



NEW JERSEY

Association of State Colleges and Universities

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QuickTakes!

NJASCU Executive Director Michael W. Klein, JD, PhD, contributed the following column to the website of the New Jersey Secretary of Higher Education, December 1, 2016

Guest Column: The Importance of Institutional Researchers to Policymaking

Many important issues face higher education in New Jersey, including enrollment capacity, institutional costs, and student success. It is institutional researchers who collect the data related to these issues and interpret the material for campus leaders and policymakers, helping them to make informed decisions. While institutional researchers may work behind the scenes at our colleges and universities, the implications of their efforts are front and center in policy deliberations.

According to the Association for Institutional Research, the field of institutional research (IR) is over 50 years old and is ingrained within most institutions of higher education in the U.S. The work of IR professionals not only contributes to their own institution's planning and success, but it also forms the basis for reports to the federal government – particularly for the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) – and to state governments.

In New Jersey, IR professionals provide data on enrolled and graduated students to the Student Unit Record (SURE) system, which was established in 1985 to create efficiencies in collecting, documenting, and tracking student data. The SURE system also provides analytic tools to institutions and higher education professionals, making it much easier to conduct and disseminate research. Within the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education, the experts who ensure the SURE system's success are Research Scientist Mary Morley and Chief of Staff Betsy Garlatti.

New Jersey's higher education community will be able to collect, analyze, and provide even more comprehensive data regarding our students when the Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) is in place. Under the leadership of Secretary Hendricks and her team, in close



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collaboration with New Jersey's Department of Education (NJDOE) and Department of Labor and Workforce Development, the SLDS will expand the NJDOE's current data system (NJ SMART) from a P-12 system into a "P-20W" data system that tracks student information from pre-K through entry into higher education and then into the workforce. Data on our college students will cover enrollment, remediation, degrees, certificates, completion, wages, and employment location. As students, parents, and elected officials focus more closely on "outcomes" from our institutions, the information from New Jersey's Statewide Longitudinal Data System will be a critically important part of policy discussions.

On November 14, I had the privilege of delivering a keynote address at the annual conference of the North East Association for Institutional Research (NEAIR). I described the importance of institutional research in the legislative process, especially how meticulous data from our institutions helps advocates like me explain the difference between completion rates and graduation rates (graduation rates do not include part-time students or transfer students), and the limitations of the salary information provided on the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard (it covers only the median earnings of former students who received federal financial aid, at ten years after entering the institution).

During the business meeting at NEAIR's conference, the association's leadership announced that the incoming NEAIR president for the new three-year term is Dr. Ann Marie Senior, the associate vice president for Planning and Research at Thomas Edison State University. It is a richly deserved and fitting honor for Dr. Senior to be elected NEAIR president by her peers, who surely know of Dr. Senior's two decades of service to TESU on accreditation compliance and regulatory reports, research and analysis to support the university's decision making and strategic plan, and her contributions toward the university's quality assurance.

At its best, policymaking is like good detective work, piecing together information to find the right solution to a problem. Sherlock Holmes, in "A Scandal in Bohemia," says: "It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data." Thanks to the institutional researchers at New Jersey's colleges and universities, we have significant data that we can share with public officials and help inform policies aimed at helping our institutions best serve our students and the residents of New Jersey.

By Michael W. Klein, JD, PhD

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