**UPdate Institutional Research**

**Recommendations**

June 18, 2015

**Current State**

Institutional research (IR) activities, as defined by the UPdate group (see appendix), take place across the university at varying levels of sophistication and efficiency. Much of the formal IR work occurs in the Office of Planning and Analysis, though there is considerable reporting and analysis conducted in Admissions, the Allen Yarnell Center for Student Success, the University Budget Office, Human Resources, Office of Sponsored Programs, International Programs, Institutional Audit and Advisory Services, and to varying extent in the academic departments and colleges and other administrative units. (In addition, analysis and reporting in Student Health and Counseling and Psychological Services are necessarily separated from other university analytical projects.)

This dispersion and diversity of effort results in some reductions in efficiency and effectiveness for the institution. In particular, Montana State is at risk for unnecessary duplication of effort, confusion caused by differing data and definitions, and actionable outcomes that are not shared with all who might take action. Additionally, and related, the separation of analysis from the owners and stewards of the underlying data breaks a helpful feedback loop for data accuracy.

On the positive side, the dispersion of effort has built capacity for analysis and in-depth knowledge of the data across offices, and invited additional perspectives on the data that allow for innovation. (See full SWOT for additional strengths and weaknesses of the current IR setup.)

**Working Group Process**

The UPdate IR working group met every other week, from December through May, to define the scope of the committee’s work, describe the current environment at Montana State University, identify gaps, identify what works well, and learn about national trends in institutional research. Members of the group defined institutional research as a specific set of activities, albeit with blurry outlines, that occurs across offices and job titles for varying purposes (see appendix for full definition). Based on the definition and current state, the working group created a SWOT analysis, interviewed campus stakeholders, and explored IR functions and best practices at other universities.

**Recommendations**

The group defined several desired process improvements that lead to actionable recommendations. The desired process improvements include:

1. Improve access to information and analysis for decision making and scholarship
2. Provide clarity to university community about how to obtain information and analysis
3. Create a culture of data use and data quality expectations and assessment
4. Consolidate unnecessarily duplicative IR efforts
5. Improve collaboration, consistency, and accuracy for those conducting IR work
6. Improve efficiency and effectiveness of recurring IR tasks
7. Enable or encourage IR professionals to take on new strategic projects
8. Encourage faculty and graduate students to use institutional data sources for scholarly projects and institutional research ends

To foster these desired improvements, the group recommends the following near- and long-term changes (with ties to desired process improvements noted).

Near Term (by July 1, 2015)

1. Establish OPA as the recognized IR hub, with formal connections to other identified IR practitioners across campus, to consolidate duplication and add coherence to the dispersed IR effort. Connections may range from firmly established communication channels to dotted reporting lines. (Addresses process improvements: b, d, e, f, g)
2. Create a “community of practice” for IR professionals across the institution to create common definitions (in collaboration with data governance processes to be developed), coordinate on mutually beneficial projects, share tools and tricks of the trade, and share project outcomes. Group may grow over time as additional practitioners are identified and benefit of participation increases. There may be two groups – a core and an associated group. We recommend the core group meet weekly at least at the onset to develop momentum, with bi-weekly or monthly meetings of the associated group. (Addresses process improvements: d, e, f)
3. Work with supervisors of IR professionals to formally share results more broadly. Where dotted reporting lines to OPA do not exist, this may include supervisors using results dissemination as an annual review criterion. (Addresses process improvements: a, b, c, e)
4. Establish a repository for shared results, likely using the OPA website initially, where results are appropriate for public or campus exposure. Explore options for alternative sharing access for sensitive results (based on individual level data or sensitive fields, e.g.). (Addresses process improvements: a, b, c, e)
5. Propose incentives and remove barriers for faculty and graduate students to engage in IR, where it fits their scholarly agendas. This may include providing easy access to specified de-identified datasets for coursework and scholarship (using institutional repository to store and access datasets), appointing GRAs in offices that conduct IR work, or more in-depth collaboration on specific projects. (Addresses process improvements: a, c, g, h)
6. Create a “How do we find out…?” webpage to connect campus constituents with information sources across offices. (Addresses process improvements: a, b)
7. Engage IR professionals across campus in a workload and process assessment to determine baseline efficiency and effectiveness and inform decisions on position coordination and/or formal project queueing. (Addresses process improvements: d, e, f, g)
8. Develop a strategy to inform campus about ongoing changes in where and how to obtain information. (Addresses process improvements: a, b)

Long Term (by July 1, 2016)

1. Assess progress on access to information and analysis through user feedback, website hits, community of practice member feedback, and other qualitative and quantitative data (a, b)
2. Assess progress on coordination across community of practice through regular assessment of sessions and occasional formal solicitation of feedback from practitioners (Addresses process improvements: d, e, f)
3. Use workload and process assessment results along with coordination assessment to recommend additional reorganization of positions and reporting lines, if warranted (Addresses process improvements: d, e, f, g)
4. Use workload and process assessment results to evaluate queueing/project management process. This may become an annual review. (Addresses process improvements: a, d, e, f, g)
5. Propose and plan a major website overhaul to improve access and provide clarity for IR data. This would primarily impact OPA’s website but would include other places where IR reports or data are housed and accessed. (Addresses process improvements: a, b, h)
6. Institute an annual MSU Institutional Research conference where diverse IR projects are presented to the larger MSU community.  (Addresses process improvements: a, c, g, h)

Implementing these recommendations will reinforce existing nascent efforts in academic analysis of institutional data to advance the mission of the university. The community of practice then becomes a broader community of scholarship that may evolve over time into an academic program as well as permeate the decision and assessment culture.

Appendix: Working Group Definition of Institutional Research

* + Institutional research activities generally include two or more of the following: collection, definition, coordination, summarization, analysis, and presentation of institutional data
  + AND institutional data include these areas/units of analysis: student, course, student enrollment, instructor, employee, employee productivity, finance, financial aid, vendor, grant. These data reside in enterprise and stand-alone databases.
  + AND institutional research activities are primarily in support of university policy- and decision-making, strategic planning, program planning and assessment, institutional benchmarking, and external reporting.
  + AND in most cases, if the project requires information from multiple Banner modules or multiple Banner and/or non-Banner sources simultaneously, it is an institutional research project.
  + Although it may otherwise fit, analysis primarily for scholarly research may not be included in this definition.