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INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH AND MANAGEMENT IN THE U.S. AND EUROPE: SOME EAIR - AIR COMPARISONS

Abstract. This chapter examines the external conditions that have influenced higher education management in the U.S. and shaped the development of practice of institutional research; compares the status of AIR and EAIR at the anniversary of their 25th Forums; and examines some common external conditions that are currently shaping management and institutional research in the U.S. and Europe. Drawing on the current conditions and the experience of AIR since its 25th Anniversary, some concluding comments suggest a more pro-active role for EAIR in shaping management and policy analysis in Europe

INTRODUCTION

Being invited to write a chapter on institutional research and management in the U.S. for this special publication on the 25th anniversary of EAIR is for me both a personal irony and an intriguing challenge. The personal irony is that I was president of AIR during the anniversary year of its 25th Annual Forum (Portland, Oregon, May 1985) and now, almost two decades later, I have the opportunity to contribute to EAIR's 25th Annual Forum celebration. The reality, of course, is that I had served on AIR's board when the question of whether and how to include an international focus to our U.S. efforts was being debated, was present when efforts to ensure European representation on the AIR Board was effectively thwarted by an AIR By-law change which required all Board members to be elected at large, was involved in discussions with several EAIR founding members about this new association and have continued to be an active participant in both AIR and EAIR Annual Forums for the past two decades. But then the irony may be no more than longevity!

The intriguing challenge is to determine how to discuss institutional research and management in the U.S. in a way that contributes to EAIR's celebration of its first 25 years. Clearly one could examine the development of the two associations, AIR and EAIR, and their changing relationship. That, however, is best reserved for a more systematic, comparative effort - perhaps including other groups like the Australasian AIR. Another approach would be to examine the development of the field of institutional research - comparing and contrasting the North American and European perspectives. That probably is beyond the scope of a brief chapter such as this.

Rather my intent is to examine the evolution of institutional research in the U.S. from a contingency perspective, to see how AIR has evolved and to speculate on its implications for EAIR. A contingency perspective suggests that external conditions have largely shaped the primary management challenges and performance demands that colleges and universities in the U.S. have had to address. The practice of institutional research, I suggest, has evolved primarily as a response to, or in anticipation of, these challenges and demands on our institutions. In turn AIR has developed as an

association that has attempted to interpret the nature of the emerging field as a profession and to respond to the needs of its members.

Although this chapter focuses primarily on institutional research and management in the U.S., it is suggested that such a contingency analysis may be useful in understanding and interpreting the evolution of IR in the European context and may account for differences as well as similarities in AIR and EAIR. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first examines how external conditions have exerted management and performance pressures on institutions in the U.S., which in turn have shaped the practice and the profession of institutional research. The second section provides a brief contrast of AIR and EAIR on their 25th anniversary and suggests how U.S. and European conditions may explain some of their similarities and differences. The third discusses a set of emerging conditions that institutions in both the U.S. and Europe must address that may change our practice of institutional research. Finally, some observations on the implications of these emerging conditions and the recent experience of AIR for EAIR are offered.

A CONTINGENCY PERSPECTIVE: IR AND MANAGEMENT IN THE U.S.

Institutional research, as a set of organised institutional activities and practices, were identified in the U.S. much earlier than in Europe. Although institutional research activities and practices were identified prior to World War II, institutional research, as a formally organised function in the U.S., emerged in the 1950s (Cowley 1959; Brumbaugh 1960). An invited gathering of 46 concerned individuals met in 1961 in Chicago (This was later identified as the first Forum even though AIR was not founded until 1964). This meeting and papers it generated marked the start of a rapid period of growth of both the practice of institutional research and of the field as a profession.

1950s and 60s Growth, Expansion and Emergence of IR

The post World War II era in the U.S. was marked by an unprecedented period of growth and expansion in U.S. higher education. Strong public support for higher education, governmental commitment and funding and enrolment demands increased the size, number and type of institutions, especially in the public sector. Pressure on institutional management during this period of rapid expansion demanded a rationale for their institution's direction and for data to account for the students they were serving, the faculty they needed, and financial and facilities resources they were requesting. Institutional performance meant becoming more accountable for resources. Institutional research activities focused on data collection, on developing data definitions and information systems and on quantitative, descriptive analyses of enrolment, space utilisation, costs, student and faculty characteristics and examining various self-study issues. AIR in its early years assisted practitioners in discovering their own peers, sharing problems and comparing approaches. Members also examined and debated the nature and role of the emerging profession - the theory vs. practice focus of their work; the need for an independent perspective vs. serving management, etc. Association activities included expanding membership, developing the Annual Forum, publishing a Newsletter and Directory and some special publications.

1965 - 1975 Disruption, Control and Professionalism

In the late 1960s and early 1970s higher education was attacked both from within and without. Large impersonal institutions, increasingly professional faculty and critical students were a source of internal stress and dissatisfaction. External issues such as the Vietnam War, civil rights and the free speech movement found fertile ground and led to major disruptions on many campuses. The management pressure was for control and order on campus and to assure greater access for non-traditional and minority students – two pressures that often served to further fuel campus disruptions. To assure the public that disruptions were not undermining the quality of educational effort, comparative and reputational studies promoted initially by prestigious groups like the American Council on Education (ACE) also became a focus of institutional research efforts. Studies of campus and programme quality and reputation, on the correlates of quality, and an expanded interest in student behaviour and attitudes were common. Enhancing the capacity of institutions to publicly report such results were also emphasised. During this period AIR gave greater attention to examining controversial issues, to promoting the use of new research methods (survey, qualitative, etc.) and to establishing a central office to better serve the association's growing membership and to reflect the increasingly quasi-professional nature of the field.

1975 - 1985 Recession, Efficiency and Results

Beginning in the mid 1970s and extending into the 1980s, higher education was subjected to a major economic recession in the U.S., which coincided with the end of the Post World War II baby boom. Both enrolments and financial support stagnated and forecasts for the next decade offered little reassurance. The resulting pressure on management again changed. On the one hand institutions were pressed to become more efficient and at the same time become more market oriented since enrolments could no longer be supplemented by seeking new applicant groups. The impact of the 1972 Higher Education Amendments, which gave financial aid directly to students (not to institutions) made the market for students even more competitive. This new reality stressed performance based on results - not just inputs or resources used. Management emphasis began to focus on strategic planning and reduction and reallocation approaches. The impact of this was clearly reflected in institutional research. Emphasis on quantitative productivity and efficiency studies, evaluative research and varied forecasting, budgeting and planning studies (Fincher 1985) increased. This was also the period in which extensive use of computers in the development of management information systems and in conducting institutional research was expanding rapidly. Some even argued that institutional researchers should become telematics technologists (Sheehan 1985).

An Interlude: EAIR and AIR's 25th Anniversary Perspective

In the context of EAIR's current celebration, it is useful to look at the development of the field of institutional research in the U.S. and at the state of AIR at the time of its 25th Anniversary Forum. Clearly by 1985 institutional research in the U.S. was a well-developed field of practice and widely recognised as an important institutional

<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-1505-2>

The Dialogue between Higher Education Research and
Practice

25 Years of EAIR

Begg, R.

2003, X, 146 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1505-2