

**Opening Address for First Annual Meeting  
California Association for Institutional Research**

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**Burlingame, California**

**February, 1971**

**WHY CAIR?**

The acronym of this embryonic organization lends itself very well to puns – I hope we can all solemnly pledge to resist the temptation. After all, you would not be here if you did not “care!”

Regardless of the agony produced by this joke, I am certain that most of you responded positively to the early survey regarding your probable attendance at this conference because you are sincerely interested in both the activity called institutional research and in the benefits to be gained through the formation of a California Association for Institutional Research. My comments today are directed toward this question – Why should there be a California Association for Institutional Research?

To put this question into proper perspective it is necessary to ask first: Why institutional research? And then briefly to inquire as to: Why Association for Institutional Research?

In their first report, the Assembly on University Goals and Governance, founded by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, stated as one of their theses that, and I quote,

“Long-range planning is uncommon in many colleges and universities. Few can boast organizations and procedures adequate for the advanced planning of their needs and resources. Many self studies scarcely mention long-range planning mechanisms. The key to such planning is the development of institutional research which provides data and knowledge of a specificity and range not now available. Only then can a planning committee and staff function.” Unquote. \*

(\* The Chronicle of Higher Education, January 18, 1971.)

What prompted the Assembly to choose this activity as the agency which they conceived to be “key” to long range planning? It was no accident, for their carefully worded report precludes the admission of such an error and the specificity of their theses forces acceptance of their intention. Let me hurriedly note, lest I mislead you, that it is not my intention to use the words of the Assembly on University Goals and Governance as sufficient reason for the existence of institutional research. After all, the Assembly only noted it once in eighty-five theses. However, their purpose in doing so is clear. Some agency must be charged with the role of systematic and continuous collection and evaluation of data for planning, and institutional research has been identified with that role from its inception. While long-range planning conceivably could be sufficient reason for the existence of institutional research, it is not ordinarily the only role assigned to this activity; and therein lies part of the problem of identity. The diversity of functions included within and among institutional research agencies frustrates any simple conception or easy definition of this field. Even worse for those among us who are both foolish and brash enough to respond to that inevitable and ubiquitous social-hour question: “And what do you do?” with the reply, “I’m in Institutional Research,” is the prolonged anxiety induced in attempting to understand the reaction occasioned by the reply. If our questioners and critics are many, it is not because we have been clannish. Rather it is because we have failed our questioners by not clearly establishing the identity of institutional research with the full scope of our role; and we have failed our critics by not firmly protesting their misguided contention that institutional research should be solving all of higher education’s problems. Of all the challenges made as to why

institutional research exists, the most ludicrous refers to its failure to produce new theories of universality. The perspective of this criticism can be properly judged when examined against the recent analysis of the Conditions Favoring Major Advances in Social Science reported in the February 5, 1971 issue of Science by Deutsch, Platt and Senghaas. These authors show that major achievements in new perceptions of relationships and new operations which, quote “prove fruitful in producing a substantial impact that led to further knowledge,” unquote, are relatively few in number and their impact had a median delay of ten years. Parenthetically, if you have not read this article you may be embarrassed to know that California is credited with only two major advances between 1900 and 1965. Whether or not you accept the contention and criteria of this article, the basic point is clear, most disciplines are not generating new and useful concepts at some prodigious rate. A more rational view, then, of institutional research is one which assigns it a single or multiple function in the same manner so lucidly described in the report by the aforementioned Assembly. Identification of institutional research as a separate field of activity in higher education has been accepted only within the last ten years or so. In fact, as many of you know, the Association for Institutional Research, itself, was not formed until 1965. As I have tried to make clear in my preceding comments, one of the basic problems with trying to explain why we have a need for institutional research is the problem of trying to explain, What it is! Regrettably, there are probably as many definitions of institutional research as there are diverse functions within this field. I will not attempt at this time to add to this long list of definitions. I will note for your interest, however, that as President of the Association for Institutional Research, I have applied for and received a grant from the Esso Education foundation to bring together a small group of researchers and administrators to discuss in depth, at a special conference, the nature, role, and future of institutional research. It is my hope that this special conference, which will take place at the end of next month, will result in a clear statement of the boundaries of the field of institutional research as well as a set of proposals for its future development. Without attempting to anticipate the results of this special conference a brief indication of the antecedents for institutional research would be useful here. Although numerous developments have been attributed to the rapid growth in higher education following World War II, there is absolutely no doubt that institutions

became more complex as they became larger. More students, more buildings, more faculty, more administrators, more rules and regulations to govern this growth, and finally more expertise to manage the expanded resources required some organized agency to gather, arrange and evaluate information and report on the institution's programs. Whether or not it was true, as so often noted in discussions of this sort, that college and university faculty and administrators preferred running their campuses by intuition rather than by examination of empirical information, it is fairly accurate to state that there was a dearth of data about the colleges and universities at the midpoint of this century. Formations of institutional research agencies brought with them expectations that the orderly collection and evaluation of information would succeed in bringing order out of the chaos of rapid growth. It would be pretentious of us to assume that institutional research has managed to achieve fully this early aspiration, but it would be equally foolish of us not to claim some significant measure of success in providing the quantitative and qualitative evaluations for more effective understanding of the institution's progress and better utilization of the institution's resources.

The reason for the existence of institutional research, then, is clear. What is needed now is to explore those avenues which will help us enhance the field of institutional research so that it may more satisfactorily perform its desirable, albeit limited function. One of these avenues is the Association for Institutional Research. As with most organizations, the Association was formed by individuals who found benefits in joining together to seek common goals through shared interests. The Association was not formed instantly, but grew out of a few years of unstructured activity with primary focus on an annual forum, and it has grown steadily in membership over the years. As I noted previously, it was not incorporated until the year 1965. The early organizers of this Association correctly titled the Association "for" rather than "of" Institutional Research. While this distinction may appear academic, it is important to most of us in the Association to think of the group as a collection of individuals from a variety of higher education agencies who are all interested in the practice of institutional research and not as a society of special interests or special institutions. The members have associated for the purpose of increasing the benefits to be derived through the proper application of institutional research techniques.

If one examined the directory of the Association, he would find a wide range of titles and offices of the members. The commonality of their interests in the Association must lie in the perceived value that this field has for higher education. Because we have eschewed special interests, being dominated neither by business, nor government, nor institutional control, we have been successful in gaining acceptance of the credibility of our appeals for better and less partisan dissemination of information. Two recent explorations of the Executive Committee will illustrate this last comment. Last summer the Executive Committee appointed an ad hoc committee for the purpose of seeking improved access to Federal data. This committee has had meetings with congressional staff members and staff members of the Office of Education which give promise of some improvement both in the rapidity of access and the availability of information which heretofore was not released.

The other, perhaps more comprehensive potential activity is related to the current interests of the Ellis L. Phillips Foundation which is attempting to find means of improving access to information for academic administration. In their recent publication by that name, Ellis L. Phillips Jr. and J. B. Lon Hefferlin explore the various means of increasing communication by providing administrators with easily obtained and reliably accurate sources of information about information which they call “meta-information.” They state in their report,

(Hefferlin and Phillips, “Access to Information for Academic Administrators,” Academic Administration Project, Ellis L. Phillips Foundation, August, 1970.)

Quote, “The information system that we advocate operates on a basic educational principle – that of helping people learn how they can obtain knowledge and assistance for themselves ... we advocate the improved coordination of existing media and information through the creation somewhere within the community of higher education of a higher education information center: an information center which itself does not presume to contain all the facts about colleges and universities as a massive data bank, but instead

serves first of all as a resource to information elsewhere – in brief, as a meta-information device.” Unquote.

At the end of their second chapter entitled “Communications between Institutions,” Hefferlin and Phillips conclude, quote, “ ... improved communication among institutions ... will involve funding for two clearinghouse and data-bank projects: First, the Association for Institutional Research should become a major facilitator of inter-institutional communication. ... Foundation investment in providing full-time staff for the Association could lead to its becoming an association for ‘institutional research, analysis, and planning,’ and it could then become the clearinghouse for information about current studies and the stimulus for cooperative research.” Unquote.

With the approval of the Executive Committee, I have responded to Mr. Phillips and Mr. Hefferlin to indicate our positive interest in the creation of a clearinghouse for information. This concern with better communication leads me quite directly to the topic of this talk, why a California Association for Institutional Research?

If for no other reason we should associate so that we can find the means of improving our knowledge of new developments and new methodologies pertinent to problems of higher education in California. I am certain that a survey of those present here would reveal a consensus that standard channels for dissemination of information are constricted, blocked, limited and tend to flow in one direction. This desire for more communication as well as other motives helped form the Association for Institutional Research and these motives are not dissimilar to those which bring all of us together today. Other researchers and administrators in other regions are reacting to the same impulses. Regional groups and state groups have formed and are being formed in several places in the United States and Canada. Thomas Mason, Director of Institutional Research at the University of Colorado, and current Past-President of the Association, has accepted my appointment as chairman of a committee which is to develop a framework for the orderly initiation of regional and state groups to provide assistance for their growth and to provide mechanisms for the translation of regional and state concerns via the Executive

Committee to the general membership. One of the benefits of a regional or state group is that the costs of mounting certain programs as, for example, workshops, are considerably less than if the Association were to do the same. Additionally, many topics of local concern can be incorporated in such workshops. The obvious reduction in traveling costs is true for all regions, but it is singularly so for we Californians, who often travel two thousand miles or more to confer with our peers.

California, with its numerous institutions at the university, college and community college levels, both public and private, and with its historical and frequently acknowledged leadership in higher education master planning is long overdue for an association for institutional research. While there has been considerable interchange among California institutions most of it has occurred through formal channels established by administrative design. A California Association for Institutional Research would not replace these more structured and partisan channels of communication and it should not even attempt specifically to assist them except insofar as its own activities are successful in discovering or recognizing fruitful research techniques and relationships.

California's geographical isolation from concentrated centers of learning and research obviously is not restricted to the field of institutional research. But the long isolation of individual institutional researchers and related practitioners within California itself is probably unique. Recent correspondence from Californians to me following the publication and distribution of a memorandum from the Association on the nature and role of institutional research indicated that they were not aware of the existence of the Association. A California association could eliminate this isolation by providing a more viable membership and by creating a more effective forum for the exchange of research methods and findings. There is always the secondary benefit, in addition to short travelling distance, of congenial association with neighbors who share common interests.

To the best of my knowledge the community colleges of California have not actively engaged in exchanges of institutional research information or, for that matter, in the Association, itself. Some of the correspondence I spoke of before indicates that the

community colleges are now seeking to change these facts. It is my contention that a California Association for Institutional Research would be a stimulus for generating leadership in this field among the community colleges throughout the country by evoking greater participation among the researchers and administrators in the California community colleges. There is no more appropriate locality to meet the need than California community colleges with their long history, enormous enrollment and numerous campuses.

I suppose the predilection of anyone who assumes the evangelist role is to warn his assembly that the path to heaven is filled with pitfalls. While I have exhorted you to consider the benefits of the formation of a California Association, I have said little of some of the difficulties which can be expected. I do not think they are insuperable and I regard them as relatively unimportant. Nevertheless, in this age of disenchantment a brief reflection on some of the more intangible problems to be dealt with might be useful and will allow me to close these remarks in a true anti-hero fashion.

If we can make our primary goal the improvement of all of California's higher education programs and not the limited goal of making our own programs simply better than our neighbor's, if we can contain our impatience with those among us who have not yet reached our own real or imagined level of sophistication in institutional research, if we can be tolerant of those among us who appear to be more impressed by verbosity, pedantry and gadgetry and less impressed with substance, if we can avoid searching for consummate solutions to our collective problems and instant remedy to our long-standing differences, if we can restrain our natural propensity to form tribal groups such as the 'big brother commune for university researchers' we can establish an association for each of us according to his needs and interests.