

11 lessons I have Learned About Institutional Effectiveness

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2017 South Carolina AIR Keynote

1. Higher education is an absolute economic and moral necessity in the United States.

Research has overwhelmingly demonstrated the importance of higher education for career and financial success, health, and quality of life. The publication *Postsecondary Education Opportunity* has provided a substantial amount of information that shows a bachelor's degree or even a master's degree is necessary for today's college students to meet their parents' standard of living. The recent presidential election in the United States has also demonstrated that educational achievement is very strongly predictive of the profound political, philosophical, and ethical differences within American society. It is increasingly clear that a college education is important not only to do well, but to do good.

2. Lack of state and federal investment as well as competition (two-year, four-year, online, for-profit, dual credit, etc.) have led to high tuition levels, resulting in questions about value, a consumer mindset, and ever-growing accountability and criticism.

Framing higher education as primarily a private good rather than a joint public-private good, as began during the Regan Revolution of the 1980s, led to the federal government shifting the bulk of its college student financial aid from grants to loans, a decrease in purchasing power of Pell Grants, slower growth in state support, and states and institutions shifting their financial aid from need-based to merit-based aid (for example the Georgia Hope grant that was initiated in the 1990s), all resulting in an explosion in student loan debt. Student loan debt topped one trillion dollars in 2013 and is now at a greater level than credit card debt in the United States. Competition for college students, especially in areas of the country such as New England and the Midwest has led to what has been termed an "arms race" in providing institutional scholarships (tuition discounting) and student amenities, such as very well-appointed residence halls, which have put some institutions in financial jeopardy. Every year over the past few years, a handful of institutions have closed their doors, particularly small private and for-profit institutions. It should not be a surprise that students, their families, federal and state governments, the media, and a booming industry of college rankings organizations are asking increasingly difficult questions about the value of the college experience, with a consumer mindset now in place that was not apparent in past generations.

3. Colleges and universities have been remarkably impervious to change.

Clark Kerr quote (1960s):

Taking as a starting point 1530, when the Lutheran Church was founded, some 66 institutions that existed then still exist today in the Western World in recognizable forms. [These are] the Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, the parliaments of Iceland and the Isle of Man, and 62 universities.

Daniel Seymour, in his recent book *Momentum* (2016), notes that both institutional leaders and individual faculty and staff members often react to criticism by becoming defensive, attacking critics as not being qualified to have an opinion, complaining about accountability initiatives, bemoaning the “corporatization” of higher education, rejecting discussion about the value of college, labelling any new initiative a fad or an attack on academic freedom and a lowering of standards, and saying that everything would be fine if the world would just leave us alone (but give us more money). Seymour (2016) says that like hospitals, law firms, and school systems, colleges and universities are professional bureaucracies that have a relatively small leadership team, while their operating core is a set of credentialed professionals who operate highly autonomously. While professional bureaucracies may be relatively efficient in accomplishing their goals with fairly lean structure, they are typically very resistant to meaningful change.

In my career, I have witnessed the development of student learning outcomes assessment; program/unit review; numerous student success initiatives; instructional cost and productivity studies; changes in accreditation models; federal and state accountability and performance funding efforts; voluntary accountability efforts such as the Voluntary System of Accountability, the Voluntary Framework of Accountability, and the University and College Accountability Network; and widespread institutional strategic planning. In my experience, however, these efforts have for the most part led to marginal change at best.

4. Colleges and universities operate as loosely-coupled systems, increasingly to their detriment.

Loose coupling takes place when changes in one part of a system lead to unpredictable changes in other parts. The use of this term in higher education is attributed to Robert Brinbaum in his classic book *How Colleges Work* (1988) . Here is an example of loose coupling. If the state commission on higher education decides to devote substantial funding to institutions that graduate more students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, some academic departments will indicate that they are ready to greatly help the institution if they were to receive greater resources; some may complain that they are being unfairly discriminated against; some will not react at all; the business affairs staff may push academic affairs to produce more STEM graduates in the short term without wanting to wait for years to realize the effect of additional investment of resources; the provost may worry about the consequences of substantial investment in tenure-track faculty members, startup-funds, and laboratories; and institutional research may find itself needing to spend lots of time explaining how the state commission has operationalized the definition of STEM. If the state commission decides in two more years to change to a funding model that emphasizes four-year graduation rates among low-income students, the previous relationships may change substantially and new institutional players (such as Student Affairs and Financial Aid) may enter the discussion. Success in such systems involves understanding the relationships and adapting as they change.

Seymour (2016) notes that loosely-coupled systems maximize autonomy of their operating core while minimizing expenses needed to coordinate them. One of many consequences of loosely-coupled systems is that while there exists formal academic preparation for college and university administration (i.e., graduate-level preparation in Higher Education Administration), most institutional leaders (presidents, chancellors) and leaders within academic affairs (provosts, deans) do not have this credential; experience is viewed as sufficient preparation. This is reflected in one of my favorite quotes: “Colleges and universities are institutions run by amateurs to train professionals.”

Seymour (2016) explains that loosely-coupled structures do not adapt well to complex, unstable environments and find it very difficult to develop and pursue a single, integrated strategy. The pace of external change is now rapidly exceeding the pace of change inside. This is what Seymour calls being in a high-velocity environment. Responses to criticism have typically been met by attacking the critics, defending the status quo, invoking academic freedom, and grudging incremental change, causing us to appear disengaged and elitist. Recent examples include reactions to criticisms about the liberal arts, the value of accreditation, and campus race relations; and stubbornly low graduation rates despite much attention given to student success.

5. Successful institutions move from a paradigm of accountability to a paradigm of responsibility

Seymour distinguishes accountability from responsibility. Accountability is externally imposed, it presumes fault and blame. The offending organization is viewed to be incapable of meeting its obligations. Every issue is circumstantial and represents an individual problem to be handled rather than symptomatic of the need for structural change. Our rigidity, sense of indignation, and intransigence only make things worse. Responsibility implies taking ownership of our own actions, being willing to question fundamental assumptions, making large-scale, painful changes, and being engaged and transparent. It isn't about solving problems and reacting to criticism, but rather creating opportunities, developing capacity, and actively building a better future.

6. We know many of the things we need to do to make large-scale change and build more effective institutions, but they take great courage.

Leaders in higher education typically do not suffer from lack of knowledge about what changes need to happen, rather they suffer from lack of courage to make those changes happen.

Sandra Featherman, in her book *Higher Education at Risk* (2014), clearly identifies several straightforward but crucial steps for taking responsibility and improving our institutions. These include a focus on outcomes, strengthening customer service, developing and marketing a brand, renting more and building less, phasing out tenure, reducing administrative bloat, eliminating intercollegiate athletics, outsourcing non-educational activities, and using technology to enhance academic programs.

The Education Trust's 2014 study of high-performing, fast-gaining institutions (summarized by Seymour) resulted in a top-10 list of simple but very important questions colleges and universities should be able to answer in order to enhance student success: 1) How many students do we lose on the way? (retention), 2) But are those returning students actually sophomores? (progress), 3) Why aren't our students accumulating the credits they need to be on track? (course withdrawals), 4) What are some of the other reasons our students aren't accumulating the credits they need? (success rates in high-enrollment courses), 5) Who's struggling with math? (success rates of students' first math courses), 6) How many students who need remediation succeed at our institutions? (developmental education success), 7) What is the role—or lack thereof—of the major in student success? (success of students in different major fields of study), 8) How efficient are we in getting students to a degree without excess credits? (course-taking and course completion), 9) What pathways do students take on their journey to a degree? (course-taking), and 10) How do pieces of student success—or failure—fit together? (a comprehensive analysis of student degree pathways). All of these are questions that IR/IE professionals can help institutions to answer if leaders make them a priority.

I would like to highlight two institutions, one new and one greatly changed, that have made profound changes and taken responsibility for building a better future.

Southern New Hampshire University was struggling when Paul LeBlanc became president in 2003. Its enrollment was low and its tuition was high. When the 2008 recession took place it was not clear the institution could survive. Instead of hunkering down and denying the situation, SNHU decided to greatly expand its online enrollment. LeBlanc's plan was to create a university that caters to the older and working students that make up 80% of today's college population. These days SNHU online offers 180 degree and certificate programs to 34,000 students around the Nation and the world. Its tuition is competitive. A small army of recruiters matches students with programs. SNHU has a special emphasis on helping students transfer and apply previous college credit. SNHU attributes its six-year graduation rate of about 50%, which is substantially above the average for institutions whose students are largely part-time, on very high use of predictive analytics.

One of SNHU's recent initiatives, College for America, is based upon students demonstrating mastery of various competencies to earn degrees rather than the traditional approach of classroom instruction. Completion of 120 competencies earns students an associate's degree. A team of evaluators develop and administer measures to test competencies.

Whereas SNHU is an institution that reinvented itself, Guttman Community College of the City University of New York is a new institution that was created based on evidence rather than tradition. Unlike essentially all other community colleges CUNY GC does not offer any developmental courses, only classes that earn credits applicable to degrees, in order to keep students on a pathway to graduation. Developmental work is built into every course as needed. Classes emphasize collaborative and interdisciplinary work. Instead of standard general education courses, CUNY GC uses urban studies to explore government, culture, history and health; and offers sociology and business through the framework of various careers. Prior to the beginning of classes, students are required to attend a three-week bridge program that is designed to help students, often older adults, to adjust to college life and refresh their writing and math skills.

All CUNY GC students take the same classes during their first year. Students are required to spend 90 minutes each week in working with classmates and building on what they learn in class, with help from peer mentors. This contrasts with the usual practice of making tutoring, advising, study groups, and skill labs available as options for students who are aware of them and choose to use them. Students also have mandatory weekly 90-minute group sessions with advisers that highlight issues such as study habits and balancing college, work, and family.

7. Integrated institutional effectiveness (IE) helps to create moderately-coupled systems and double-loop learning.

There has been substantial growth in the existence of integrated, multi-functional institutional effectiveness (IE) offices and divisions, which integrate institutional research, student learning outcomes assessment, accreditation, planning, program/unit review, and sometimes budgeting, space planning, new program development, and other functions. The *Directory of Higher Education* listed 43 IE units in 1995, 375 in 2010 and 501 in 2015. IE improves its component functions by bringing them together organizationally, sharing competencies, and improving communication. More importantly, IE helps to smash organizational silos, introduce systems approaches, and enforce a culture of inquiry and responsibility, decreasing gaps between plans and performance. Seymour (p. 63) frames IE as a means of intentionally linking planning (*Why do we exist?*, *What do we want to create?*, *What do we believe?*), strategic intent (*How are we going to get there?*), evidence (*How will we know if we are successful?*), and action (*What do we do now?*). IE can be seen as a way to bridge the gap between an institution's vision and its current reality. It uses evidence (institutional research, assessment, program or unit review) to demonstrate accountability and to promote continuous improvement.

Integrated IE can be viewed as a way to promote what Argyris and Schön (1978, as summarized by Seymour) have termed double-loop learning and Model II organizations. While single-loop learning focuses on error detection and correction, double-loop learning involves questioning why we do what we do. With single-loop learning, we adjust our behaviors in a way that allows us to continue without having to make any fundamental changes to our underlying belief and value systems. Double-loop learning involves a more profound process. It requires that we call into question our basic assumptions. Raising this learning concept to the organizational level, Argyris and Schön make a distinction between Model I and Model II learning organizations based upon whether the policies and practices of the system promote single- or double-loop learning. In a Model I organization, adhering to rules, regulations, and traditions can be as important or even sometimes more important than achieving goals. The Model II learning organization has values, policies, and practices that promote double-loop learning. Members of the organization are empowered to share their information and their thinking. Ideas for improvement and change are tested publicly and people work together to achieve higher and more profound levels of understanding while continuously monitoring the responsiveness of the organization to changing external environments. If we are to be a more integral part of double-loop learning capacity building, then we need to engage with our colleagues more in articulating and testing the fundamental assumptions under which we work, and we also need to be part of the reflection process.

An example of single-loop vs. double-loop learning can be seen in Ball State's response to improving DFW rates (the percentage of "D" and "F" grades and withdrawals from high-enrollment courses). A single-loop response to high DFW rates might include sharing those rates with department chairs and deans, reminding students that tutoring services are available, and suggesting that the problem will go away if we just admit better students. I can't say all of these responses haven't taken place at Ball State, but recently we have decided to begin to move towards more of a double-loop approach with responses such as early warning systems where faculty members share information on students who appear to be at risk of not doing well, building and staffing a math emporium, and developing a new faculty academy where new tenure-track faculty members get a one-course load release for their first academic year in order to engage in professional development concerning their role as teachers. While I wouldn't say we have fully embraced double-loop learning in all of our operations, these are steps in that direction.

- 8. At its inception institutional research (IR) was much more comprehensive, influential, and respected than it often seems to be now. It previously seemed to be achieving the potential of what we now term integrated institutional effectiveness (IE). We need to break out of the vicious cycle of "mere reporting" through gaining adequate staffing, support for contemporary self-service business intelligence and predictive analytics linked to action, reporting in the proper place in the institution, and through being bold concerning our role as leaders.**

Here are two descriptions of IR from classic IR literature:

Steckline (1970) listed the purposes of IR:

(1) IR service to faculty members: a) to learn, by controlled experimentation, the potentialities, outcomes, or limitations of their instruction, e.g., supplementary techniques useful in instruction or which produced certain outcomes of instruction; in general, to provide a research basis for critical examination of teaching procedures and practices; b) to obtain a better understanding of the purpose of a course or a curriculum; c) to determine a basis for comparative judgments concerning instruction and curriculum building; d) to obtain a better understanding of admissions practices, examinations procedures, grading practices, and work loads; e) to obtain a better understanding of the role of the faculty member in the administration of a college or university, e.g., the pressures and forces causing certain administrative problems and/or actions, or of the desirability of a faculty voice in administrative policy making; f) to develop a better understanding of the factors that influence costs of instruction and other functions of an institution of higher education; g) to obtain an understanding of the way in which curricular decisions can affect such things as space utilization, building costs, and various routine operations of an institution. (2) IR service to the administration: a) to serve most of the purposes listed above, b) to identify and analyze factors that influence costs or efficiency of operation; c) to obtain overall pictures of the characteristics of the undergraduate and graduate student body, of the faculty, and of the curriculum; d) to provide continuous, up-to-date data on institutional characteristics such as size and rank of staff, available space, number of research contracts, amount of effort expended upon research, public, and professional services, etc.; e) to bring to the attention of the administrators trends taking place in any of the characteristics noted above; f) to provide data and information useful in obtaining financial support; g) to provide data useful in explaining the mission and achievements of the institution. (3) IR service to coordinating groups or other outside agencies.

Suslow, in his 1971 Association for Institutional Research Forum presidential address, stated that [IR] is an attitude of critical appraisal of all aspects of higher education, which has as its primary purpose the assessment and evaluation of the expressed goals of the institution and the means to achieve those goals. . . . IR will remain viable in the future only if it retains its critical nature. . . . IR will have failed in its function if it does not devote a significant proportion of its time and effort to evaluation of the programs which constitute the means for achieving the institution's goals. We will not remain viable if we devote all of our time to mastering electronic gadgetry and stockpiling massive amounts of data.

Most contemporary IR does not look like what was described long ago, due to never-ending external and internal requests, insufficient staffing (the 2016 National Survey of IR Offices carried out by the Association for Institutional Research says average staff size is only 3.5), lack of necessary information technology support, not having a "seat at the leadership table," and incorrect reporting relationships. All of these factors have led to IR being viewed by many leaders as disconnected and ineffective. Despite perhaps knowing that IR spends a great deal of time with mandatory external reporting and responding to information requests from across campus, many campus leaders seem to view us with an attitude of "What have you done for me lately?" It is my view that we often lack professional development opportunities beyond technical-analytical knowledge and skills, and that our professional associations seem disinterested in providing leadership development opportunities. For example, my content analysis of AIR Forum sessions suggests most emphasize technical-analytical skills and very few are concerned with the development of contextual or leadership skills.

9. Like information technology and enrollment management, IE needs to be an integrated unit with Cabinet-level leadership.

The Association for Higher Education Effectiveness (AHEE) has carried out two national studies and produced an advocacy paper on IE leadership (see www.ahee.org).

The first study consisted of interviews with 12 current and retired presidents or chancellors and one provost at a variety of institutions. The sample for the study consisted of colleges and universities that had undergone a comprehensive regional accreditation review within the previous three years and that demonstrated some evidence of an integrated institutional effectiveness presence based on a website review. The interviews asked about the pervasiveness of the IE model, its perceived advantages and disadvantages, the staffing and capabilities needed to ensure the success of the IE model, and possible future directions.

Participants in this study identified several advantages of the IE model, chiefly including improved institutional decision-making and accountability. They acknowledged that professionals who can lead successful IE units must have a varied and highly-developed skill set, one that requires not only technical-analytical expertise, but also leadership, coalition-building, and culture-forming abilities. This trend toward integrating accreditation, assessment, institutional research, program review, and strategic planning activities appears to be taking root in response mainly to external forces, such as those exerted by accrediting bodies, and, to internal pressures, including “consumer-oriented” demands from prospective students and their parents. Indeed, nearly all interviewees explained that embracing IE will be unavoidable, as institutional performance, accountability, and return on investment become ever more dominant themes in the higher education landscape.

AHEE’s second study provided a profile of vice presidential leaders in IE within colleges and universities in the United States. One hundred forty persons with the title of Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness (VPIE) or its equivalent (e.g., VP for Planning and IE) were identified. Contact information was available for 101 of them, and 51 (50%) participated in telephone interviews. Information gained through online searching was combined with interview results to describe the demographic, educational, and career profiles of the participants, their employment settings, their job titles and responsibilities, the institutional circumstances that led to the VPIE position being established, the knowledge and skills critical for performance as a VPIE, how leadership of IE at a vice presidential level is different than at a lower (director, associate vice president) level, participants’ ideas about the future of IE and the position of VPIE, and how a professional association such as AHEE can best support them.

Implications of the study for institutions interested in establishing the VPIE position include confirmation from the participants of the value added by the IE structure and the VPIE position, particularly in terms of improving accreditation and other IE functions. It is also important to recognize that it is crucial for persons in the role to have strong technical-analytical skills, deep institutional knowledge (or the ability to quickly acquire it), leadership skills and experience, and several dispositions or personality characteristics. It is not unusual to bundle a portfolio of the typical IE functions with additional responsibilities. There is no one optimal type of educational or career preparation for the position. Since nearly none of the results varied significantly by institutional category or geographic area, persons whose experience crosses institutional and geographic sector boundaries can be successful.

The results of AHEE’s two research studies were used to produce an advocacy paper that suggests establishing a Cabinet-level VPIE position at every college and university in the United States. The establishment of cabinet-level administrators responsible for enrollment management and information technology serves as examples of the benefit of providing oversight over a set of related functions by a leader who is a full participant in the highest level of decision making.

10. The first major barrier to realizing the full potential of integrated IE is leadership development.

A 2012 article in *Change* magazine by Christina Leimer focused the attention of a wide set of academic leaders on the issue of organizing for evidence-based decision making. Christina's article introduced readers to the concept of integrated institutional effectiveness. In addition to advocating for the integrated IE model, the article also provided thoughts on the characteristics of effective practitioners, and particularly leaders, in the IE area.

- The leader of this integrated, multi-function office has a critical responsibility for working with campus leaders to make meaning of and add value to information.
- For culture to change, someone must turn data into information and institutional knowledge through analysis and interpretation. Then someone needs to be responsible for setting that knowledge in the context of institutional goals and disseminating it in multiple formats that are appropriate to particular stakeholders, in order to inform recommendations and planning. (Leimer, 2012, p. 46)
- Since the range of responsibilities in integrated offices is broader than those of a typical IR office, so are the skills, abilities, and personal traits that lead managers in [IE] offices need. To varying degrees, experience with and skills in research methods, statistical techniques, data analysis, statistical software, and database management are fundamental. But organizational, project-management, group-facilitation, and written and oral communication skills are important too, as are strong interpersonal skills that enable these managers to work effectively with a range of institutional constituents, from line staff and faculty to middle managers and executives. The abilities to build consensus, negotiate, communicate in non-technical language, coordinate people and projects, and lead are key. (Leimer, 2012, p. 49)
- Personal characteristics needed include sensitivity, open-mindedness, flexibility, a capacity to listen, enthusiasm, a commitment to learning, a sense of humor, the ability to build others' self-confidence and motivate them, creativity, team-building and problem-solving capacities, a thick skin, a tolerance for ambiguity, and patience. So too are the abilities to educate, build trust, and use data to tell a compelling story. It is essential that [IE] professionals know what data are available and how they can be applied, as well as which methodologies can be used to answer questions. They need to understand the types of problems higher education managers must address, how colleges and universities operate, and how decisions are made there. They need to understand the political world of academia and how to work with others to reach institutional goals. They need to comprehend higher education culture and the culture of their particular institutions, as well as the external environment at the local, regional, national, and even international level as it impinges on institutional operations, problems, and goals. (Leimer, 2012, p. 50)

As a follow up to Leimer's article I became interested in IE practitioners' need to develop leadership skills. With the support of the Association for Institutional Research (AIR), I administered an IR Leadership Development Needs Analysis Survey to a sample of members of AIR that asked participants about their need to develop knowledge and skills in the areas of managing and developing staff, planning and resource management, understanding campus politics and cultures, and developing oneself as a leader. Survey participants (240) indicated a strong need for leadership development in all of the areas listed. These findings were explored further in a focus group at the 2012 AIR Forum.

The survey findings and my experience over a quarter century as an IR/IE professional led me to write the book *Leadership and Management in Institutional Research: Enhancing Personal and Professional Effectiveness*, which addresses the areas noted in the survey. I have had the opportunity to explore these issues further in state, regional, and national workshops, where participants work on case studies and discuss their own experiences.

In 2013 a small group of IE leaders established the Association for Higher Education Effectiveness (AHEE). AHEE is a network of higher education professionals who lead or staff offices that intentionally integrate multiple functions to promote and support evidence-based planning and improvement. AHEE aims to support and develop leadership that educates, advocates, advises, facilitates, and improves higher education's capacity to use evidence in decisions, policy, planning, and change for the purpose of improving postsecondary education. Specifically, AHEE is interested in helping to develop integrated institutional effectiveness offices/divisions that better serve institutions, and, in the process, help to develop the professionals that staff these offices.

In addition to the two research studies and the advocacy paper previously noted, AHEE has produced three recordings, "Advancing to Senior Level Positions in Institutional Effectiveness", "Developing the Integrated Institutional Effectiveness Office", and "The Program Review Process at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis: A Case Study", all of which are available free on the AHEE website. AHEE also maintains an email list with more than 600 participants that is used to facilitate networking and discussion of IE topics. IE leadership positions are also posted on the AHEE website, as is a sample position description for a Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness Job Description.

At its 2016 meeting, AHEE's Board of Directors members discussed possible future activities, including the development of an IE leadership institute; increased involvement with other higher education professional organizations such as AIR, the Society for College and University Planning, and regional accreditation associations; and developing short narrated presentations on specific topics that are posted on the AHEE website. It has become apparent over three years that the pace of activity is slow with a seven-member volunteer Board of Directors comprised of busy professionals with no staff or budgetary support. In order to ensure the ongoing success of AHEE we plan to have discussions about possible affiliation with universities that have mature institutional research certificates and/or degree programs that could provide staff and volunteer support and facilitate the leadership institute.

11. The second major barrier to realizing the full potential of integrated IE is institutional culture and real leadership support.

Seymour discusses IE (and particularly its leader) as the institution's "convening authority." If the president of a college or university is the only person with true cross-functional responsibility, but that president is busy with activities such as fundraising and dealing with crises, "Who is convening and facilitating the larger, strategic communications that need to take place?" (Seymour, p. 84). This is the role of IE, which must report directly to the president.

While I am convinced that IE and its leader being in the role of "chief convener" are absolutely critical for moving institutions forward in taking responsibility for what Seymour calls virtuous cycles of change, it is still, sadly, very often the case that whether IE exists, what it means, and the degree to which it is sustained and thrives is entirely at the discretion of presidents. AHEE's VPIE study made it clear that the driving force to establish the IE leadership position at a vice presidential level was entirely the president. While we commend presidents that have that foresight, it is all too easy to find examples of institutions where IE is neither understood nor appreciated or where previous IE units are rapidly changed or eliminated.

I would like to use my own experience as a candidate for several recent senior-level positions to illustrate the threats to the potential and sustainability of IE.

Several years ago I applied for a position as Assistant Vice Provost for Institutional Research and Effectiveness at a large, well-known, East Coast public, research university. The job description sounded like a great opportunity. When I visited for an interview some problems became clear. The first sign of a problem was the fact that the office was in an old basement with the coating of old pipes dropping from the ceiling and the staff working in cubicles. When I asked the person who would be my supervisor whether the person who took the position could be a member of the deans' council and other important groups, she seemed completely surprised that the person in the job would want to be a member of those groups. I asked what the background of people who had been in the job previously was and was told that it had been filled by a series of one-year appointments of faculty members in the college of business. The thing that concerned me most about the interview is when the person who would be the supervisor told me that the new person was expected to fire the whole staff. She said the staff were not doing useful work because they did not understand priorities within the university. The office staff members told me they were very busy with federal and state reporting, responding to ad hoc requests, and continuing longstanding internal reporting, but they received no feedback on their work. It was amazing to me that the people there could not connect the isolation and lack of professional preparation of the people who had been leaders of the office with how the office was regarded by the leadership of the university. It was clear to me that I would not accept the job if it was offered. It was not.

A few years later I applied for a similar Associate Provost position that had been held previously by a friend and colleague following his announcement of his plan to retire. After acknowledging receipt of my application materials, the university, a large, public research university on the East Coast, never communicated with me again. At a conference months later the person who was retiring from the job approached me, apologized, and shared with me that no one got the job. Something went wrong in the search process (it was never clear what it was) and they started over. A few months later I was contacted by a search firm who said I was a strong candidate for the job and they highly encouraged me to apply. I responded that I could not apply, as I had started my new job at Ball State two weeks previously.

More than a year ago I learned that a colleague was retiring who was in a vice presidential-level position at a university considered to be a peer of others where I have worked and for which I had twice served as a member of its accreditation review team. This university was in a state experiencing several problems with state funding and the associate vice president with responsibility for budgeting, who reports to the vice president position that was becoming open, was made the interim vice president. I was a bit concerned about potentially taking the vice presidency in an institution where I would be central to the budget problems, but I at least wanted to apply and hopefully get an interview so that I could learn more. I never got a chance. After several months I eventually learned that the interim vice president was given the job on a permanent basis with no search.

About a year ago I learned that another friend and colleague in a vice presidential-level position back in my original home state was leaving her position to take a presidency. Not only would taking this position put my wife and me less than an hour from family and put me back into the state retirement system, but, more importantly, it was an institution at which I was really excited about working. It has a reputation for taking evidence-based decision making and continuous improvement very seriously. My friend and colleague had built what I consider to be one of the best-performing institutional effectiveness operations I have ever seen. I was concerned if the institution would have an interest in me as a candidate since it was a different type of institution than the ones where I have worked for many years, but I spoke to several colleagues in that sector who urged me to apply and gave me some good advice about issues to keep in mind. I applied and was thrilled to hear I would have a first-round interview. That interview went well and I was invited the next day to an on-campus interview. That one went very well also and I really felt a connection to the institution and the person who would be my supervisor. After not hearing anything for a month following my interview I reached out to the firm involved with the search and was told to be patient, that the institution really liked me, and it was just taking longer than expected to finish the interviews. After three more weeks I contacted the search firm representative again and two days later received a one-line email message indicating the institution had decided to reorganize and the position would not be continued.

Most recently I was contacted by another search firm and urged to apply for a vice-presidential position at a private East-Coast institution. I was concerned about the very high cost of living in that area, but decided to apply anyway and soon was asked to come for a first-round interview with several of the vice presidents, but not the president. Since the position title had changed from that of the person who was retiring and now included a strong focus on “analytics,” I asked the group with whom I met why this interest in analytics had developed and what was meant by the term “analytics” there. The answer is that the president had become interested in the concept of analytics, although it was not clear how or why, and felt the institution should have it; they could not articulate anything further. I was told after the interview that I would not progress further in the search and was not a good fit with what the institution was looking for.

These experiences and others colleagues have shared with me leave me concerned about the viability of institutional effectiveness when, even at institutions where IE has been valued and thriving, the entire structure seems to be based upon and vulnerable to the most recent ideas of the president.

A similar concern that I have witnessed many times, even at institutions that have invested substantial time and energy over many years in improving student success through sustained evidence-based decision making and continual quality improvement, is the situation where a president is easily persuaded by a vendor to buy some “student success solution” that is promised to magically improve student retention and graduation rates with no effort required beyond buying the product.

These are not examples of colleges and universities taking responsibility for creating a better future for themselves and being on what Seymour calls a virtuous cycle of improvement. Rather they are examples of leaders who can't seem to rise above the crisis of the day and grasp at quick-fix solutions to problems that they do not realize are only symptoms of much larger underlying patterns, structures, and mental models that do not serve them well.

While I am happy with what we have achieved at Ball State, the reason I am thinking about another position is to find an institution that seriously embraces institutional effectiveness, empowers the IE leader as a full member of the senior leadership team, and is willing to examine, challenge, and change its patterns, and truly engage in double-loop learning.

While I am happy with what the Association for Higher Education Effectiveness has achieved during its short existence, the reason we need to do much more is that we cannot afford for the existence of and support for institutional effectiveness to be subject to the passing fancies of presidents. We need to not have institutional effectiveness be reinvented separately at each college or university with various degrees of success, but rather share and implement emerging best practices and have IE be recognized and respected as a profession. We cannot afford to wait much longer to take responsibility for deep lasting change rather than reacting after the fact to our growing chorus of critics. We owe it to our students, our institutions, and ourselves to do better.

Questions for Consideration:

Where are IR/IE going?

What does it mean?

How can we prepare?

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