Chapter 4.12
Institutional Research (IR) Meets Knowledge Management (KM)

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ABSTRACT

In this study, a selected university's capacity to provide necessary and meaningful information under a KM framework in order to guide it through its current and new and sweeping initiatives was examined. Specifically, information generated from a university-created Study Committee charged with studying the IR function and key units that perform this function were analyzed. A critical analysis of the committee, its methodological approach to studying the IR function, the IR units, and the findings of the committee was conducted. It was found that KM principles were employed in a limited fashion, and that no knowledge creation was taking place. Another key finding was that the primary focus of the committee and a key unit in the IR function were much more concerned about the decision support systems and their ability to provide good data that, in turn, they believed would lead to excellent decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

Universities and colleges across the United States have an inherent desire and need to establish data/information systems in order to support and, purportedly, to optimize decision-making. In a changing higher education marketplace, this could not be any more central to universities' ability to compete and self-direct in ways that afford them comparative advantages in such a competitive marketplace. As a result of increasing competition and the creation of the field of knowledge management (KM) in the early 1990s, universities have moved in a direction that captures the cumulative endowment of knowledge that universities hold. In order to remain competitive and strategically contend with market forces, universities are engaged in this fast-moving field of knowledge management in several areas: human resources, organizational development, change management, information technology, brand and reputation management, performance measurement, and

evaluation (Bukowitz & Williams, 1999). As the young and popular field of knowledge management continues to emerge, some universities will succeed in aligning their organizational activities with KM principles while others will not; others will only adopt parts of a KM framework. For example, some universities may only develop a capacity for data/information systems but fail to develop capacities in other critical areas that are necessary to interpret information that is created from such systems. That is, they will spend large sums of money building system-wide database warehouses and investing in the people that support such systems but will fail to invest in a commensurate fashion in the human capital needed to interpret the information generated from these systems in order to advise decision makers. Such is the case of Western University, a research extensive university and the subject of analysis for this chapter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Knowledge Management (KM), a term and movement that was coined by the corporate world (Serban & Luan, 2002), is a fairly young field, yet it has gained momentum in both the public and private sectors. In fact, it is becoming a standard in universities whereby they can harness their cumulative knowledge in order to make informed decision-making by taking data in its raw form and create knowledge for decision-making consumption. KM principles are usually found in institutional research offices at universities, the function of which are explored in the following review of the literature.

Institutional Research (IR)

According to Saupe (1990), "Institutional research is conducted within an institution of higher education to provide information which supports

institutional planning, policy formation and decision making" (p. 211). These activities include strategic planning, academic program reviews, environmental scans, enrollment management, faculty productivity analyses, budget analyses, and others. The IR function is a decision support model that is structured around applied and basic research—an approach that involves evaluation, problem identification, action research, and policy analysis.

Typical questions asked in an applied approach may involve questions such as: (1) How many sections of a specific course should be offered? (2) By what amount should tuition rates be increased to produce a target amount of tuition income? (3) What impact would increasing tuition have on access for low-income students? (4) Is attrition a problem at our institution? (5) Are our faculty salaries competitive with those paid by peer institutions? and (6) Are there statistically significant differences in salary between men and women or non-minorities and minorities?

As an evaluation function IR addresses the following areas: (1) information on cost and productivity that underlie judgments about efficiency; (2) information on other characteristics of programs, units, and outcomes that lead to judgments about effectiveness or quality; and (3) information on program purposes, on programs offered by other institutions, on the labor market and on potential demand that produce judgments about the need for academic programs.

Problem identification may surface when looking at results from routine queries or tabulations. For example, in the course of querying data for a routine retention report it might be found that certain racial/ethnic groups experience lower rates of persistence from year to year and overall retention during a six-year time period. An action research approach in IR, perhaps, holds the greatest promise for addressing complex questions such as this. IR offices are where the researcher and client (anyone in the organization) work closely

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