# Preface

In the early 1990s, I was introduced to institutional research (IR) by David England, who probably knew community college research and institutional research better than anyone at the time. It was from him that I learned many technical skills and practiced the dispositions for their effective use. Additionally, at a Southern Association for Institutional Research (SAIR) conference in San Antonio (circa 1994) while employed by Dr. England, I received an introduction to the Traditionally Black Colleges and Universities Special Interest Group (TBCU-SIG) of the Association for Institutional Research (AIR). I soon left institutional research for traditional academic life, but TBCU-SIG was the group that nurtured me through that scholarly career. As do many, TBCU-SIG is a place where I found support, IR wisdom, connections, community, inclusivity, fun, and most importantly, encouragement. This group was also a place for scholarship. Still, if I have learned anything from TBCU-SIG, it is the importance of encouragement. So as the members of TBCU-SIG have given to me, this book is an attempt to give back. If anything, the challenge of *Cases on Institutional Research* is to reflect TBCU-SIG's infectious support, wisdom, connections, community, inclusivity, fun, scholarship, and encouragement. Indeed, this edited book is the result of encouragement from TBCU-SID members, and particularly from the late Charlie Brown, who encouraged members to "publish, publish, publish."

## Why a Casebook on IR?

Books on IR are a dry breed. After an Internet search, a quick read on any set of titles assures one that these books are not for the uninitiated. They can read like books on wiring, but certainly less electric. They tend to be laser-focused on specific aspects of IR. However, the perspective of *Cases on Institutional Research* provides a more expansive survey of the landscape of institutional research scholarship. A theme that emerges is that in higher education, everyone participates in institutional research in some way. Therefore, in IR practice, one will find great diversity—a diverse group that does it, what they think about it, and how they came to the IR world. Inside this text, one will find thinking on IR theory and practice, IR informatics and statistics, higher education curriculum and instruction, and of course, assessment. Even more important, the topics encountered are presented as cases. In most instances, scholars writing the cases were intimately involved in these experiences. The aim of the cases is not generalizable truth, but truths, nonetheless, that one can take from someone else's description of their experience. These cases are not formal, anthropological cases either. However, the reader will find that IR cultural norms do emerge, along with the values, attitudes, and motives of the writers. In all cases, the reader will find the makings of a culture, a culture that dedicated to improving educational

experiences for students and continually increasing the effectiveness of higher education. One purpose of this book, then, is to extend the scholarship on IR. To that end, this book best suits the IR practitioner in the field, the faculty member or mid-level administrator in the midst of a program assessment effort, and the graduate student getting prepared for life and work in higher education.

Unlike more specific books on IR, a casebook has the additional power of introducing the IR to novices from the standpoint of people who practice and think about it. By definition, IR takes a data-driven view of the higher education enterprise. However, what this means is as diverse as the situations people find themselves. For example, to an information systems person, the meaning of the word "data" can be very different from the English professor's idea of data. Another aim of *Cases on Institutional Research* is to introduce students of higher education and practitioners to the circumstances that require IR knowledge and skill. The reader will find that that there are a multitude of voices and approaches. This book is many encounters of that world that should increase the knowledge, skill, and awareness of effective IR practice. In fact, many of the cases provide examples of higher education problem-solving that one can use immediately.

Finally, this book presents cases on managing change in higher education. The greatest contribution of cases came from folks who were involved in assessment of student learning. Even several cases not directly involved in assessment possess some tangential relationship to the idea. In today's higher education, regional accrediting bodies and higher education coordinating boards drive much of the assessment. The underlying issue is accountability, especially accountability designed to help higher education institutions remain effective and continuously improve. Outside agents rarely bring about the required change. Ultimately, it is being accountable to students and to others within an organization that brings about change for the better. In fact, accountability to others within the organization requires teamwork, and teamwork requires openness, transparency, and clarity. Additionally, one cannot delve into accountability without some considerable commitment to outcomes.

## Organization of the Book

To that end, the book has five sections. Section 1 is called IR theory and practice. This section deals with institutional research as a profession, including cases that discuss how one should think about IR and implement good IR practice. Section 2 focuses on IR informatics and statistical practice. "IR informatics" is actually a new term that captures heavy role of increasing complex computer and human interactions that are at the center of today's IR practice. Section 3, called higher education curriculum and instruction, advances ideas through case experience about developing and understanding the development of higher education courses and culture—particularly with student learning as a focus. Higher education program assessments, Section 4, examines higher education curriculum from an outcomes perspective, with many topics that focus on diversity, a long emerging topic in higher education that may be nearing new levels of maturity. Finally, Section 5 provides examples of whole university-wide or college-wide assessment systems. Over half of the chapters explore assessment to some degree. Clearly, assessment is a game-changer in higher education.

Each chapter of the book has a standard format that includes the following:

• Title
• Author
• Abstract

- Background
- Setting the Stage
- Case description
- Current challenges facing the organization
- References
- Key terms and definitions

Even with this standard format, the reader will find the chapters to be as unique as the writers who have contributed their work. Many authors have added questions for the reader. Some chapters are long and deep explorations with plenty of background information, while others are short and to the point. While each of the chapters present knowledge on what to and what not to do, some chapters describe actual processes, so they are written from that perspective. The authors come from around the United States and from one international locale. I can safely say that my interest in and knowledge of the great diversity of IR increased immensely while developing this text. Not all of the contributors have terminal degrees, as is common in IR. Nevertheless, all of the contributors help expand the boundaries and rich diversity of effective IR practice. The reader will find the recounting of using enterprise resource planning systems, to using geospatial information systems, and even a discussion of moral codes and their impact on institutional culture—all of this is within the purview of IR. There are even elements of the autobiographical in a case or two. At the end of the day, IR practitioners use everything at their disposal to solve problems. To make the most of the text, I suggest that you compare and contrast your own ideas and experiences to those in the text. Consider how the conclusions in the cases compare with your notions of effective IR. It is in this comparison and contrast that you will find the way to navigate your own trek through the many problems and opportunities for growth that IR presents.