SURVIVING AND BENEFITING FROM AN INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH PROGRAM REVIEW

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Abstract
While institutional research (IR) offices often assist academic and administrative units with their program reviews, the tables are turned when the IR office itself is up for review. What is the measurable evidence of quality for an IR office? How should you select external reviewers for the office? How can a program review be used to leverage increased resources and a heightened role for the IR office? These questions and others are explored. Examples of methods and instruments for measuring IR quality are shared.

Introduction
Given an environment of constrained resources, increased pressures for accountability, and interest in information-driven planning and resource allocation, many colleges and universities have implemented mandatory periodic assessments of their academic programs (i.e., academic program review) (Barak, 1982). A smaller but growing number of institutions have implemented similar assessments of their administrative offices (i.e., nonacademic or support unit program review) (Brown, 1994; Wilson, 1987). While institutional research offices are often familiar with the task of assisting other units on campus undergoing program reviews, they face interesting challenges (and opportunities) when they themselves undergo a program review: What is the measurable evidence of quality for an IR office? How should reliable external reviewers for the office be selected? How can a program review be used to leverage increased resources and a heightened role for the IR office?

While there has been considerable discussion in the institutional research community concerning assessment of the effectiveness of the function and its practitioners (Harrington, 1995; Huntington and Clagett, 1991; Knight, Moore, and Coperthwaite, 1997; Presley, 1990; Terenzini, 1993), difficulty can be encountered when an institutional program review self-study template is forced upon an IR office (e.g., “how many students does your office serve annually?”). The purpose of this edition of the Professional File is to address the questions posed above and to turn the challenge of program review into an opportunity for institutional research offices.

Background of the Institution and the IR Office
The author’s institution, a midwestern, public, residential, Doctoral I university, has witnessed many changes with the employment of a new president in 1995 and a new provost in 1996. One aspect of this new leadership climate has been a more information-driven approach to management. For many of the reasons noted above, an academic program review process was implemented in 1997-98 with review of administrative offices starting the following year. The institutional research office was underutilized and severely understaffed by 1995-96 as a result of budget cuts coupled with a management style which did not stress the use of information to support decision making and planning. With the onset of the new administration in 1995, a decision was made to reestablish an IR office which would be responsible for a comprehensive set of activities (e.g., production of an annual fact book, responsibility for federal and state reporting, development and administration of student and employee surveys, an ambitious assessment and enrollment management research agenda, participation in the National Study of
Instructional Costs and Productivity, completion of an economic impact study, etc.). Human resources in the IR office grew to three professional staff and one graduate assistant in 1998-99. The IR staff volunteered to be in the first cycle of administrative program reviews in 1998-99 for several reasons: to assess the effectiveness of the office three years after its inception, to help chart a strategic plan for the office for the next several years, to increase the visibility of the office, and to make a case for increased resources.

The Program Review Process
The support unit program review process consisted of three principal steps: development of a self-study (according to prescribed guidelines) by the IR office; a visit and subsequent report by an external review team (composed of two IR directors from other universities); and a final review and report prepared by the division program review liaison, the IR staff, and the division vice president.

The program review self-study guidelines asked the IR office to describe 1) the history and organization of the unit, 2) the mission of the unit, 3) its programs and service activities, 4) human resources, 5) financial resources, 6) facilities, 7) the number of students served in the most recent fiscal year, 8) the results of program/service evaluations, 9) the qualifications of the IR staff, 10) staff professional development activities, performance evaluation activities and their results, and the adequacy of staffing levels, 11) the organizational climate and communications methods, 12) the relationship of the office's mission to those of the university and the division in which it reports, 13) the demand for services from the office, 14) the office's uniqueness compared to other units at the institution, 15) areas of cooperation/collaboration with other units, 16) use of financial resources within the office, 17) adequacy of financial resources, 18) the office's strategic plan for the next five years, and 19) a timetable and financial considerations of the plan.

While some of these tasks were easily accomplished (e.g., provide credentials of staff, list products and services and estimate their usage), other parts led to questions (number of students served, quality assurance, organizational climate, future plans). The office redefined number of students served as number of internal and external customers served and counted presentations made, external survey responses, studies completed, and "hits" to the IR World Wide Web page. We noted the wide dissemination of IR-generated information via student and employee newspapers and the production of the "Friday Factoid" e-mails to faculty and staff listprocs (these are brief summaries of studies completed by the office and indications of available IR resources).

The most challenging portion of the self-study was in providing evidence of quality assurance. To do so, the IR office gathered evidence of quality in three ways: the use of an "IR Customer Survey," structured interviews with the president, provost, and vice president for finance; and an internal analysis of Suppliers, Inputs, Processes, Outputs, Customers (SIPOC). The IR Customer Survey (see Figure 1) contained 15 5-point Likert scale questions about adequacy of IR information and characteristics of IR staff and a listing of 10 IR products/services with two 5-point Likert scales reflecting respondents' use of and satisfaction with each. Four open-ended questions on the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the office, suggestions about things to do differently, and a section for other feedback were also included. The survey was administered to an existing cross-functional institutional leadership team of vice presidents, deans, key administrators and faculty, constituent group leaders and others (about 75 total); this group represents a representative customer base for the IR office.

Structured Interviews consisting of 13 open-ended questions about satisfaction with products, services, staff, policy relevance, communication, responsiveness, strengths, weaknesses, things to do differently, and other feedback (see Figure 2 on page 4) were administered in one-hour individual meetings with the president, provost, and vice president for finance. The idea for the self-analysis of SIPOC was taken from the work of an organization development consultant who was working at the institution during the time of the self-study. Separate analyses were carried out for each major IR process (providing descriptive information, state reporting, enrollment management information, etc.); key quality characteristics and conditions for success were then listed. An example is provided in Figure 3 (on page 4). This exercise proved valuable for facilitating thinking about IR processes in the context of larger institutional systems.

The self-study also capitalized on serendipity in developing evidence about the organizational climate in the IR office. A Leadership Climate Survey developed by the IR office during this same time period for broader use in the institution as a follow-up to a dialog with the president about preferred leadership styles was used with IR staff concerning the Director of Planning and Institutional Research. The instrument consisted of 17 5-point Likert scale questions plus a don't know option (see Figure 4 on page 5). Results of the IR Leadership Climate Survey were first shared with the Director of Planning and Institutional Research's immediate supervisor and were then summarized for use in the self-study.

It should be noted that a feedback step was taken after the plan for the self-study was in place and the instruments were created, but before they were used. The plan for the IR self-study (specifically the IR customer survey, interview questions, and format for SIPOC analysis) was shared with a national group of colleagues who are IR practitioners and faculty who teach about IR. Feedback was very positive and minimal changes were made.

The External Review
The external review team was comprised of two persons proposed by the director of the unit and approved
1. What do you feel are the strengths of the Office of Institutional Research?
2. What are areas for improvement for the Office of Institutional Research?
3. What could or should the Office of Institutional Research do differently?
4. Is there any other feedback you would like to provide about the Office of Institutional Research?
The Office of Institutional Research is interested in your feedback concerning the quality of the services we provide. We would appreciate your responses to this interview, the results of which will be used in our program review process.

- How satisfied are you with the technical competence of the Institutional Research staff?
- How satisfied are you with the professional integrity and ethics of the Institutional Research staff?
- How satisfied are you with the policy relevance of the work done by Institutional Research?
- How satisfied are you with how effectively the work done by Institutional Research is communicated?
- How satisfied are you with the productivity of Institutional Research?
- How satisfied are you with the initiative and creativity demonstrated by the Institutional Research staff?
- How satisfied are you with the impact Institutional Research has had upon decision making, planning, and operations at BGSU?
- How satisfied are you with the willingness of Institutional Research to seek feedback and to continuously improve its activities?
- How satisfied are you with the interpersonal relations skills demonstrated by the Institutional Research staff?
- What do you feel are the strengths of the Office of Institutional Research?
- What are areas for improvement for the Office of Institutional Research?
- What could or should the Office of Institutional Research do differently?
- Is there any other feedback you would like to provide about the Office of Institutional Research?

### Table 1: SIPOC (Suppliers, Input, Processes, Output, Customers) Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suppliers</th>
<th>Input</th>
<th>Processes</th>
<th>Output</th>
<th>Customers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Registration &amp; Records Info. Tech. Services</td>
<td>institutional data concerning enrollment, graduation, GPAs, etc.</td>
<td>production of the 15th day headcount enrollment and SCh reports</td>
<td>15th day enrollment and SCh reports</td>
<td>enrollment management team, University leaders, general BGSU community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration &amp; Records Info. Tech. Services</td>
<td>institutional data concerning enrollment, graduation, GPAs, etc.</td>
<td>production each semester of the Student Flow Model and related tools (e.g., College Migration Report)</td>
<td>Student Flow Model and related tools (Web-based)</td>
<td>enrollment management team, University leaders, general BGSU community</td>
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<tr>
<td>managers of special programs Registration &amp; Records Info. Tech. Services</td>
<td>lists of program participants, institutional data concerning enrollment, graduation, GPAs, etc.</td>
<td>tracking of special program students (e.g., learning communities)</td>
<td>retention, graduation, etc. tracking</td>
<td>managers of these programs, University leaders, general BGSU community</td>
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<tr>
<td>IR Office in consultation with other University offices printer</td>
<td>questionnaire</td>
<td>developing, administering, analyzing, and communicating the results of the First-Year Student Questionnaire</td>
<td>report of the results of the questionnaire (Web-based)</td>
<td>enrollment management team, University leaders, general BGSU community</td>
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<td>other university offices</td>
<td>need for enrollment mgmt. support information, concerns about use of these tools</td>
<td>consulting with customers concerning the use of these tools</td>
<td>tools used and used appropriately</td>
<td>BGSU community IR Office</td>
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<tr>
<th>Key Quality Characteristics</th>
<th>Key Quality Characteristics</th>
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<tr>
<td>timeliness, accuracy, relevancy of data</td>
<td>accuracy and efficiency</td>
<td>relevant, accurate, timely</td>
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<td>Conditions for Success</td>
<td>Conditions for Success</td>
<td>Conditions for Success</td>
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<tr>
<td>human and technological resources, time, sense of priority from other offices</td>
<td>human and technological resources, time, sense of priority from other offices</td>
<td>customers must want to use information to support improvement, customers must have access to and choose to use the Web</td>
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by the vice president of the division. Team members were proposed who were well respected, experienced IR directors, familiar with the type of institution, interested in issues of IR evaluation and professional development of IR staff, and available to read the self-study and make the site visit at the requested time. The team read the program review guidelines and the IR self-study in advance. During the two-day visit the team met and talked with the IR staff and several representative customers, such as vice presidents, deans, directors of

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<td>Demonstrates an understanding of the vision, mission, and values of BGSU</td>
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<td>Explains and models these values in your unit</td>
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<td>Develops a vision for your unit</td>
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<td>Demonstrates the ability to mentor team members</td>
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<td>Demonstrates the ability to support team members</td>
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<td>Demonstrates the ability to motivate team members</td>
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<td>Demonstrates the ability to analyze problems</td>
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<td>Demonstrates the ability to solve problems</td>
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<td>Demonstrates the ability to directly address performance problems</td>
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<td>Demonstrates the ability to be open to criticism</td>
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<td>Demonstrates the ability to mediate and resolve group conflicts</td>
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<td>Interacts with individual team members on a regular basis</td>
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<td>Interacts with the team on a regular basis</td>
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<td>Demonstrates the ability to represent a unit in the larger community</td>
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<td>Demonstrates the willingness to be evaluated by team members</td>
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<td>Demonstrates the willingness and the ability to respond to leadership appraisals</td>
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Figure 4
A Leadership Climate Inventory

Please describe the extent to which you agree each of the statements below concerning your unit leader by circling the best response.

SA = Strongly Agree
A = Agree
N = Neutral
D = Disagree
SD = Strongly Disagree
DK = Don't Know/Can't Tell

Demonstrates an understanding of the vision, mission, and values of BGSU
Explains and models these values in your unit
Develops a vision for your unit
Demonstrates the ability to mentor team members
Demonstrates the ability to support team members
Demonstrates the ability to motivate team members
Demonstrates the ability to analyze problems
Demonstrates the ability to solve problems
Demonstrates the ability to directly address performance problems
Demonstrates the ability to be open to criticism
Demonstrates the ability to mediate and resolve group conflicts
Interacts with individual team members on a regular basis
Interacts with the team on a regular basis
Demonstrates the ability to represent a unit in the larger community
Demonstrates the willingness to be evaluated by team members
Demonstrates the willingness and the ability to respond to leadership appraisals

What should be done to improve the leadership climate of your unit? (Please use the back of this page if necessary to answer.)
administrative offices, and the faculty senate and other constituent group leadership. The visit concluded with an exit interview with the president and division vice president and with writing time for the team report. The reviewers’ report was requested to be completed and sent within 30 days. It discussed adequacy of the self-study, strengths and weaknesses of the office, its leadership climate, the adequacy of resources in the office, and the office’s plans for the future. The IR office was given several days to respond formally to the reviewers’ report.

The Final Report and Recommendations
The program review final report was drafted by the division program review liaison and reviewed by the IR staff and the division vice president. It included a summary of the process, findings of the self-study and reviewers’ report, final recommendations, and future plans. It was formally approved and signed by the president and the division vice president. The reviewers’ findings were very favorable and the principal recommendations were to significantly increase the IR operating budget, to increase IR staff (professional, clerical, student employees, and faculty research associates) and to consider new research areas (such as marketing, financial aid modeling, nontraditional students, and distance learning) as resources become available. A multi-year plan to increase the IR staff and budget was prepared and has been implemented. The program review allowed the IR office to meet the institutional requirement (new for 1999-2000) of developing a five-year unit strategic plan.

Thoughts in Retrospect
Clearly, the program review process was a major benefit to the IR office at the author’s institution. In addition to the specific positive outcomes noted previously, an IR program review can help to address issues such as reporting relationships and salaries; it helps the IR office to plan for the future; it provides visibility to the IR office to leaders whose attention might otherwise be lacking; finally, it helps to rally staff around the office. Some lessons learned were that the process is time and labor intensive, that the external reviewers’ role is crucial to the success of the undertaking, and that institutional leaders must take the process seriously. While not apparent in the author’s recent experience, potential drawbacks of an IR program review could be imagined to include that problems noted may not be addressed and that the process is taken as an assessment of the director rather than a formative evaluation of the office.
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