Chapter 1

The Dean of Information:
A Theoretical Framework for Institutional Research Leadership in Higher Education

Hansel Burley
Texas Tech University, USA

ABSTRACT

The author focuses on the institutional researcher as an institutional leader, over and above providing traditional reporting and support. IR practitioners hold authority over the institution's data. Leadership and social psychological theory can explain their effectiveness. The author combines effective leadership theory with the Theory of Planned Behavior to produce framework for IR leadership. This framework should help the IR professional be more than a data custodian. It should help the IR professional adopt both a transformative and facilitative leadership stance as needed, in order to help the institution reach its goals.

BACKGROUND

What It Means to Have Authority over Data

"We don't do that here," was the first answer William received from his first request for data from the institutional research (IR) Office at Big State University. This was about 15 years ago. The associate dean in the College of Education had charged him with tracking down teacher education students who stop out or drop out. William had been chosen for two reasons: first, he was a new assistant professor, and second, in his former life, he had been an institutional researcher. At that point, he did not realize that the legislature's outlawing of education majors in this state would complicate matters for him in the way it did. He assumed that the IR office would track everyone, despite the fact that education majors did not

officially exist. Additionally, he figured that this would be a quick job. "Besides," he thought, "I used to do reports like this in a day. All I needed to do is call the IR office, grab a little data and be on my way," he thought.

He did call the IR office first. The receptionist transferred him to Bob. It was this Bob who told him that the work he wanted done was not done by the IR office. However, Bob thought it best that the assistant professor speak to someone else first. Bob, passed him on Robert, though most called him Bob too. Both Bob and—Bob directed him to the university fact book, and both were happy to put one in campus mail for his review. However, William had a copy of the fact book, and it did not give him information on teacher education students who stop out. With less professionalism than he could have used, he responded with, "Give me a break! What IR office doesn't track stop outs?" With far more professionalism than the college of education professor exhibited, Robert recommended him to Mary Alice, his supervisor. Mary Alice suggested that everyone have a meeting—she thought she could squeeze him in in two weeks. William told her about his deadlines, but he agreed to the meeting anyway. He had nowhere else to go for the data, so he decided to be patient. Unfortunately, he got caught in her time squeeze, and the meeting was postponed for another week.

To his surprise, when he got to the meeting, he was given a brief tour of their area, and he got a chance to meet all the staff. They all seem reasonably engaged in their work, and they were clearly a warm and genial group. However, this was no boiler room of activity, and they did not seem "squeezed" at all. In fact, they seemed quite comfortable and at home. William made note of how their comfort did not match his urgency. There were pictures of families on desks next to half finished cups of cold coffee. Bobble heads and small stuffed animals—mostly bears—filled in the corners of desks. Cutouts of satirical office cartoons doubled as wallpaper in some cubicles and offices. Sheets of green bar paper seemed to be everywhere, along with large computer monitors and all types of printers.

Mary Alice, the two Bobs, and the education assistant professor met in the IR office conference room. The chairs were comfortable. Impressive looking flow charts draped the walls, and half erased programming code was on the whiteboards. While there, they asked William many questions. Most questions were about variable definitions and database names and tables that he knew nothing about. A bit intimidated, William just kept repeating that all he needed was stop out data on education students. The IR staff seemed to feel certain that they could get close to what William needed by merging the X39C data report to the Zed90 semester enrollment report.

These reports were actually queries of the main administrative computer system. They were designed so all employees could use them. In theory, this was a good idea. However, there were problems. Some reports were annual, while another might be semester based, one report had duplicates, yet the other was uncertified coordinating board data only—the problems went on. Usually, the slices of data generated by the reports were specific to the requester's need, making them somewhat arcane by the time they were posted. Besides the complexity of the project, time was an issue. Mary Alice thought that with a good proposal for a new report request, a specialized report could be written in about a year.

While at the point of near full discouragement, Martin, the director of IR walked in and introduced himself. Martin's response was that he and his staff were mere computer programmers. Their focus was and always had been on federal agency and state coordinating board reporting. Unfortunately, Martin explained that the college of education reported teacher education data to the Big State Education Agency itself, without interference or oversight from IR. The IR office does not track those data. If the need was a serious one, my request for data needed to go through my dean, the provost's academic committee, and the

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