Democratize the Data on Campuses

By Lisa A. Petrides

JAMES YANG FOR THE CHRONICLE

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, academe 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 classroom, 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, campuses 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. Furthermore, 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.

> 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.

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 cre-

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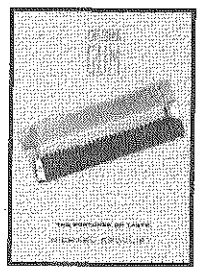

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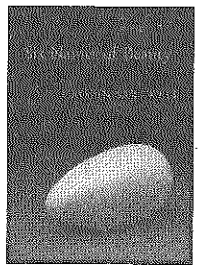

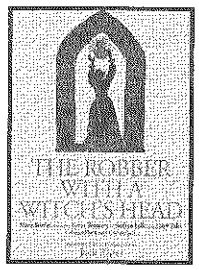

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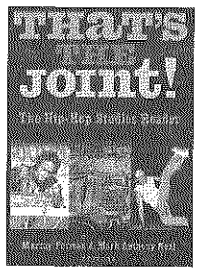

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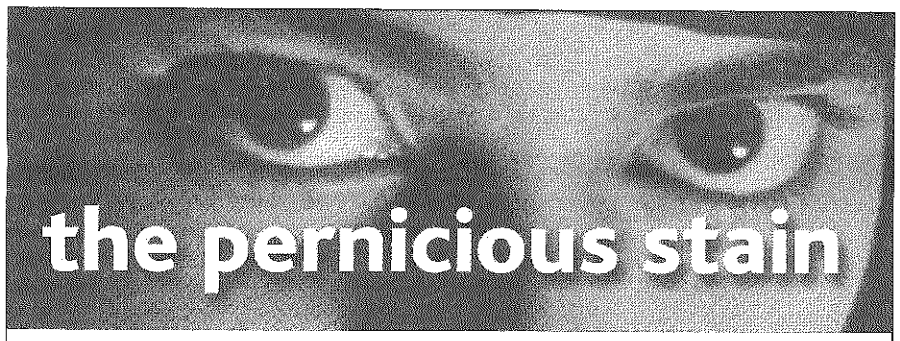

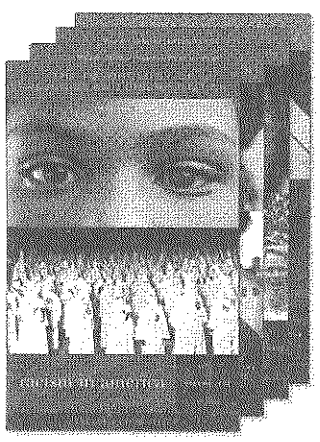

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ate a campuswide information-technology system. And a successful system requires persuading prospective users from a wide range of departments and institutional levels to work together to determine, for instance, how to define such concepts as "full-time student," which data to track, what kinds of reports to generate, and what levels of access different people need. Should faculty members be able to see budgetary data so that they know how much an additional course section costs? Should counselors have access to data on students' performance, to compare that with students' goals?

Inevitably conflicts arise over privacy; the status quo of organizational dynamics is disrupted; and those who previously managed the flow of data find their authority challenged. In short, making data available to more people has an impact on the way that colleges and universities have traditionally done business.

The fact remains, though, that while academic culture may well encourage solo investigations and the careful dissemination of data, every institution recognizes the need for a shared data system. And the whole point of such a system is, of course, to share data. By equipping more people throughout the institution with the data they need, a college can enable its employees to make better day-to-day and long-term decisions about how to reach and serve students.

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However, simply increasing access to data is just the beginning. The democratization of data can transform academe through information sharing and the deliberations that it provokes. As more people gain ready access to information, they inevitably ask questions: Are other programs on campus running more efficiently? Are they reaching more students? How can we do what we do even better? Such questions might lead to a more complex understanding of student success.

Higher-education leaders can encourage their colleagues to make valuable suggestions for change by:

- Making reliable data quickly available to a wide range of administrators and faculty and staff members. Relatively inexpensive steps might include developing Web-based, user-friendly interfaces for existing information systems, or creating online clearinghouses where faculty members could post data or research reports relevant to teaching and learning.
- Supporting the use of data in decision making. For example, deans and other senior administrators could ask for supporting data when they receive budget requests. They could encourage faculty members to use student-enrollment data when they ask for additional teaching positions, or data on student-learning styles to improve their effectiveness in the classroom.
- Identifying the decision makers who already use data and encouraging them to share what they know. Most colleges and universities already have a group of administrators and faculty and staff members with a reputation for gathering and using information to improve teaching or other services to students. In some cases, those individuals collect and analyze data unofficially. It is important to encourage them to share their information so the entire institution can benefit from their knowledge.

Making information widely available, and encouraging people to use it, brings a host of opportunities and challenges for colleges and universities. No doubt there are risks involved: Information about issues like program budgets and student outcomes can be a powerful tool, and its possession can transform traditional hierarchies of decision making.

However, the democratization of data offers academic institutions their best opportunity to make wise decisions about improving education and responding to external mandates. It also allows them to prove that they are accountable, and that mandates from outsiders with less knowledge of academe are unnecessary.

Lisa A. Petrides is president and founder of the Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education, an educational-research think tank based in Half Moon Bay, Calif.

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