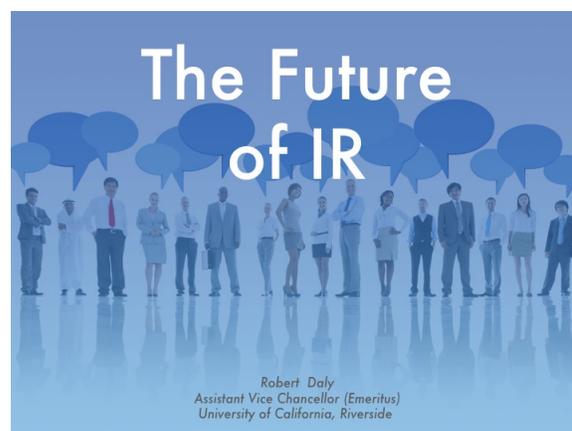


The Future of IR

The Future of IR.

The future IR is something I have been thinking about and talking about for well over 25 or 30 years. I can remember the many times that my friend Dennis Hengstler, now at University of Tennessee, and I would lament about the future of IR. We would worry that IR would become fragmented and would move to departments and to various administrative offices. That has happened to some extent, but those IR offices tend to specialize in a particular area. For example, student affairs research offices tend to worry about issues such as undergraduate student satisfaction with various services on campus while IR offices in undergraduate education tend to worry about issues like student experiences while attending college.



The complete fragmentation of IR has not happened, and in many cases, institutional research offices have become more centralized. With or without the centralization, I do, however, see our offices being assigned more and more duties; thus adding to the complexity and difficulty of talking about the future of IR. That seemingly continuous addition to the roles and duties of an IR office makes me wonder, "What is IR?"

What is IR

I've always been proud of my IR offices as I believed my offices were well respected due to their integrity and objectivity. But, I've learned that that is not enough. IR can do so much more, and be a more vital and important part of a college's administration.



Ziploc® baggie

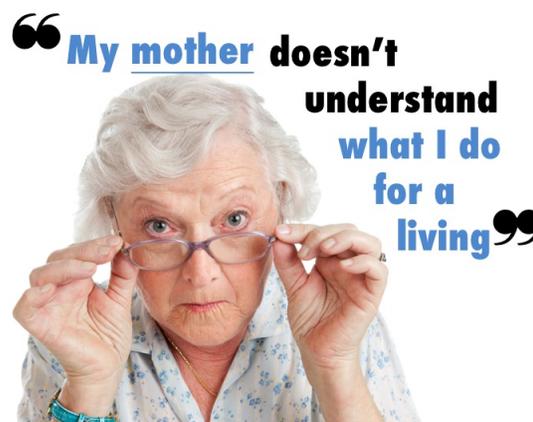
I often think that institutional research is not doing more and is not more important because it sees itself being like a Ziploc® baggie: Reliable, Useful, Secure, and Transparent. And sometimes tightly sealed.



These characteristics are good descriptors and rather admirable, but they don't define really well what we do. In fact, you may have tried to explain what you do for a living to your friends, your relatives, and your non-IR colleagues. I image you have not been totally successful.

My Mother

My mother, who just celebrated her 90th birthday, still doesn't understand what I did for a living. She tells her friends that I work with computers, and to her that is very impressive. But, the question remains: "What is IR?"



What are we trying to do

When you continue to think about “What is IR,” you also have to ask yourself the next question; “What are we trying to do?”



List of IR duties

I put together a list of 16 different IR-type duties. I could probably put together a list of two or three dozen different responsibilities and duties of IR offices by looking through IR job announcements. But, that longer list may not be complete. We sure are doing a lot--maybe too much.



In many ways, all the duties and tasks of IR have not changed for years. Fred Volkwein, our keynote speaker, told me that the topics at this conference and other IR conferences are just about the same as the topics of thirty years ago, only the sophistication of the tools we use are different.

With such a long list of IR duties, it's no wonder that we have hard time explaining what we do for a living. Maybe we need a focus or a specialty that will define IR.

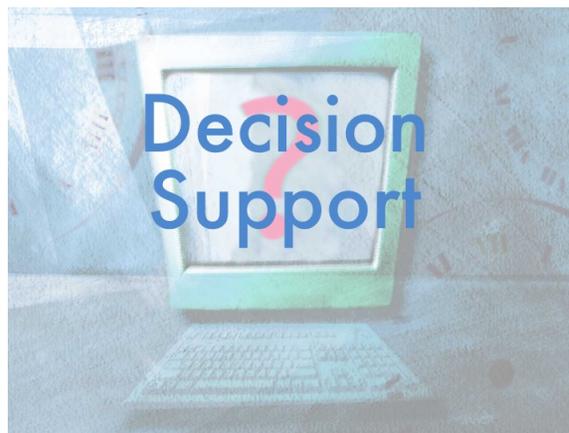
What should we do

To look for that specialty, let's ask the question: "What should we be doing?" Is there a task that can help shape and define the future of IR. Let me summarize what I think we should be doing in two words: Decision Support.



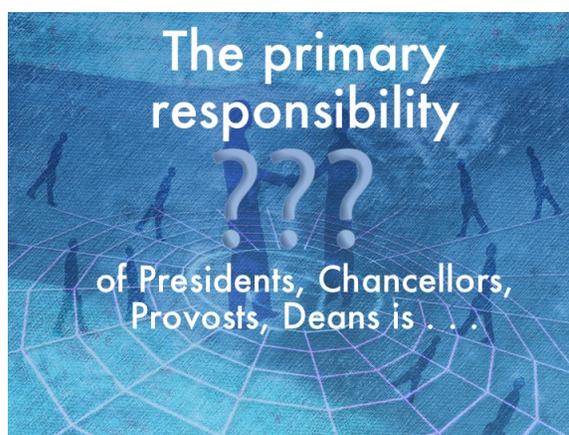
Decision support

I can already hear you saying, “Wait a minute. Decision support—we already do that. In fact, decision support was on your list of duties a couple of slides ago. What's the big deal?” The big deal is that we have to do decision support differently. We tend to focus on presenting historical data, and that is not enough. We need to do more than that.



Primary Responsibility.

To do more, remember that the primary responsibility of presidents, chancellors, Provosts, deans, Vice Chancellors, etc. is to make decisions.



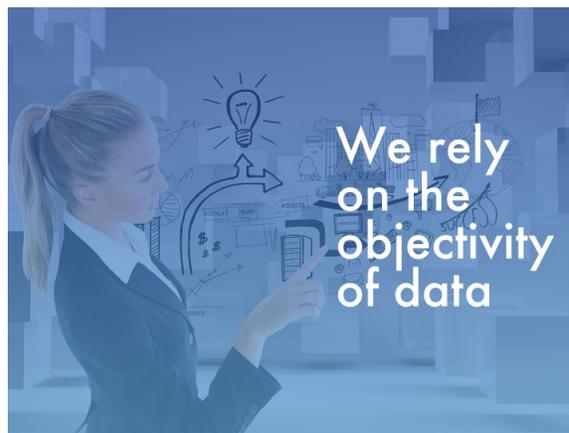
Make Decisions

Yes, we already do help with decision making. It's in our IR DNA—better decisions with data. We help by being like a Ziploc® Baggie; reliable, usable, secure, and transparent.



Objectivity

In particular, we strive to be completely objective when we produce our data, reports, and analyses. I believe that we should not give up that objectivity as it makes us reliable and trusted. Objectivity is important, but if you really want to make an impact and make a difference, if you really want to be vital for decision makers, then you need to move by adding a new dimension to your work.



Future Events

To add a new dimension, it is critical that we remember that all decisions are based on the expected outcomes of future events.

We, however, tend to deal with the past. Our reports, statistics, data tables, and analysis are based upon what has happened in the past. The past is important because it does give us a touchstone and provides some important context and content for decisions. We should continue to provide that context and content. We should continue to produce objective and trusted analysis, but I think we can and should do more.



Reduce Risk for Better Decisions

Doing more deals with the future and the decisions that will affect it. The future can be a very scary place. Making decisions about future events is a very risky task. Put yourself in your provost's shoes when she has to make decisions involving spending millions of dollars for a new student success program. Imagine how valuable IR professionals would be if they provided the data about the success of such programs at other colleges and also estimates of the likelihood of success on their campuses. Your input can help reduce the risk of making a decisions.



In your day-to-day decisions, you too seek important information about expected outcomes of future events. For example, think about buying a new car. That is a very expensive purchase and you want to reduce the risk of making a choice. You do the needed “research” to understand a car’s expected reliability and future cost of repairs. You want to be sure you are making the best decision. Your “research” on reliability and repair costs helps you make a better car buying decision.

Purchasing a car or a house is a personal decision, but your provost makes decisions about spending millions of dollars that affects many people. You can help by providing three or four alternative outcomes resulting from a potential decision. Your provost can then use those alternatives and your historical data to analyze the likelihood of each outcome, and the costs and benefits associated with each. Your Provost now has information to help make a better decision. You are doing more for decision-makers.

Obviously, the more important and more expensive a decision is, the more important and valuable the information about likely outcomes of a decision is. We, as IR professionals are in a unique position as we can not only provide the necessary historical data—we do it better than anyone else—but also provide needed analysis about possible outcomes resulting from decisions. If we are to grow as a profession, we must make ourselves even more valuable to decision-makers than we are now. We can do that helping to minimize the risk associated with decisions, which will lead to better decision making.

Wallflower

You also have to make a decision. That decision is whether you want to actively participate in decision-making and help affect the future of your campus or just be a provider of data and historical information. That decision will affect your career and the future of IR.



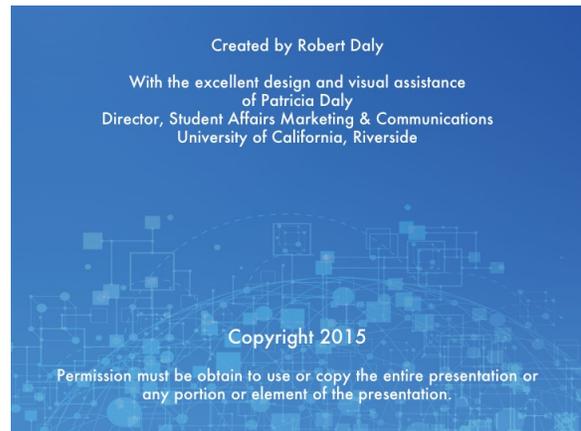
IR's Future

Each of us has different career goals, but when I start thinking about the future of institutional research, I believe that its future is in specializing in decision support. It is where we can make the biggest impact and where IR will not only be reliable, useful, secure, and transparent, but also vital and important to decision makers. You need to do more and to think differently about what is most important for your campus' decision-makers, for the future of your campus, and for the future of your career.



Let me close by reading you a quote by Wally Amos, of Famous Amos cookie fame.

*“If you continue to think what you always thought,
you will continue to get what you always got.”*



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