Democratize the Data on Campuses

By Lisa A. Petrides

Paul H. O'Neill, former secretary of the treasury, made headlines earlier this year with his revelations about the inner workings of the Bush administration. But his story reveals something equally significant about the amount of data that leaders must manage. When O'Neill left the Treasury Department, he took with him 19,000 documents—notes, papers, and memoranda.

In his business career, O'Neill had made a name for himself by "democratizing" data, making information available not only to board members but to people making decisions in production and marketing departments. He demonstrated that increasing access to data is important, but encouraging people to make use of newly abundant information is also essential.

Like government and business, academia is awash in information. Colleges and universities need to reconsider not only who needs access to what data, but also how information is—and could be—used in decision making. In an ideal world, a dean, faculty member, or student counselor would be able to sit down at a computer to find data about campus enrollments, course-taking trends, graduation rates, or any other information that would help improve educational programs and make the most efficient use of an institution’s resources.

Yet recent studies of colleges and universities reveal a complex web of processes and problems surrounding the use of information. Institutions have a long way to go to make data readily available and useful.

The good news is that people are increasingly interested in making use of information at all levels of campus decision making. Administrators rely on data to assess particular programs to determine where best to invest limited resources. Department heads and faculty and staff members use data to help improve instruction and students’ performance in the class-

Universities are reluctant to invest in the tools and training that would permit more administrators and faculty and staff members to use relevant data in making decisions.

room, and to more effectively match students with appropriate services and interventions.

However, while growing numbers of academics recognize how useful timely and reliable data can be, few institutions have taken adequate steps to meet the growing demand for data. The most useful information is often not readily available to the people who need it. Additionally, campus systems provide few incentives for educators and staff members to tap into the rich data resources that are open to them.

For example, in a recent study that my institute conducted at a community college in California, the majority of faculty and staff members reported that campus information systems did not enable them to search data in the student-information system from their desktop computers, or to share that information. More than half of the respondents reported that it took a great deal of effort to get the data they needed to be effective in their jobs, and more than one-quarter of faculty members and administrators said that it was nearly impossible to get the basic data they needed to make decisions. Further-

more, faculty and staff members who were determined to make use of information said they had to bypass the college’s centralized information system to do so, developing their own methods of collecting data. That resulted in significant redundancy of data and duplication of efforts, which are costly to the institution.

In the past it might have been excusable for institutions to restrict access to such data systems because using them required sophisticated computing skills. For instance, if a faculty member wanted data about student enrollments, the request would have to be routed to information-technology specialists with expertise in running the numbers. In many cases the most important data were not available, either because the information systems had not been set up to collect and compile that information, or because the systems could not deliver it before a decision had to be made.

The technological barriers that kept data inaccessible have now all but disappeared. Yet universities are reluctant to invest in the tools and training that would permit larger numbers of administrators and faculty and staff members to use relevant data in making decisions.

Indeed, it is still quite expensive to create a system that permits anyone to make full use of data. But the benefits are overwhelming. By focusing on improving the tools and training, universities can accelerate the use of information in making decisions and improve the quality of higher education for all.

The Value of Solitude

The Ethics and Spirituality of Aloneness in Autobiography

John D. Barbour

"John Barbour has given us a brilliant poetic sensibility with this wonderful book. Ranging across Western theological, philosophical, and literary thought from Antony to the present, Barbour shows how solitude can have sacred, meditative, and spiritual—and how it can ignite our quest to find meaning and purpose."—Richard B. Miller, Professor, Department of Religious Studies and Director, Putnam Center for the Study of American Institutions, Indiana University

Studies in Religion and Culture $49.50 cloth, $19.50 paper

Night Journeys

The Power of Dreams in Transatlantic Quaker Culture

Carla Gerona

"Night Journeys is a fascinating study of the meaning of dreams in the history of early Quakerism. Gerona combines meticulous scholarship with a sophisticated understanding of dream theory to trace the changing meanings of dreams as they were interpreted, both within and outside the Quaker community."—Phyllis Mack, Rutgers University

$35.00 cloth

Books to fit your every mood

Paranoia and Contentment

A Personal Essay on Western Thought

John C. Hystery

"Paranoia and Contentment is a sharply resonant, luminous, troubling, and intellectually bold meditation on paranoid voices. Part scholarship, part personal essay, this beautifully written book turns upside down our standard thinking about paranoiac creativity, imagination, and what it is to be wholly human."—Tom O'Brien, author of The Things They Carried and winner of the National Book Award

$30.00 cloth

November 26, 2004

The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk, a peer-reviewed journal, offers quantitative and qualitative research focused exclusively on improving the education of students placed at risk. Join us for our tenth anniversary, a year of timely special issues on subjects that matter to you, the education professional.

The special issue brings together the work of five of CREED’s seven synthesis teams, including Language Learning and Academic Achievement, Professional Development for Diversity; Schools, Families and Community, Science Education and Student Diversity; and Teacher-School Systemic Integration for Effective Reform.

Guest Editors: Roland Thureau, University of California, Santa Cruz

Contributors: Donna Christian, Catherine Cooper, Amanda Darwiche, Fred Sennett, Stephanie L. Knight, Olivia Lue-Salvation, Deborah Short, Jam Stinefield, Roland Thureau

To subscribe to JESPAR, contact our publisher: University of Michigan Press, 800-858-7640 or e-mail at subscription@umich.edu, or write to Professor David E. Lester, Superintendent of Schools, 101 School House Road, Half Moon Bay, CA 94019.