

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE CONTEXT

# Feature

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## Accountability During Crisis:

The Transformative  
Potential of  
Institutional Research  
and Effectiveness in  
the Struggle Toward  
Racial Justice

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**I**n this national moment of heightened racial stress, all institutions, including those of higher education, must rethink their commitment to racial justice. Leaders of two- and four-year institutions across the country have released statements championing “diversity and inclusion” amid calls for unity across difference; however, few statements include tangible action steps to directly tackle issues of racism and anti-blackness among the very campus communities to whom they are addressed. While much of the discourse in the responses focuses on the role of institutional units traditionally charged with leading, at least symbolically, on social justice-related issues, I would like to instead focus here on the potentially transformative role of two connected units less commonly associated with racial justice: institutional research and institutional effectiveness.

Institutional research (IR) consists of a wide-ranging set of tasks conducted in support of the decision-making processes of various stakeholders within higher education institutions (Association for Institutional Research, n.d.). Typically, institutional researchers are charged with collecting, analyzing, and reporting data relevant to students, faculty, and staff as well as reporting to the state and federal government, accreditors, and other external bodies. Institutional effectiveness (IE), less ubiquitous but increasingly common, usually includes the functional components of IR along with broader organizational functions, such as strategic planning, assessment,

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and program review, all at the institutional level (Association for Higher Education Effectiveness, n.d.).

Aside from such high-level tasks, an additional goal of IE is to build analytical capacity within the institution by providing professional learning opportunities, internal consultants, and other means of support often beyond the scope of a traditional IR office. The notion that efforts to enhance “effectiveness” should be institutionalized, rather than siloed within one often under-resourced and inconspicuous unit, informs the origin and proliferation of IE offices, as an extension of IR.

The roles of IR and IE must be expanded and center racially conscious modes of measuring and enhancing institutional effectiveness. IR and IE professionals must be reimagined as facilitators of organizational learning about race and racism and be empowered to lead data-informed efforts to narrow the disparities in opportunities, experiences, and outcomes that Black, Latinx, and other racially minoritized students routinely face.

In addition to possessing the traditional competencies of the collective IR/IE field (i.e., research design, statistical analysis, etc.), professionals should be expected (and provided the scaffolding) to engage in critical self-reflection around how their own racial identities and positionalities shape their approaches to work. As a predominantly White, positivist-leaning field, this critical reflection needs to be part of a movement led by leaders of the profession. The Association of Institutional Research, Association for Higher Education Effectiveness, and other relevant professional groups should lead this movement by first reexamining their own mission statements and core competencies, then by establishing capacity-building mechanisms by which IR and IE professionals might enhance their racial literacy. These organizations should also incentivize ideation around creative approaches to using data to facilitate critical, race-conscious discourse with stakeholders at all levels within the organization. Adoption of these and other approaches, however, will likely first require racial diversification at the highest levels among IR- and IE-related professional organizations as well as throughout the field. Despite the necessity of top-down, transformative change, there are several

strategies that IR and IE professionals can embrace now to combat anti-blackness and racism within their respective institutions. Dowd and Bensimon (2015) suggest several strategies for equity-enhancing data usage among faculty and administrators; I draw from these to offer three recommendations specific to IR- and IE-related policy and practice:

**Normalize the practice of disaggregating data by race.**

Every aspect of the collegiate experience is racialized, from admissions to alumni engagement. In order to capture the experiences of racially minoritized students, faculty, and staff, surveys, dashboards, and other assessment-related instruments must be designed to account for the breadth of racial and ethnic diversity increasingly found among campus stakeholders. Given the racial homogeneity of many IR and IE offices, their leaders should seek reciprocal relationships with colleagues and students whose feedback might inform the creation of more racially and culturally relevant tools. Once these tools are created or adjusted, IR and IE staff should commit to reporting experiences and outcomes in racially disaggregated terms whenever possible, given potentially small n-sizes (the presence of which are also notable, relevant findings).

**Collect, analyze, and report findings from qualitative data.**

The value of qualitative research remains untapped in many IR and IE units. While quantitative methods allow for wider examination of various aspects of institutional effectiveness, qualitative methods offer a deeper dive into the fabric of an institution and the experiences of those along its margins. IR and IE professionals should have the skills necessary to conduct interviews, observations, focus groups, and other qualitative methods as well as the ability to analyze qualitative data. These approaches should be incorporated into all aspects of institutional assessment, especially those assessing the experiences and outcomes of campus stakeholders with severely underrepresented racial or ethnic backgrounds.

**Regularly report the “state of justice” to all campus stakeholders.**

IR and IE leaders must be innovative in their efforts to activate data-informed accountability around racial justice. Issuing ad-hoc reports and rarely read fact books is hardly enough to meaningfully engage the typical, often data-averse, practitioner and facilitate the degree of organizational learning required for self-assessment and change. IR and IE staff must consider alternative ways to reposition academic and student affairs practitioners as “practitioner-researchers” with valuable experiential knowledge to inform sensemaking of the data. Collaboration is critical, as often, faculty and staff lack an understanding of the function of IR and IE and their potential as hubs for transformational inquiry. Working with other units, such as human resources or diversity and inclusion, IR and IE professionals should create regular forums for critical self-reflection, active engagement with racially disaggregated data visualizations, facilitated discussion of implications for racial justice, and action-oriented planning toward change.

IR and IE professionals are uniquely positioned to lead efforts toward racial justice in higher education. Given their inherently broad scope, wealth of institutional data, and proximity to senior leadership, IR and IE offices should have a primary role in cultivating a culture of inquiry among faculty, staff, and other campus stakeholders. In doing so, IR and IE leaders must emphasize the necessity of race-conscious inquiry to address the often unchecked, racist institutional norms that deprive minoritized students of equitable educational experiences. This has always been important but will become increasingly urgent as a new academic year begins with the anticipation of continued racial stress and unrest on campuses across the U.S. As postsecondary leaders struggle to develop and articulate substantive strategies to combat racism and anti-blackness at their respective institutions, IR and IE leaders must embrace their potential as racially conscious thought leaders with the necessary tools to support institutional efforts toward racial justice.




## References

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