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*Metropolitan universities are distinct from other types in terms of their missions, students, programs, and budgets. Yet planning and funding decisions that seriously affect them are often made from a traditional viewpoint of higher education. The Urban Student Affairs Data Exchange shares financial, enrollment, and cost data useful to urban universities in matters related to accountability, benchmarking, policy, and strategic planning. A history of the project includes problems addressed, current uses of data, and special studies under way. Universities interested in joining the data exchange group may contact the author.*

# **The Urban Student Affairs Data Exchange: *Its Value and Uses***

As has been pointed out repeatedly and as far back as 1983 (Rudnick in Brown, 1983), metropolitan public universities have had problems when their programs, services, and budgets are compared to traditional public universities. For example, land grant universities have colleges or schools of agriculture and forestry and large extensive cooperative extension programs. Many of these universities are well over one hundred years old. Thus, they are relatively well funded, and so their libraries, laboratories, scholarship funds, student services, and other budget categories have a funding base on which they are able to build year after year.

As a response to these and other differences, a group of chief academic officers began to meet regularly over twenty years ago. Representing thirteen urban or metropolitan universities that were located in Boston, New York, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Houston, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, Birmingham, and Philadelphia, they began to refer to themselves as the "Urban 13." Shortly thereafter, the chief student affairs officers (CSAOs) from these universities also began to meet regularly. Programs included speakers and topical discussions.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, federal agencies, state coordinating boards, and legislatures began

to demand that state colleges and universities be more accountable for their funds. Some of the questions these agencies asked of student affairs administrators included: How many students are enrolled from year to year? What are the average ACT or SAT test scores for the entering freshman class? What are the student retention and graduation rates? How many students are on financial aid? What is the average federal student financial award? What is the amount of the institution's scholarship funds? Who in particular receives these funds?

The Urban 13 Chief Student Affairs Officer Group decided that this demand for more accountability presented them with opportunities. One, they could collect the data to answer these and other questions from public agencies. Two, they could collect data to compare unit costs among universities for various student services (e.g., counseling centers, placement offices, student activities offices, and student life offices). In order to begin planning, one chief student affairs officer volunteered to chair the project. The charge was to develop a longitudinal management information database that would be useful in decision making. Next, a meeting was held of student affairs staff members who, on a regular basis, collected, organized, and provided the chief student affairs officers with management information data and reports. This group was referred to as the data managers. They met and provided the CSAOs with the following recommendations:

- In consultation with their CSAOs, the data managers should identify the financial, enrollment, and unit cost data that was to be collected, organized, and published annually;
- The database should not reside on any campus or within any professional association. Instead, an outside consultant should be hired who has the equipment and expertise to develop the forms, procedures, and publish and distribute the Annual Report;
- The data managers should meet to refine and correct the first draft of the Annual Report;
- When at all possible, available management data reports should be utilized (e.g., annual federal IPEDS and College Board reports);
- The guideline for all of these processes should be: keep it simple.

The data managers group had the benefit of advice from someone who had been involved in an earlier, ill-fated attempt to develop a nationwide student affairs management information database. It was to be a cooperative

project between the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). That project failed because it was too complex and expensive, and it required a very high initial investment in equipment and software.

### **The Annual Reports and their Value**

In 1986, the Urban 13 Chief Student Affairs Officers Group voted their support for all of the above recommendations. Additionally, they adopted the recommendation of the chair to hire John Minter and Associates as the consultants who would design the forms, collect the data, and publish the Annual Report. The initial cost for the first Annual Report was \$800 per institution. In addition, the CSAOs appointed from their membership a three member committee to recommend policy. The first policy adopted was that the report would be confidential and not distributed to other institutions without permission from the policy group.

Over the next six months, the forms were designed and copyrighted; the sections to be used from the IPEDs and College Board annual reports were selected; and the student affairs cost centers to be studied were identified. Using the federal IPEDS and College Board Reports, the first Annual Report included:

- institutional financial statistics and ratios;
- opening fall enrollments by gender and ethnic origin;
- enrollment by status (i.e., undergraduate degree seeking, nondegree seeking, graduate, and first year professional);
- enrollment by degree field; and
- foreign student enrollment by country.

Although some of these categories may seem far removed from the interest and need of CSAOs, over the years most have been maintained. For example, Current Fund Revenues By Source, (a federal IPEDS report) provides data on what proportion of an institution's budget comes from tuition and fees, federal sources, state appropriations, grants and contracts, private gifts and endowments, and auxiliary enterprises. Over time, marked shifts in revenue are often seen in state support, federal support, endowments, and the growth in auxiliary enterprises. On the other hand, it is equally important for CSAOs to know how funds are spent by their universities. The Current Fund Expenditures and Mandatory Transfers section includes the subcategory-

ries of Instruction, Research, Public Service, Academic Support, Operation and Maintenance of Plant, Scholarships and Fellowships, Auxiliary Enterprises, Mandatory Transfers, and Total Current Fund Expenditures. This budget information reflects universities' priorities.

Other sections of the Annual Report proved helpful as well. Everyone is interested in enrollment breakdowns by gender, ethnic origin, and foreign student by country. The Urban Student Affairs Data Exchange Annual Report provides valuable information on the number of students by ethnic backgrounds (e.g., white, black, Hispanic, Native American and Alaskan Native, Asian, and Nonresident). It is valuable for institutions to know how the enrollments in these categories have changed over time, and data are now available so that each university can immediately compare its enrollment data and longitudinal changes with other peer metropolitan universities. It is with pride that many of these universities can report an annual, steady growth in the number of minorities and women students enrolled in their institutions over the years. These data are also used to illustrate how these metropolitan universities are achieving their affirmative action goals.

Other student affairs areas selected to collect data included:

- the number of students employed in cooperative education;
- the number of students employed on campus;
- the number of students living on campus;
- credit hours attempted;
- distribution of undergraduate student aid;
- SAT and ACT score distribution;
- degree completion by program, and
- student affairs cost centers.

These data are useful in reporting both the score distributions and means of new freshmen on the ACT and the SAT, because they provide a clearer profile of the freshmen class than the means alone. Institutions may have similar ACT or SAT freshman mean scores but significantly different profiles of new freshman. For example, some universities may have large numbers of students whose test scores fall below the lower one-quarter or one-third. However, the frequency of high scores at the upper range would bring the overall mean score up. Thus, in spite of the high mean score, this university has invested in a substantial developmental program, to assist those students with low test scores to achieve their potential.

The CSAOs are especially interested in the Student Affairs Cost Center section. How much are other metropolitan universities spending for counseling services, placement offices, admissions, financial aid, student activities, health services, recreation, registration, and other student services? Although this section is of keen interest, it has also been the most problematic. What connotes a “student activities” office on one campus may be called a “student life” office on another. At some campuses, counseling is combined with placement; at other campuses, these offices are separate. In nearly every student affairs cost center, the first Annual Report revealed overlap and unclear definitions.

In response to this problem, the CSAOs designated several data managers to develop operational definitions for each of the student affairs cost centers. The initial draft definitions were shared and discussed at the second annual meeting of the data managers. In many cases, agreement could not be reached about what constituted a student affairs cost center. It was therefore agreed that each university would provide additional explanations of what was contained in a cost center, whenever a data manager determined that such information would be useful, a practice that has continued and has been most helpful.

The Urban Student Affairs First Annual Report taught the data managers and CSAOs many other lessons. The familiar computer jargon “garbage in, garbage out” proved true. Several universities had not used sufficient care in collecting and reporting their data so that the tables in which errors had been recorded presented spurious results. Financial data from universities with medical hospitals also presented a distorted picture. Medical hospital budgets are so large that, when percentages are used, categories such as academic support and student services appear very small in proportion to the total budget. This problem was corrected by excluding the hospital budget from the total institutional budget in the second and succeeding years.

Deadlines for submitting data for the Annual Report were found to be important, and these have changed very little over the past eight years. In August, the annual contracts from Minter and Associates are sent to the CSAOs. The data collection forms and instructions are sent early in the month of November. By December 15, the cost center budget data is submitted to the consultant. The deadline for College Board data and other Student Affairs data is January 31. The data from the IPEDS Report is due March 1. The initial draft of the Annual Report is distributed to the data

managers, through the chief student affairs officers, in late April. During the first two weeks of May, the data managers hold their annual meeting with the consultant, corrections are made, data issues are discussed, and policy issue recommendations are prepared for the meeting of the chief student affairs officers the following month. After that meeting, the final report is prepared for printing and distribution to the CSAO meeting in early June.

It soon became clear that the Urban Student Affairs Data Exchange was useful for purposes other than the Annual Report because financial aid, cost centers, and scholarship data are more meaningful when comparisons are made between institutions of comparable size. Thus, different-sized institutions set up subnetwork data exchanges on their own, e.g., for institutional enrollments that range between 10,000 and 15,000 students, or from 26,000 to 30,000 or more. In addition, special surveys have been undertaken as part of the consultant contract. For example there have been surveys of salary and of tuition and fees.

When both the Student Right-to-Know, Campus Security Act and the NCAA required the publication of student retention and graduation rates, the Data Exchange members instituted a student retention and graduation study as a new major annual project, in consultation with the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), carefully designed by and operationalized by data managers. Now participants in the Urban Student Affairs Data Exchange's student retention and graduation study have reliable, accurate, and comparable data, in some cases going back to 1984.

### **Discussion**

The Urban Student Affairs Data Exchange, representing many metropolitan universities, has developed and maintained a management information database that is accurate, timely, and useful to both data managers and chief student affairs officers. It is particularly helpful in reporting and in supporting planning and policy decisions. Further, as state and federal agencies require more accountability data from universities, the Urban Student Affairs Data Exchange will be the group that will be the most able to respond with appropriate data.

Of special importance at this time is the student retention and graduation study. Legislators, parents, students, alumni, and the public want to know the student retention and graduation rates of various types of colleges and universities. What these groups do not know, and need to understand, is that

metropolitan universities enroll students who, for various reasons, take longer on average to graduate, according to the data from the longitudinal student retention and graduation study. It is important for metropolitan universities be able to show that these rates are typical throughout the country at these institutions, which attract and serve more adult students who are working, raising families, and attending school part-time for a variety of reasons. Publishing student retention and graduation data, followed by an explanation of the differences between metropolitan and other universities, will greatly assist us in explaining our students' special characteristics and needs. The complete analysis of the longitudinal student retention and graduation study will be available in June 1996.

Recently, the National Association of College Business Officers (NACUBO) embarked on a massive financial accounting project referred to as the "Benchmark Study." The purpose of the annual NACUBO Benchmark study is to make financial and performance comparisons among institutions. Although much larger and more complex than the Urban Student Affairs Data Exchange, this study shares some similarities. Because it focuses on financial, enrollment, and graduation (performance) data, it will provide data enabling peer universities to make comparisons between campuses. Because of these similarities of the projects, the members of the Urban Student Affairs Data Exchange should be at an early advantage, and should be able, early on, to identify ways to utilize the NACUBO Benchmark Study data constructively.

The members of the Urban Student Affairs Data Exchange plan to continue their work because the data that are collected and shared have proven valuable and useful, the informal networks that have formed as a result of the data exchange project make the effort even more valuable. Generally, participation in the Data Exchange is limited to doctoral-granting research universities with a metropolitan mission, a student population of at least 10,000, and a total university budget of 90 million dollars or more.

*Note:* Metropolitan universities interested in joining the Urban Student Affairs Data Exchange should contact the author.

### ***Suggested Readings***

Harrington, T. F. *Student Personnel Work in Urban Colleges*. New York: Intext Educational Publishers, 1974.

Jacoby, B. *The Student As Commuter*. Washington, D.C.: ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report 7, 1989.

Brown, N. (ed.). *The American University in the Urban Context: A Status Report and Call for Leadership*. Washington, D.C.: National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, 1983.