vary, depending on whom you ask? Lack of consistency is another symptom of poor data management and analysis, including unstandardized methodologies for collecting, entering, analyzing and reporting data. Rigor in data management applies to every functional area of your institution – Finance, Human Resources, External Affairs, Facilities Management/Physical Plant, Student Affairs, Admissions, Financial Aid, Registrar, Advancement/Alumni, Career Development/Placement and Academic Affairs. All areas of the institution are active participants.

Every functional area of your institution can have a mission, which is aligned with your institutional mission, core values and strategic plan and be accountable for fulfilling that mission. The missions can be translated into sets of deliverables and metrics so that fulfillment of the local mission is assessed and reported. Your Office of Institutional Research, Assessment & Reporting is at the helm for business protocol, providing centralized expertise and coordination for what data elements to collect, time of data capture, how to code data elements for manipulation and reporting and how to lay them out in a data file format for access and intended use. Information Technology (IT) is critical in providing technical expertise and service. For example, IT may help determine a central data repository for institutional data and provide data transport and programming expertise. Local data managers are the business area data experts that provide information to the Office of Institutional Research, Assessment & Reporting about the meaning of data that are collected in their respective operations. This is teamwork. Teams follow the business protocol. When local offices are not responsible for simple reporting, they are not motivated to appropriately manage data that

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are generated in their respective operations so that the data can be archived in a central repository for research, assessment and reporting by anyone.

Subsets of data that are generated in the operations of your various functional areas have research, assessment and reporting value. In a distributed system your offices have Data Managers who extract subsets of data elements from your main system, or their separate systems, "at census" (i.e., calendar date or event driven), and in a data file layout that lends itself to the kind of research, assessment and reporting that you need. This business practice also enables local offices to plan data-based tactics, track them in progress to make any adjustments and assess their effectiveness for the future. An Admissions example is College Board search. A Financial Aid office example is scholarships and loan amounts. Their tactics have been better informed by the Office of Institutional Research which identifies important applicant attributes and awarding parameters for them.

Do you turn over your admissions marketing and financial aid awarding strategies to an outside enrollment management consultant, and figure that you've got this covered? Consider this:

- A data-based, versus opinion-based, enrollment management consultant for admissions marketing and financial aid awarding strategies still needs data to work with.
- Consultants can only work with the data you turn over to them.
- How time consuming and tedious is it for your offices to compile the data for your consultant and can you be sure that it is accurate (i.e., data integrity)?
- The consulting practice does what you contracted it to do. How self-reliant are you to cover what it does not?
- How equipped are you for data-based institutional research, assessment and reporting to inform strategic direction for your institution and strategic planning, policy and decision-making for every need in every facet of your institution?

Cost of education, loans amounts, merit-based versus need-based aid, loan default rates, graduation rates, learning outcomes, starting salaries and employment in one's major: Figures are becoming public knowledge due to the accessibility and sophisticated use of data bases by mainstream media for writing provocative articles. Do you struggle with reporting these pertinent factors of interest? Moreover are you proactive in impacting them? Driven by the proper use of data you can be proactive, instead of reactive, in the face of increasing accountability to constituents and increasing demands on your institution. A distributed network of institution-wide participants which is guided by a central office and supported by the president and provost enables a data-based institutional research, assessment and reporting system that gives rise to an evidence-based culture for strategic planning, policy and decision-making.

Get Ready for the Online Invasion

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What if they gave a traditional classroom lecture and nobody came? Although that's not about to happen any time soon, the growing popularity of free virtual courses transcending barriers of time and geography, coupled with online offerings from for-profit institutions, poses a plethora of challenges for college presidents.

As the next wave of students weaned on the Internet engulfs our campuses, enrollment managers and CEOs need to prepare now with strategies and answers *before* they begin to receive, in large numbers, requests such as these from 18-year-olds: "*I've completed 30 units of online coursework. Can I transfer them in for credit toward a bachelor's degree?*"

Many educators note that MOOC's (massive online open courses) such as MITx, a portfolio of free MIT virtual courses also offered online by Harvard, Stanford, Yale and other prestigious universities, have taken higher education by storm. Further, with the advent of sites such as Coursera, a California-based virtual learning community, this issue has taken on considerable urgency in the larger context of how traditional colleges and universities can best deliver courses to students who have been learning online since pre-kindergarten. The American Council on Education (ACE) has just announced, in

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its words, an initiative next year using faculty teams to assess the content and rigor of these courses to evaluate whether they should be recommended for college credit.

Barely a year old, MOOCs differ from older for-profit distance learning programs in several ways: they are often more rigorous, offering highly motivated students a fast track to completing their undergraduate educations and allowing them to move more quickly into graduate programs and into the marketplace. The fact that courses from elite institutions are tuition-free appeals to all students, but especially to veterans and other non-traditional learners, the fastest-growing demographic segment in higher education today.

With similar live courses costing several hundred dollars per unit, traditional campus-based programs obviously cannot compete on cost. A possible solution -- limiting the number of units which students can transfer in -- may simply drive them to other universities.

We urge presidents and chief enrollment officers to arm themselves and their respective institutions *now* for this new wave of virtual learners who increasingly will seek a $200,000 degree for the price of a few on-campus courses. In addition to what and how many virtual courses will be accepted and from what institutions, *the time required to evaluate these courses will be of great concern to faculty*.

The questions to be asked, then, are:

What credits will we accept?
How many and from whom will we accept them?
Who will evaluate them for equivalency with our current courses and degree requirements?

As they ponder these emerging challenges, presidents and senior campus leadership, including faculty, will also want to consider the larger picture of how to best deliver courses to students who are "digital natives."

Rather than the traditional "lecture" approach, one president from a primarily residential campus in the Northeast with a distance component suggests encouraging faculty to use the MOOC approach to teaching, using digitalized multimedia, online offerings as class preparation. Valuable classroom time is then used for discussion and analysis based on students' virtual participation beforehand. Similarly, Yale Provost and President-Elect Peter Salovey teaches a seminar called "Great Big Ideas" in which students watch the course's lectures online, leaving classroom time entirely free for interactive discussion. "MOOCs really (constitute) only one part of what online tools can provide, and it may in the end not be the most important part," Provost Salovey says.

Although there will always be the traditional undergraduate demographic that seeks and benefits from the residential experience, a growing number of students will seek the cost-effective, convenient and expeditious virtual community to enhance their educational experience.

Experienced, respected enrollment management professionals such as The Dysart Group, Inc., can suggest strategic tools and strategies to help college presidents and enrollment managers to anticipate and craft proactive responses combining the best of both virtual and traditional campus-based learning.

"We can project trends and suggest innovative solutions to adapt the traditional classroom model to contemporary online learners," President John W. Dysart notes.

Keeping a college education affordable and accessible to all students who can benefit from it has long been the principal challenge facing presidents and senior campus management. The new distance alternatives make this balance both more complex and more urgent.

Thoughtful answers need to come soon, because our 17-year-old students wanting to complete most of their undergraduate education free and online are not going to wait for us to advance favorable solutions. Instead, they are quite likely to reply, "Well, if you won't accept my online courses for credit toward a degree, I'm going to enroll at another institution that does."

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