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Institutional Research functions continue to transform despite little support and unrelenting demands

As the higher education community awakens to the critical role of the Institutional Research (IR) functionality in improving student outcomes and driving institutional performance, the National Association of System Heads today released the results of a [two-year study](#) and a series of rubrics that can be adopted by higher education systems and campuses nationally to increase access, completion, and success among students and graduates.

“Comprehensive data and decision analytics are no longer a nice-to-have; they are a need-to-have,” said Nancy L. Zimpher, chancellor of The State University of New York and chair of NASH. “Support and development of Institutional Research functionality is at the core of our ability to create evidence-based decision-making platforms that ultimately allow colleges and universities to identify ‘what works’ to improve student outcomes, and bring those practices to scale. With the release of this report, NASH provides a valuable blueprint to help public higher education systems and individual campuses measure their collective impacts on student learning, achievement, and success.”

The study, which was based on a nationwide survey of IR offices, interviews of IR personnel and users, and with visits to system IR offices, found IR functions to be in a state of flux. Across systems and campuses, IR functions are struggling to fulfill their traditional roles centered on compliance reporting while simultaneously refocusing on informing policy and strategy through decision analytics for many reasons. Demands are intensifying and diversifying, and the data produced by compliance reports are increasingly misaligned with the environment faced by systems and campuses. Legacy data systems are topically stove-piped, making essential cross-functional analyses hard to produce. All the while, there is little in the way of financial support or professional development for personnel, further complicating efforts at IR transformation.

Despite these challenges, system and campus IR functions have evolved to a much higher level of performance in the area of student retention and graduation. Both are increasingly translating data and analytics into knowledge, which has contributed immensely to improvements in student success. Still, if IR functions are to reach their full potential, more must be done to bridge IR with Information Technology (IT), and to ensure that data and analyses are timely, accurate, and compelling.

This evolution is visibly uneven across systems and campuses for a host of contextual, technical, and financial reasons. With that in mind, NASH created complementary self-assessment rubrics for IR functions at both the system and institution levels. The purposes of these rubrics are to allow systems and campuses to take stock of their strengths, as well as

areas where further improvements can be made. The rubrics were shaped by four broad themes, which include:

- **System and state relationships:** This includes the history of the system, the level of state interest in policy and performance, and the degree of autonomy of the system from the state.
- **Intra-system organizational dynamics:** This includes dynamics between the system and the Board, President or Chancellor, and/or the campuses.
- **The role of IR within the system and among campuses:** This includes whether or not IR is focused on compliance reporting and auditing, or geared more towards translating data into knowledge and action.
- **Data quality and the IR-IT nexus:** This includes how Institutional Research and Information Technology can best complement one another.

NASH recommends that system leaders supplement the self-assessment with a visit from an external review team with expertise in public systems and the IR function. The team can provide the system leaders with their perspective about the overall function, and can provide an independent assessment about strategies for improving performance. NASH has organized and trained an IR review team to support that function, which can be made available to systems on a cost-sharing basis.

The work was led by NASH consultant Jane Wellman in partnership with NASH Deputy Director Jonathan Gagliardi, and under the guidance of a national advisory committee drawn from system and campus IR offices. It was supported by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates foundation. For major highlights and the complete works please visit www.nashonline.org/institutional-research.

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