

Hands and Minds: Collaboration Among Faculty and Institutional Researchers in Portland State University's Portfolio Project

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Abstract

Portland State University's participation in the Urban Universities Portfolio Project represented a rare collaboration among institutional researchers and faculty members on a major campus initiative. At PSU, the hands of institutional researchers came together with the minds of faculty members to bring the portfolio to life on the Web. The result was a creative partnership that addressed important issues surrounding institutional mission and its relationship to planning, assessment, and accountability.

At Portland State University (PSU), work on the Urban Universities Portfolio Project (UUPP) represented a rare collaboration among institutional researchers and faculty on a major campus initiative. Mintzberg (1987) notes that, "large organizations try to separate the work of hands and minds. In so doing, they often sever the vital feedback link between the two." PSU's participation in the UUPP brought the hands of institutional researchers together with the minds of faculty members to give the portfolio life on the Web. The result was a creative implementation strategy in which faculty and institutional researchers worked together as partners to address important issues surrounding the institutional mission and its relationship to planning, assessment, and accountability.

The new realities of higher education have created an increasingly complex decision-making environment within institutions, one that demands broader participation than in the past. Rapid changes in technology, declining financial resources, and demographic changes in student populations require that colleges and universities become more innovative and adaptive (Hurst, Matter, and Sidle 1998). To address this new environment, institutional research (IR) practitioners must move beyond their traditional, narrow roles as information providers and enter into broader, more collaborative relationships with the campus community and its external constituents. By drawing IR to the center of campus planning and decision-making, the UUPP provided institutional researchers at PSU the opportunity to redefine their roles for a new higher education environment.

Strategies for Change

In 1990, a new president began focusing campus attention and effort on establishing the institution's identity as an urban public university. Change efforts addressed the curriculum, faculty roles and rewards, student services, community involvement, and relations with the state higher education system and legislature. While a new administration in 1997 continued these efforts, changes in the external environment required review and revision of some earlier initiatives. In particular, a new state funding model prompted the university to seek ways to become more flexible and innovative.

Historically, state-supported higher education in Oregon has been underfunded. Consequently, PSU sought opportunities to win external funding for change initiatives directed toward increased flexibility, responsiveness, and accountability. Such an opportunity presented itself in 1998, when the university joined five other urban campuses in an initiative to design a new medium for communicating about the outcomes and effectiveness of urban public higher education—the UUPP. The project's purpose was to develop “institutional portfolios” that would be available on the Web and that would document educational outcomes and institutional practices, describe obstacles to success, and detail how institutions were addressing their urban missions.

The PSU Portfolio Project

The university's portfolio project team included the provost, the director of institutional research and planning (who served as campus project director), two institutional research analysts, and a graduate research assistant. Early on, the team recognized that direct participation by faculty was necessary to the success of the project. This recognition was consistent with experiences reported in the literature on assessment and accreditation. Morse and Santiago (2000), for example, observe that “faculty leaders knowledgeable about outcomes assessment can and should take the lead in educating peers about assessment, in setting up institutional structures that facilitate the planning process, and in guiding assessment initiatives toward institutional change.”

An executive planning group of university administrators thus appointed a ten-member faculty committee that drew on a broad array of perspectives and expertise. The committee included creative thinkers actively involved in the improvement of teaching and learning. Chaired by a senior faculty member who was a former academic dean, the committee met quarterly throughout the life of the project.

Initially, some members of the executive group felt that the faculty committee should play only a passive, advisory role. Understanding that most faculty members already felt overburdened, administrators were reluctant to give the committee more work to do. But it soon became apparent that the members of *this* faculty committee were not content with a merely advisory role; they wanted something to do.

To move from discussion to action, the committee divided itself into work groups focused on three broad categories of evidence that reflected the university's mission:

academic issues, student issues, and external issues. This strategy served as a catalyst for work on the design of the portfolio and as a means for determining which initiatives or activities should be featured within it. The committee defined academic issues to include program assessment, scholarly work on urban issues, faculty issues, and curricular reform. Under student issues were student services, access, and diversity. The external issues group focused on community connections, university partnerships, K-12 and community college collaborations, and national/international higher education.

Principles of Design

The electronic institutional portfolio that emerged from the collaborative process at PSU reflected five functional areas of the institution: Teaching and Learning, Research and Scholarship, Community and Global Connections, Institutional Effectiveness, and Student Success. (Vision and Planning was added later at the request of the upper administration.) Some administrators expressed reservations about these categories, suggesting that they were too “faculty-oriented.” To address the need for the portfolio to speak to a range of audiences, we used hyperlinks and the concept of “portfolio tours” to link themes across functional areas and to provide multiple paths through the portfolio Web site. Inherent in the portfolio design was the recognition that populations with multiple perspectives exist both within and outside the institution and that they require multiple access points to information.

A diagram created early in the project by one committee member envisioned a process of continuous reflection on the portfolio’s content that would lead to campus-wide discussions of institutional mission, vision, and values. The eight principles articulated by the committee reflected PSU’s collaborative approach to portfolio development, emphasizing the role of the Web site as a forum for discussion and a place where many voices could be heard:

- PSU’s motto (“Let Knowledge Serve the City”) guides the process.
- Faculty members are centrally involved in the portfolio’s design.
- Content does not comprise a laundry list of activities, but forms a strategic document.
- The Web site creates a virtual “place” where many destinations may be reached by various pathways.
- Portfolio Web pages provide a forum for discussion, comment, and feedback, and for conversations about assessment.
- The many voices on campus are represented.
- The portfolio forms a basis for an emergent strategic planning process and for accountability.
- Once completed, the portfolio will appear prominently on PSU’s main campus Web site.

From these principles emerged eight elements that were to appear throughout the portfolio’s content. Evidence included in the portfolio would:

- Reflect PSU’s mission as an urban university,

- Demonstrate community engagement,
- Contain the elements of assessment and reflection,
- Include examples of faculty development,
- Focus on student learning,
- Highlight diversity,
- Be concrete, practical, and visually interesting, and
- Focus on interesting and dynamic topics.

Throughout the process of developing the portfolio, the project team acted as consultants to the committee, offering practical and technical suggestions. At the conclusion of each meeting, committee members expressed a sense of accomplishment, enthusiasm, and collegiality as a result of participating on the committee and interacting with the project team. One of the most active committee members remarked that it was a pleasure to be invited to think about the portfolio and to contribute to its design while his colleagues in the institutional research office developed the Web site and organized the content.

Members of the Faculty Advisory Committee frequently commented that their work on the project enabled them to learn more about activities outside their departments or programs and to see clearer connections between their individual day-to-day work on teaching, research, and service and the mission of the institution as a whole. They began thinking differently about their roles within the institution, using their knowledge and creativity in new ways to contribute to the institution. An additional benefit was that the collaborative nature of the project prompted faculty to acknowledge institutional researchers as colleagues, rather than as part of a distant administration. This sense of collegiality created a new internal coalition that could begin to influence discussions about institutional planning, assessment, and accountability.

The Changing Role of Institutional Research

In May 1998, PSU's Office of Institutional Research and Planning began moving toward a more collaborative, team-oriented approach to institutional research. Literature on the challenges facing institutional researchers in the next century suggests that increased communication with constituents, team work and group process, and flexibility will characterize their work (Sanford 1995; Hurst, Matier, and Sidle 1998). Hutchings and Shulman (1999) wrote,

Traditionally, these offices have been treated as a kind of company audit, sitting outside the organization's inner workings but keeping track of its "effectiveness" as witnessed by graduation rates, student credit hours, faculty workloads, and so forth. Imagine, instead, a kind of institutional research that asks much tougher, more central questions.... If we reconceived "institutional research" to be about such questions, in the service of its faculties, led by faculty members, then the scholarship of teaching would not be some newly conceived arena of work, or a new route to tenure, but a characteristic of the institution that took learning seriously.

At PSU, the UUPP advanced the notion of institutional research as a collaborative enterprise linked to faculty work and to the broader objectives of student learning. Such an idea runs counter to long-held cultural notions and traditional hierarchical structures, making it difficult to implement on any campus. As PSU faculty and institutional researchers began to collaborate on the UUPP, however, they found much in common. For example, they shared a degree of frustration with their level of involvement in institutional decision-making and similar values regarding the goals of the institution in promoting and documenting excellence in teaching and learning. These commonalities continue to facilitate their collaboration in institutional initiatives.

Organizational Roles

Parson (1960) defines three organizational levels or sectors within a hierarchical framework. These sectors include: the technical core, which carries out the organization's primary function; the managerial level, which administers internal affairs, procures and manages resources, and mediates between the technical core and the uses of its services; and the institutional level, which mediates between the organization and the interests it is intended to serve. In higher education organizations, the technical core comprises the faculty, researchers, and professional and support staff (including institutional researchers); the managerial level is made up of directors, department heads, and deans; and the institutional level includes upper-level administrators, such as the president, provost, vice presidents, and vice provosts.

Each level functions with different goals, strategies, and values. These differences often result in conflict among the levels, which leads in turn to the separation of hands and minds noted by Mintzberg. For example, it is not uncommon for institutional researchers to be accused of failing to meet information needs or of producing inaccurate information. Often, however, the failure lies in the decision-making process, which separates discussion of policy choices from the data needed to support them.

Faculty, too, experience this separation of hands and minds. Floyd (1985) writes that "faculty are particularly frustrated by considerations of timing. Sometimes they perceive that they are consulted only after a course of action has been decided upon." Yet common sense, as well as the literature on faculty involvement in institutional initiatives, tells us that, to be effective, faculty input must be sought at the beginning of the decision-making process, not when it is too late for their perspectives to have an impact.

Institutions are beginning to recognize the importance of collaboration among Parson's three levels in institutional decision-making. Marin, Manning, and Ramaley (2001), for instance, discuss the outcomes of a collaborative approach to an accreditation self-study at the University of Vermont. They describe the self-study as a "chariot" that carried the institution forward in its discussions about the future. At PSU, the electronic institutional portfolio played a similar role. In both projects, the campuses moved away from the traditional separation of power and perspectives and toward a collaborative, problem-solving approach to institutional change that recognized the value of cooperation among organizational levels in decision-making.

IR Professionals: Facing a Brave New World

The implementation strategy employed in the portfolio project at PSU brought faculty and institutional researchers closer to the decision-making level of the institution. Throughout, the campus project director/institutional research director mediated among faculty, institutional researchers, the provost, and other upper administrators. In this role, the director walked a fine line between advocating for a faculty-centered approach to the portfolio and the demands of administrative leadership. While this role created a new set of tensions and pressures, it also helped to move the IR office out of the trenches and into the arena of institutional planning and decision-making.

In the new, collaborative environment for institutional research, directors and managers will need more than data analysis and reporting skills. As Borden (2001) has noted, “developing institutional portfolios may well mark the beginning of a transformation in institutional research that takes it beyond decision support for management and planning and toward the scholarship of mission-critical activities in teaching and learning.” The development of a scholarship of institutional research will require a new set of skills that include a broad understanding of organizational change and behavior, politics and policy, and faculty culture.

Involving the Campus Leadership

The Faculty Advisory Committee recognized that involvement of institutional leadership in the project was as important as its own involvement. Early in the project, the committee discussed the role the portfolio might play in strategic planning. This role, indeed, was the hook that drew the administration’s interest to the portfolio; planning formed the intersection between the teaching and learning focus of the portfolio and broader institutional objectives. During 2001-2002, the use of the portfolio as a vehicle for focusing strategic priorities, documenting actions, and engaging internal and external communities in conversations about values, vision, and mission became a key piece of the administration’s planning agenda. Faculty played a role in this agenda through participation in the planning committee, in focus groups on values and vision, and in campus-wide discussions regarding institutional priorities.

In the absence of a formal strategic plan, PSU adopted a planning process based on learning and strategic action. The portfolio provided a medium that enabled the institution to focus its priorities and learn from reflection on its actions. Historically, PSU’s successes in curricular reform and strategic change have been based on experimentation and learning, rather than on deliberate strategic planning. The portfolio gathered these experiences together to illuminate patterns that have emerged from various change efforts and provided a vehicle for campus-wide reflection and assessment.

Future Directions

At the end of the three years of the funded project, most members of the Faculty Advisory Committee voiced enthusiasm for continuing to serve. Three members were replaced and new members enhanced representation across schools and colleges. As the portfolio moved past the initial stage of development, the project team and faculty committee focused attention on critical reflection on the portfolio content. Each committee member was responsible for reviewing the content of a portfolio theme or tour and providing feedback to the project team on the following:

- Does the content follow the principles of design set out by the faculty committee?
- Is the connection between the content and the mission of the institution clear?
- Does the content address the “big” questions regarding assessment, the university mission, vision, and values, and accountability to various publics?
- What is missing?

The next step will be to bring this conversation to administrators and the broader campus community. Vice Provosts have been asked to review sections of the portfolio relevant to their functional areas, and to begin thinking about how to address the rationale behind the university’s initiatives. As the work moves forward, other campus and community groups will be invited to join the discussion through face-to-face meetings and discussion boards available on the portfolio Web site.

As the portfolio project matures, Faculty Advisory Committee members have expressed concerns about the increasing demands being placed on it. From its beginnings as a virtual place for the documentation and discussion of student learning, assessment, and accountability, the portfolio is now a central component of PSU’s planning initiative, accreditation self-study, and program review process. The critical role of faculty in decision-making about future uses may be endangered as administrative involvement increases. One challenge facing faculty members and their institutional research colleagues is to reinforce the importance, and success, of collaboration in furthering institutional initiatives.

Suggested Readings

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