

The Case for a Cabinet-Level Chief Institutional  
Effectiveness Officer at All Colleges and Universities

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## The Association for Higher Education Effectiveness

This position paper was sponsored by the Association for Higher Education Effectiveness (AHEE, see [www.ahee.org](http://www.ahee.org)). AHEE was founded in 2013 with the mission of “support[ing] and develop[ing] 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. AHEE’s vision statement is as follows:

Higher education institutions rely on integrated offices led by well-prepared, qualified Cabinet-level professionals who assure evidence-based planning, decision making and improvement as a means of achieving institutions’ effectiveness. These professionals are knowledgeable of global problems and solutions regarding higher education effectiveness and are routinely called upon to participate in higher education policy.

It is difficult for anyone to disagree that the management of American colleges and universities is becoming increasingly difficult. Scarcely a day goes by that there is not a story reported in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, or popular media about some critical issue at some campus, a new federal or state mandate or policy change affecting higher education, or some other issue concerning academe. The 2015 *Inside Higher Ed* Survey of College and University Presidents (Jaschik & Lederman, 2015) listed the Obama administration's proposal for a new institutional rating system and proposal for free community college tuition, institutional financial sustainability, sexual assault on campus, race relations, and faculty hiring and tenure as among the challenges and issues facing institutions of higher education.

The set of challenges and issues facing today's (and certainly tomorrow's) campus leaders is daunting. Presidents, provosts, and other senior administrators need to not only work harder but also work smarter. One way of doing so is to increasingly practice evidence-based decision-making. While institutional research, accreditation, and strategic planning have existed at many campuses for decades, and student learning outcomes assessment and academic program or unit reviews have been in place for 20 to 30 years or more, there is much more to be done. Only 26% of a sample of chief academic officers says their institutions are very effective in using data to inform campus decision-making; that same percentage say their campuses are very effective in identifying and assessing student learning outcomes; and only 16% say their colleges or universities are very effective in data analysis and organizational analytics (Jaschik & Lederman, 2016).

A solution for improving evidence-based decision making is the establishment of integrated, multi-functional offices or divisions of institutional effectiveness (IE). Such units intentionally bring together the often-disparate functions such as institutional research, student learning outcomes assessment, strategic planning, accreditation, and academic program or unit review into one administrative structure. Other areas sometimes included within IE are institutional budgeting, analysis and allocation of space, development of new academic programs, and perhaps a research and development function where seed funding to promote campus improvements is made available through internal grants. Leimer (2012) noted that the number of campuses listed in the *Directory of Higher Education* that had at least one administrator with the term institutional effectiveness in his or her title increased from 43 in 1995 to 375 in 2010. That number had increased again to 501 in 2015. IE offices or divisions exist in many types of institutions, from public research universities to private regional colleges to for-profit, online institutions, to community colleges. Knight (2015) provided additional details of the rationale for establishing IE units.

Leimer (2012) posited that two things are necessary for colleges and universities to truly embrace and benefit from a culture of evidence-based decision making. One is the integrated, multifunctional IE office or division. The other is leadership of that unit.

For culture to change, someone must turn data into information and institutional knowledge through analysis and interpretation. . . . Developing such a culture takes sustained effort over a long period of time at multiple levels of the organization. But someone needs to take the lead—to advocate for, and maintain focus on, this mode of thinking and practice. (p. 46)

Leimer also noted the importance for the IIE leader to have “the abilities to build consensus, negotiate, communicate in non-technical language, coordinate people and projects, and lead” (p. 49). Other important characteristics of the IIE leader include

sensitivity, openmindedness, 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, . . . patience, [and] . . . the abilities to educate, build trust, and use data to tell a compelling story. (pp. 49-50)

Terenzini (1993, 2013) discussed the knowledge and skills necessary for the effective practice of institutional research. He first posited his three tiers of organizational intelligence in 1993 and affirmed them 20 years later. It seems very reasonable to extend this discussion to the other IR functions as well. While institutional research, planning, and accreditation professional organizations, conferences, and publications often emphasize what Terenzini terms “technical/analytical skills” and, to a lesser extent, “issues knowledge,” they seldom focus upon what Terenzini (1993, 2013) called “contextual knowledge and skills,” which include a rich, detailed knowledge of one’s institution, its history, politics, and the personality of its leaders, as well as the characteristics listed above by Leimer (2012).

This position paper makes the argument for establishing an integrated, multifunctional IE unit and appointing a cabinet-level chief IE officer at all colleges and universities. The challenges and issues facing today’s institutions and the need to support and enhance evidence-based decision making suggest the time for this change is now. A discussion of the previous establishment of strategic enrollment management and chief information officer positions led by cabinet-level administrators over the past few decades helps us understand why this proposed organizational change will benefit institutions today.

Henderson (2001) traced the development of strategic enrollment management (EM) in colleges and universities to a targeted recruitment aimed at National Merit Scholars at Michigan State University in the 1960s and the response by Boston College in the mid-1970s to enrollment declines following the end of the Baby Boom, increasing competition, and decreasing retention rates. Strategic enrollment management was developed as a result of the idea that enrollment and revenue could not be sustained and improved through the traditional admissions function alone, but rather through the integration of functions such as marketing, the strategic use of financial aid, market prediction and institutional response, research and information flow, and retention/graduation support. A continuum of EM models was discussed, with the most mature and effective model being an enrollment management division within the institution headed by a vice president who exhibits transformational leadership with presidential support for full responsibility of all related functions. Henderson noted that while several professional organizations provided learning opportunities within functional areas of EM, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers emerged as the premier organization supporting the EM model, including the development of leadership skills for its members.

Penrod, Dolence, and Douglas (1990) similarly highlighted the development of divisions of information technology (IT) and the position of cabinet/vice presidential chief information officers (CIOs) in higher education. They explained that the position of CIO began to appear on campuses in the 1980s in order to integrate, increase the effectiveness of, and provide leadership for a rapidly-expanding array of information technology functions. The authors listed some of the roles of the CIO as providing a single source of leadership on all IT issues, coordinating IT policies and initiatives, and relieving the worries of senior leaders about technology. Penrod and his associates described the emerging role of CIOs as functioning as a network manager who coordinates communication, planning, and decision making across all aspects of IT within the institution. They also noted that despite the high level of authority invested in CIOs, the nature of politics and decision making at colleges and universities is such that effective leadership often relies upon the ability to “consult, suggest, cajole, sit on committees, and take people to lunch, but [not] order or threaten.” (p. 7). The authors pointed out that the linkage between the existence of the CIO function and the institution’s achievement of its goals became apparent rapidly on many campuses. As with Henderson’s analysis of enrollment management models, Penrod et al. highlighted a hierarchy of information structures and concluded that the vice presidential level CIO model is most efficacious.

Despite the assertions here that the cabinet/vice president-level chief institutional effectiveness model is a solution for many of the issues and challenges facing academe and the contention that the enrollment management and IT leadership models found at many campuses today illustrate the usefulness of this structure, it is very reasonable for leaders facing highly constrained resources and existing criticism over “administrative bloat,” to require hard evidence of the value of this structure prior to implementing it. Two recent studies carried out under the auspices of AHEE highlight the benefits of the IE model.

In the first study, a group of researchers affiliated with AHEE (Bartolini, Knight, Carrigan, Fujieda, LaFleur, & Lyddon, 2016) conducted a series of interviews in 2015 with presidents and other leaders at campuses that have adopted the IE model to investigate experiences with this model, its advantages and disadvantages, and thoughts on its future. Twelve leaders (three presidents, one chancellor, one interim president, five presidents emeritus, one provost) representing a variety of institutional types (three community colleges, a for-profit medical college, a historically Black institution, a liberal arts college, a private institute of technology, a private research university, two regional state universities, and a theological seminary) were interviewed. Participants identified advantages of the IE model as improved effectiveness and efficiency of decision making; improved institutional accountability and ability to establish priorities; the ability to carry out benchmarking and identify best practices; greater timeliness, accuracy and richness of evidence; durability of decision support processes; better connection of people and systems; heightened ability to focus on student success; and the potential to influence policy. The only disadvantage cited was the ability to identify candidates for the chief institutional effectiveness officer position who possess the necessary skill set. Ten of the dozen participants felt the IE model will become more common as accountability pressures (particularly accreditation requirements) continue to escalate.

The second study included 51 persons with the title of Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness (VPIE) or its equivalent (e.g., VP for Planning and IE) employed at community colleges, private, public, and for-profit colleges and universities who were interviewed by two members of AHEE's Board of Directors (Knight & Tweedell, 2016). Many of the participants highlighted the benefit of being a cabinet-level chief IE officer as accomplishing functions such as reporting and analytics, planning, assessment, program review, and particularly accreditation more effectively as a result of having greater access to institutional leaders, being part of critical discussions without the filter of a supervisor, having a fuller understanding of issues, and better ability to provide information to leaders at the time that it is most helpful.

Feedback from leaders at institutions where the IE model has been adopted and from vice presidents for institutional effectiveness highlights the benefits of this structure. Just as the adoption of divisions of enrollment management and information technology with cabinet-level leaders was the correct response to changing campus circumstances 30 to 40 years ago, now is the time for IE. The growth of individuals with IE in their titles from 43 to 501 over 20 years shows that many colleges and universities have already reached this decision. While it should be expected that this change will be met by some level of anxiety over the redistribution of previously disparate responsibilities, the financial outlay for a senior level IE leader, and the changing dynamics resulting from the presence of that leader in the cabinet, the examples of enrollment management and IT show that the benefits of these changes were well worth the cost.

Even though increasing numbers of institutions have already established IE units with cabinet-level leaders, interview with presidents, feedback from vice presidents for institutional effectiveness, and the experiences of the members of AHEE's Board of Directors suggest the value of providing some assistance and leadership to institutions for making this change and supporting IE staff members, particularly the chief IE officer. AHEE is providing networking and professional development opportunities for IE professionals through a variety of ways. It also provides advice to institutions about implementing this model and recruiting IE leaders. The following job description was developed by AHEE to aid institutions in framing the roles of senior IE leaders:

As a member of the President's Cabinet, this senior leadership position is responsible for leading the development and sustainability of an institutional culture of evidence-based decision making and improvement and for aligning strategic planning, budgeting, assessment and analytics to support achievement of institutional goals. In collaboration with the President, the VP leads development of the institution's strategy and long-term plan. Working with the senior leadership team and other key members of the institution, s/he develops operational plans and organizational systems and processes to achieve the strategy and evaluates progress on key goals. The VP leads cross-functional institutional initiatives, assuring implementation, monitoring progress, and facilitating change as needed.

The institutional effectiveness structure and the cabinet/vice presidential-level chief institutional effectiveness officer offer real promise for helping institutions to navigate an increasingly rough terrain. Research with persons in such positions and presidents at institutions where they have been established as well as precedent of the positions of Vice President for Enrollment

Management and Chief Information Officer provide evidence of the value of this structure. The Association for Higher Education Effectiveness stands ready to assist institutions in supporting IE leaders. Many colleges and universities have already realized the value of this innovation. Others have little time to lose.

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