

Starting an Institutional Research Function at Your School

What An Independent School Needs to Know

This piece explores the role of an institutional researcher at independent schools, including why the role is a critical one, how schools can build the function over time, what skill sets to look for when hiring the right institutional researcher, and examples of the types of projects people in this role have undertaken. Findings are based on semi-structured interviews with eight institutional researchers at independent schools around the country as well as an artifact analysis of job descriptions for the role, presentations given by institutional researchers at national conferences, and a review of the secondary research on the history and function of the institutional research department in higher education.

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The term “institutional research” has become more widespread in recent years in K-12 education, particularly in independent schools. A movement towards hiring an institutional researcher to support the school is catching on, and a small but growing number of independent schools around the country have either hired for the role in recent years or have a faculty member taking on some or all of the institutional research capabilities.

The idea of institutional research (IR) was first popularized in higher education in the 1950's, and was originally meant to serve as the mechanism by which a college or university could centralize their compilation, analysis and reporting of data.¹ Today, the IR department at most colleges and universities “embraces data collection and analytical strategies in support of decision making at the institution.”² At its core and when done successfully, the role is meant to be both operational as well as strategic: data collection and analysis can only be purposeful when done in the larger context of supporting a school's overall vision and mission.

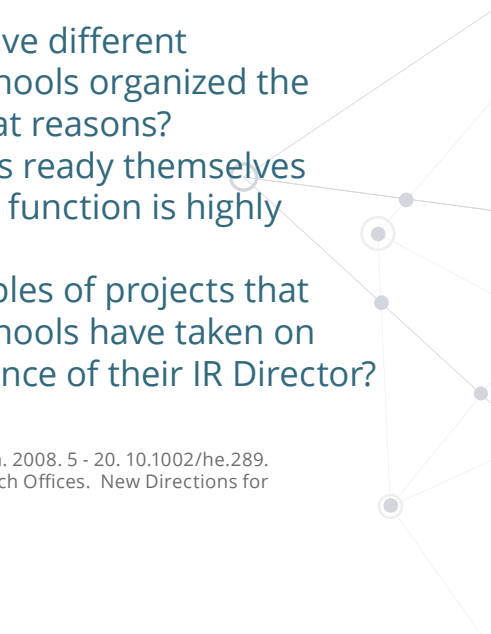
Over the past few months, EXPLO Elevate has been interviewing institutional researchers at independent schools across the country as well as analyzing key documents related to the function, including job descriptions, presentations by those in the IR role at schools, and reviewing secondary research on the evolution of the field of institutional research.

In this brief, we share findings from interviews that seek to answer the following questions:

1. What value does the IR role and/or function provide to independent schools?
2. In what ways have different independent schools organized the role and for what reasons?
3. How can schools ready themselves to ensure the IR function is highly effective?
4. What are examples of projects that independent schools have taken on under the guidance of their IR Director?

¹ Volkwein, J.. (2008). The Foundations and Evolution of Institutional Research. *New Directions for Higher Education*. 2008. 5 - 20. 10.1002/he.289.

² Middaugh, M.F. (1990). “The Nature and Scope of Institutional Research,” *Organizing Effective Institutional Research Offices*. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, no. 66. San Francisco Jossey-Bass.



About the author

Sudipti Kumar is a researcher with over 15 years of experience in education. She taught both high school and fifth grade in public schools located in Brooklyn, NY and in Boston, MA. Her research background includes in-depth studies on human capital policies affecting teachers in large urban school districts, promising practices in teacher preparation including in-depth research on teacher residency models, and data-informed practices in education. Sudipti has experience in both quantitative and qualitative research methods, with a specific interest in qualitative semi-structured studies that focus on understanding the human experience as it relates to the area of interest.

Why is the IR function an important one to consider for independent schools?

For independent schools, the rationale to consider investing in an institutional research function may differ from the decision-making process a college, university, or public school district may go through. In the latter, there are specific accountability mandates that require these institutions to track and report certain data, including graduation rates, attrition, and student demographics. While arguments can be made (and have been!) that these institutions do not move beyond “accountability and compliance requirements” to true reflection on what the data actually means for the institution, there is a relevance and importance to the act of data collection, analysis, and sharing of data that is fundamental to the system itself.

Similar requirements are not often present at an independent school. As one institutional researcher mentioned during an interview, “independent schools

have not had to think much about satisfying external constituencies in the same way [as public institutions]. Depending on where the school is in terms of concerns around future viability, the reasoning for hiring for this role may be very different, and also may influence the type of work the person takes on.”

So, why then is the institutional research role at the independent school key? Conversations with those who are in this role as well as research on the field more broadly unearthed a multitude of reasons as to why this is a needed position, particularly in today’s context where data-informed decision making has cemented itself as part of the lexicon in K-12 education.

Key reasons that highlight the critical nature of this role:

1. Provides an opportunity to share evidence of success.

Projects or studies that the institutional researcher takes on can provide concrete evidence that the school is doing good work that is core to their mission and vision. These findings can in turn be used to help tell a story about the school to key stakeholders and reinforce why students attend the school in the first place. One example was shared by Rachel Gorsky, Director of Institutional Research at the Gilman School in Baltimore, Maryland: “Gilman has great teachers. A way to share that is through the data and evidence, so this provides a compelling reason to undertake a project at the school around teacher evaluation”.

2. Supports the school in driving institutional improvement.

The IR function will likely unearth findings that point to a need to enact changes in one or more key areas. Faculty, student, and alumni engagement in the process of data-informed decision making - including being actively part of the data gathering process as well as in understanding what the data means - can be a key driver for institutional improvement because there is wide-scale buy-in across those groups who can actually enact change. Studies have shown that teachers often do not feel part of the research or data culture at their schools or districts; in situations where there is greater transparency and support on the part of administrators, there is a greater likelihood that teachers will not only participate, but also use the findings.³

3. Allows for more specific initiatives that are data-based.

In the absence of data, decisions to make changes may be based on “a sense people have” or a general push in a certain direction from a few of the more talkative members of faculty. It can also be hard to know what exactly the “thing is” people should do if there is a problem at the school. Sarah Enterline, Institutional Researcher at St. Mark’s School in Southborough, Massachusetts, provided a compelling example: anecdotes around students of color at a school feeling disenfranchised or experiencing a tough time adjusting may provide little insight to the school as to whether this is actually true and if so, what the appropriate path forward might be. However, survey results that specifically point to Latinx students struggling within the broader school community could result in a clearer answer on the “what”, which could then lead to the creation of an affinity group specifically for this population.

4. Showcases the school’s priorities and values.

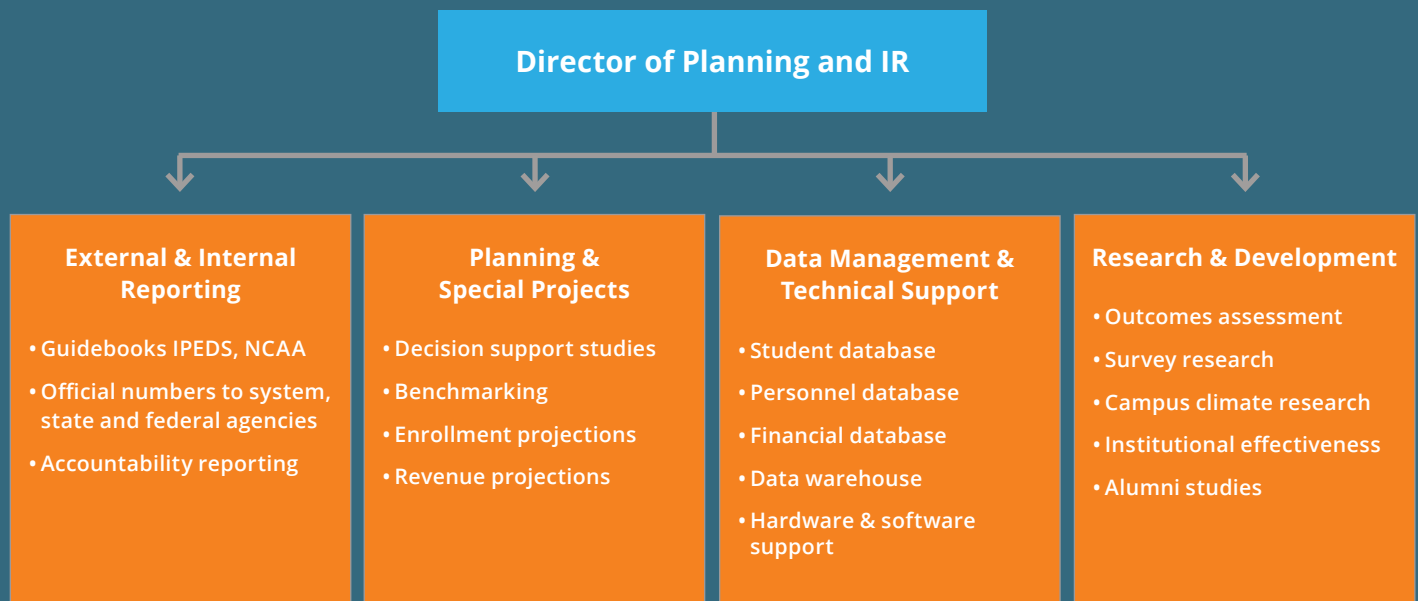
When a school takes the initiative to staff an office focused on diversity, equity and inclusion and/or technology, they are taking (at the very least) a first step towards indicating the importance of that area for the school to realize its mission and vision. Similarly, filling an IR role at the school can speak to the value the school places on using data and research.

As a signal of the role’s growing importance in independent schools, in early 2021 the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) added “Institutional Researcher” as a new searchable category on their [Career Center](#).

³ Joram, Elana & Gabriele, Anthony & Walton, Katherine. (2019). What influences teachers’ “buy-in” of research? Teachers’ beliefs about the applicability of educational research to their practice *. Teaching and Teacher Education. 88. 10.1016/j.tate.2019.102980.

What does the IR role entail?

In higher education, particularly at larger institutions (but even smaller liberal arts colleges), there is often a team of people that comprise the IR function. The below chart provides an example of the core functions of institutional research in higher education.⁴



An overview of the IR team functions, comprising at least 3-4 full or part-time employees at a higher education institution.

Clearly, the institutional research team has myriad responsibilities, all of which are critical to the effective functioning of an organization that prioritizes the collection and use of data.

At independent schools, there is likely only one person who is managing the entirety of these responsibilities, which is very different from a team of people in higher education, each with a unique skill set and background that prepares them to be effective at that role. Rarely, an independent school may have a small team in place.

Interviews with institutional researchers at various independent schools indicated that a challenge is clearly the disparate roles and responsibilities that usually fall to only one person. As one institutional researcher named, "I am not used to running the statistical regressions. When I did this in my prior roles [in higher ed], I had a person on my team who managed

that part of the work. I can do it, but I am slower at it than I would like and it takes time away from the other critical parts of my job."

Even if one person has all the skills that would normally sit across a team of people in an IR department, he or she can only do so much given overall capacity and time constraints. Thus, the school gaining some clarity around what they want to focus on is a critical first step toward hiring the right person. As Libby Barlow, Institutional Researcher at St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire, named, a larger school with significant data and numbers of students may be looking for an institutional researcher who has the ability to crunch numbers and run statistical analyses easily. Other schools with smaller numbers of students who may be unable to analyze data sets due to small sample sizes may require someone who will focus more heavily on qualitative studies.

⁴Volkwein, J.. (2008). The Foundations and Evolution of Institutional Research. *New Directions for Higher Education*. 2008. 5 - 20. 10.1002/he.289.

Given that the role is fairly new in the K-12 independent school world and based on a specific skill set that those who are in the position of hiring may not have, it can also behoove the school to let the person hired guide the direction of the office based on their unique background and experience. When Sarah Enterline was hired into the IR role at St. Mark's School, she was clear with the school that she was not going to focus only on data collection and management, and that this must be a strategic position with a direct line to leadership. In that way, Sarah helped craft her position during the interview

process. In fact, a key quality to look for during interviews may be a person who can articulate a focus for the role that mirrors and perhaps even moves beyond what the school was initially considering.

In a presentation Sarah recently gave at the Northeast Association for Institutional Research conference, she articulated that for the IR role to be truly impactful, it should cut across all of the key areas of the independent school's work.

The chart below outlines the different aspects that an IR person at an independent school can focus on, as well as examples of projects in these areas.

Area	Types of Projects
Academics and Faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student, teacher, family satisfaction surveys • Curriculum evaluation • Faculty culture and workload assessment • STEM (or another initiative) program evaluation • Residential life assessment • Analysis of grades, participation in honors courses, college applications, across race and ethnicity
Admissions and Advancement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alumni surveys • Geo-demographic market analysis • Domestic boarder initiative • Event evaluations
Student Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional climate and inclusion assessment • Entry and exit interviews • Survey of student engagement • Intercultural and global skills assessment
Strategic Initiatives and Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NEASC Accreditation • Data governance audit • Assessment of inclusivity and multiculturalism • Holistic education • Place-based/experiential education

A sample of projects an Institutional Researcher and an independent school may be responsible for, based on a presentation given by Sarah Enterline, Director of Institutional Research at St. Mark's School and adapted using additional interview data.

How is the IR role structured at different independent schools?

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to how the IR function is fulfilled at independent schools. Many schools have hired a full-time institutional researcher on the team; however, there are quite a few schools who have a part-time position filled by someone who is currently in the organization and who has both the skill set and interest. In yet other schools, the role is filled through an ad-hoc committee that comes together as needed and rotates membership. A fourth option for schools is to outsource the IR function to another organization that provides external support when required.



Below we share some different examples of what the IR function can look like as well as some considerations for each model that expand upon what is articulated in the figure above.

Full-time Institutional Researcher

Many independent schools that were interviewed for this piece, including St. Mark's, St. Paul's, Gilman, and Punahou, have a full-time institutional researcher as part of the faculty.

Libby Barlow (St. Paul's School) had considerable experience in higher-education institutional research roles both at private and public institutions prior to joining the school. She names that it is critical for schools to think about their "readiness" when they look to hire a full-time person to fill an IR function.

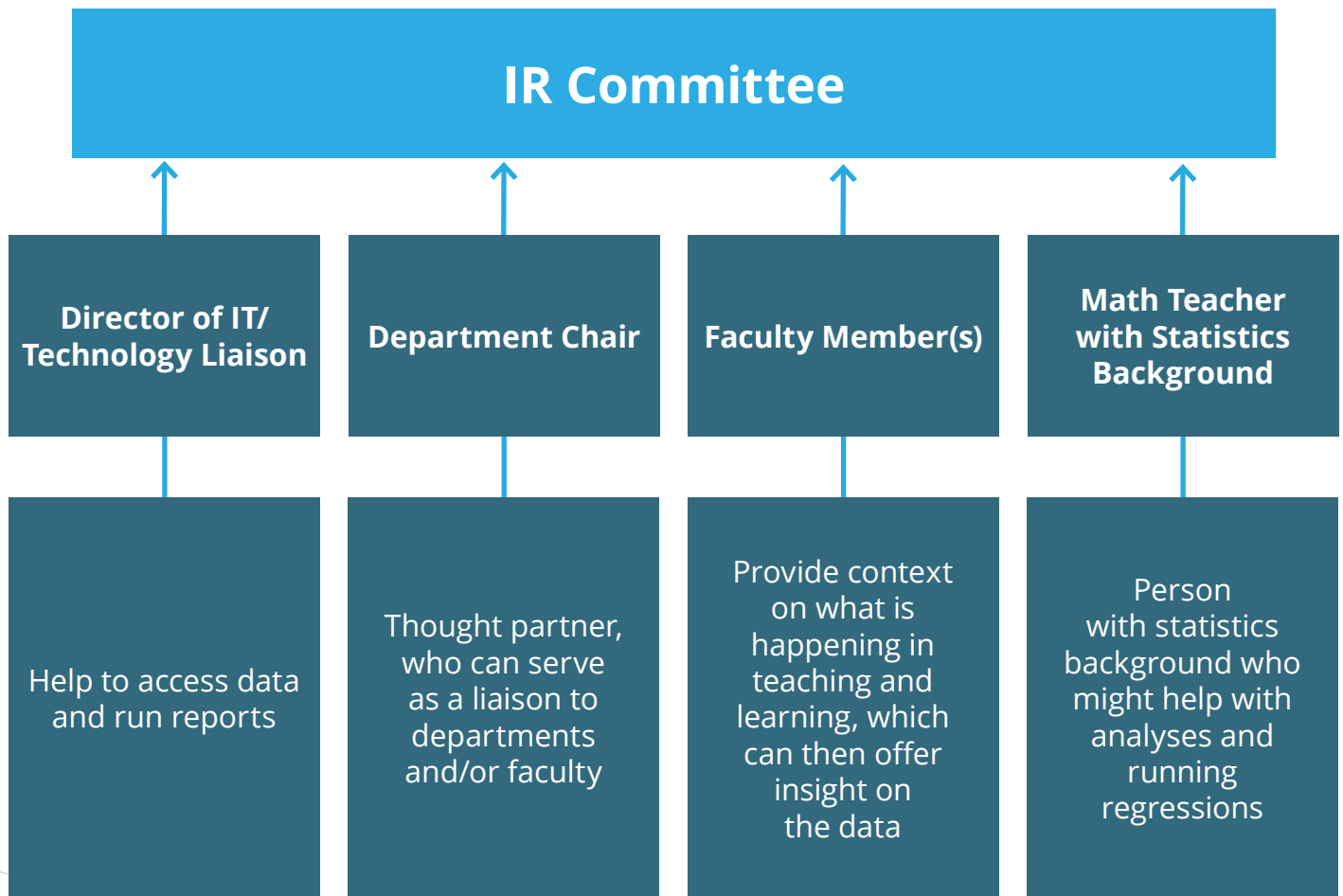
Readiness could be described as the ability to answer the following questions:

1. Why are you hiring an IR? What questions about your school do you want answered?
2. What will be this person's most significant responsibilities and mandate?
3. Is the school well-positioned (ready) to have this person embark on the work? What evidence of readiness do you have?
4. What are some of the projects you want this person to work on in the first year in the role?

Rachel Gorsky (Gilman School) noted that when she was hired in 2018, the school had already been asking "data-minded" questions and thus they were well-positioned to support the type of work she was embarking on. She was specifically hired to work closely with the student outcomes sub-committee of the Board, who were very interested in looking at longitudinal data and themes across the entire student body as well as sub-groups of students. In Rachel's role, she reports to both the Director of Technology and the Assistant Head of School.

An ideal situation, named by some of the people interviewed, is for the IR person to have a formal or informal committee at the school that they can work with, who would in some ways mimic the different roles a team would play in higher ed. Below is an example of the different types of people who may be on that committee in addition to the institutional researcher, and the ways in which they can each support the IR work.

Institutional Research Committee



The above example assumes an IR project focused on teaching and learning. If the IR project is focused not on curriculum but on admissions or another area of the school, then the committee members may differ.

Part-Time Institutional Researcher

At Maret School in Washington D.C., Eric Heilman serves as the Director of Institutional Research in a half-time role while also maintaining a reduced teaching load. Eric first started at the school as a math teacher and taught statistics. After a few years, the Board recommended that the school become more data-focused. The school then leveraged Eric's skills and created the position he is in now. In his first year, he taught a full course load in addition to fulfilling the IR role, which was clearly a significant amount of work for one person to take on.

Over time, the school has reduced his course load so that he can both teach as well as prioritize this critical work.

Anecdotally, interviewees discussed how other independent schools have a person in the registrar's office or someone who runs library services who is also interested in data and analytics and has naturally fallen into the role, even if it is in a somewhat limited capacity.

There are some pros and cons to this approach. It allows the school to get used to an IR function, and to have someone who is already in the organization and knows the school and faculty well take on the responsibilities, rather than someone who is brand new. It also provides a growth opportunity for the right person - someone who has the skill set but isn't yet using it in the way they would like to.

The cons are that it can be a challenge for a person to effectively split their role into two very different functions. As mentioned above, many higher-ed departments have entire teams devoted to this work. A half-time staff person may not allow the school to truly give the time and attention to this type of critical work unless they are as motivated as Eric is. Also, if they are currently a teacher that is reporting to a department chair (for example), then avenues need to be created to ensure the information gets to key decision makers in the organization.

Rotating Ad Hoc Team

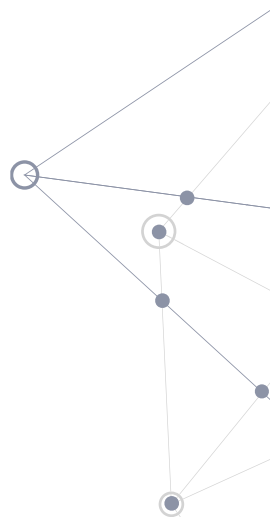
An interesting model shared by interviewees is that of San Francisco University High School.⁵ In their approach, they do not have a full or part-time IR role at the school. Instead, they have a rotating team of faculty that come together to explore a specific question in an ad hoc fashion. These people also disband as needed, and a new group will come together as research questions arise for the school.

There are some significant benefits to this structure, including:

- The group will include people who are deeply invested in the issue at hand
- The members may change based on the research question being asked
- Rotating membership increases the base of people who know about and are engaged in the overall work of research
- No one group of people at the school is overly burdened

However, if there is no singular person leading the work at the school, it can be difficult to manage an organic process unless it is truly ingrained in the fabric and culture of the school. As such, a school seeking to replicate such a model may want to retain one to two people as committee chairs who remain permanently in the group to provide continuity and some general structure to the group.

⁵ EXPLO Elevate did not have the opportunity to directly interview staff from San Francisco University High School.



Outsourcing the IR Function

Some schools seek to outsource the IR function to an organization or person who can provide guidance and insight in this space. This structure makes sense when the school does not yet have expertise in this area, and can thus first extend the school's overall capacity with external resources. Prior to joining her current role at St. Mark's School, Sarah Enterline consulted with both private and public schools and supported their institutional research efforts.

It is important to note that these choices do not have to be mutually exclusive; it's possible that the school starts out with a part-time IR person who then moves to full-time and/or that the work begins via an outsourced IR team external to the school and then the school chooses to invest in the role internally. More on these options will be discussed in the section around starting an IR function at your school.



Reporting Structure

In conversations with institutional researchers, there was significant discussion on where the role should “sit” in order to be most effective. Universally, it was named that if the position doesn’t report directly to key leadership, such as the head or assistant head of school, he or she should have the ear of that person and be able to set up a meeting with him or her pretty quickly. In fact, the word “sponsorship” was used - in that this person would be sponsored by leadership in a way that shows the school is deeply invested in this work.

Before the person is hired into the organization, the school should consider whether this is an administrative team role or a staff role. If it is a staff role, there may be a greater opportunity to be part of faculty conversations and have a pulse on what is happening “on the ground” in the school. However, it may be more difficult to bring the issues up to administration in a timely manner unless the pathway for those conversations is clear and well-defined.

The role of the Board of Trustees also came up during interviews as a group to consider both from a stakeholder perspective as well as because they can be instrumental in driving the work forward. Many independent schools hear from Board members that the school should become more data-informed or data-driven and this may in fact be, at least in part, guiding the decision to hire for a role like this. Soliciting input from the trustees may be a helpful first step for a school who wants to hire for the role but isn’t sure what questions to ask. Leadership can start by asking: What does the Board want to know? Why?

Hiring an Institutional Researcher

If a school goes the route of hiring an institutional researcher or is looking for someone on the team who can take on the role in a part-time capacity, the necessary skills somewhat depend on the type of role that the person will be filling. Will this person be taking on more qualitative research studies that involve running focus groups with students and faculty members and analyzing themes, or will they be looking at survey data or other inputted data and be able to develop a statistical analysis? It is also highly probable and possible that the school is looking for someone who can do both with ease.

Regardless of the specific types of research projects the school wants the person to manage, key skills aggregated through conversations with institutional researchers that cut across types of projects include:

- Ability to understand and synthesize data
- Fluency in translating data to layperson terms
- High EQ - the ability to build rapport with faculty
- Sees big picture/able to think about key questions
- Has an understanding of K-12 education

Prior roles for people who come into this function at the independent school level vary. Libby Barlow came to St. Paul’s with extensive experience working in IR at both the University of Houston and Syracuse University. Sarah Enterline also worked for a significant period of time at Boston College and held high-level positions at other consulting firms prior to joining St. Mark’s giving her an understanding of the needs of both public and private K-12 schools. Rachel, from Gilman, comes to the work directly out of her masters program where she received a Masters in the Sociology of Education and focused heavily on quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Job descriptions may include the following components, based on examples from a sampling of independent school IR job description reviewed:

IR JOB REQUIREMENTS

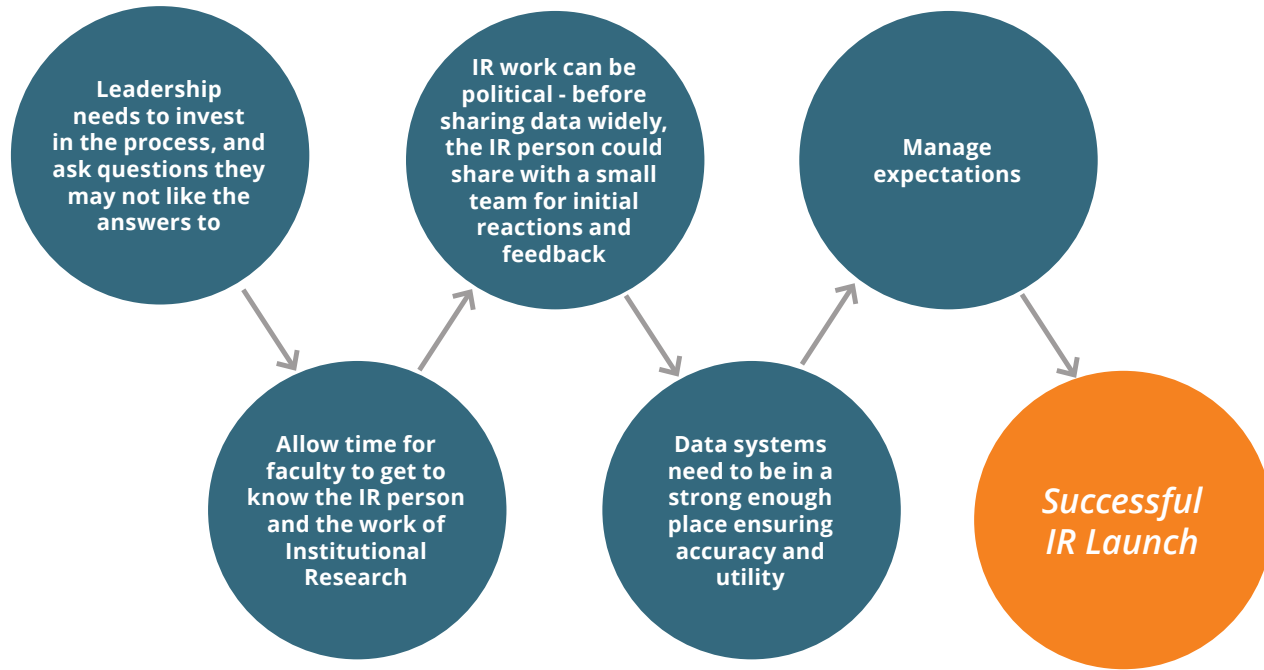
- A requirement for either Masters or PhD level candidates
- 7-10 years of experience conducting either qualitative or quantitative research (or both)
- Strong facilitation and presentation skills
- Experience and background in applied research and program evaluation
- Knowledge of K-12 education and students (ideally through prior work experience in this environment)
- Self-starter who can work independently
- Highly collaborative and can communicate effectively across a wide variety of stakeholder groups
- High knowledge of research methodologies (both quantitative and qualitative)

A critical part of the IR role, often not mentioned in job descriptions but named by the institutional researchers interviewed in this piece, is someone who truly understands that this profession is guided by a code of ethics. Sarah Enterline named that “while it might be cliché, but just like a doctor or lawyer is guided by a certain set of responsibilities, so too is the institutional researcher.” The American Institutes for Research (AIR) has a clearly laid out Code of Conduct. While it is specific to the staff of that organization, it is a helpful resource for schools to ensure their IR person is familiar with and that he or she espouses the values laid out within.

Additional considerations that become important, particularly if the school chooses to hire a person full-time:

1. Developing a **job description** that speaks to the specific needs of the school. If the role will likely be more qualitative rather than quantitative, clearly define that in the job description specifications.
2. During the **interview process**, consider how the person demonstrates not only the skills laid out in the job description, but also has an innate understanding of the work of an institutional researcher. Are they able to pick up on what the work will look like and guide the conversation through their knowledge on the topic?
3. Given that the person hired will likely have a highly technical skill set, the **salary** to hire someone with the necessary background may need to be apart from the traditional payscale for faculty members at an independent school. In addition, a few of the IR Directors interviewed for this piece named that hiring someone who is entry level may be a “huge risk.” Someone who knows what they are doing and who is either mid or late-career will also require a larger budget.
4. Prior to hiring, consider key logistical areas, including:
 - a. Policies around data access: while not all institutional researchers have direct access to data, it makes their job considerably easier if they can go into systems themselves as needed.
 - b. Software and hardware needs: People hired into this role will likely require specific software and additional hardware that the school should be ready to invest in. This may mean a license to a data visualization software like Tableau, or a second (or even third) computer monitor for the person so they can manage looking at data easily.
 - c. Professional development: Traditional PD that the school offers may not meet the needs of the IR person. Consider the budget they may need to stay up to speed on maintaining their professional needs.
5. Ensure that the person, when hired, has ample time to listen and engage with faculty before starting the work. Building rapport and relationship building was articulated over and over again during interviews as critical to the success of the institutional researcher. In fact, in year one in the job, the person may only be focused on relationship building and some smaller data projects. It may take this person until year two or three to really start to take on some of the bigger questions the school is grappling with or wants answered.

Setting Up the IR Role for Success



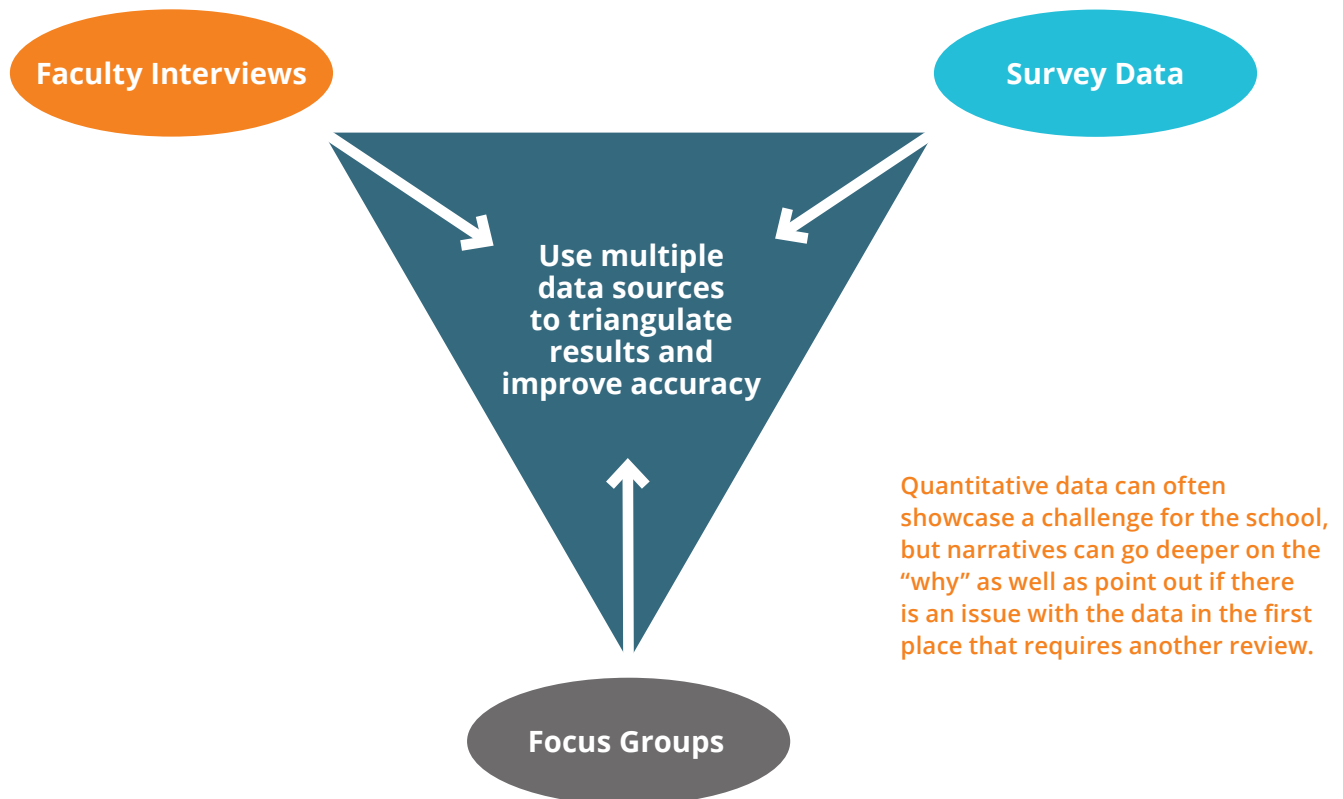
In order for the role to be truly successful, interviewees noted the following:

- Leadership needs to be invested in the process, and to be willing to ask questions they may not like the answers to. As noted earlier, interviewees specifically used the term “sponsorship” to reference the type of investment leadership should have in the person who is doing this work.
- Faculty need time to become acclimated to the person who is in this role as well as the work of an IR, particularly if the school is not starting from a data-informed place generally. This will take time and effort on the part of both the IR person as well as leadership in normalizing the use of data across the school.
- The role is sometimes a political one - before sharing data widely, the IR person may need to share it with a small team and gain their input and perspective so that the larger rollout of data that may point to a troubling trend can be met with less defensiveness.
- Data systems need to be in a strong enough place where they can be utilized, and/or the person taking on the role needs to take on the responsibility of ensuring the data sources are accurate and can support one another.
- Manage expectations. Schools may not be able to look at longitudinal data immediately. This is particularly true if there hasn't been appropriate data collection for a long period of time and the IR person has to start by putting the systems in place so that longitudinal data can be collected and analyzed with confidence.

The importance of data systems

[In a recent NAIS article](#), Mariel Triggs, former Institutional Researcher at Lick Wilmerding High School in California, shares the importance of starting with a “data inventory.” In fact, aligning data sources may be much of the initial work of an institutional researcher. Interviewees for this piece were unanimous that without accurate and clean data systems that spoke to each other coherently, the role was a difficult one and an uphill battle to say the least.

Data and Equity



It is worth noting for schools who are looking to make better data-based decisions data is in fact, not neutral. Collection mechanisms, the way the data are analyzed and “cut,” and discussions around data are all shaped by the people who are deciding what data is important and how it should be used at the school. Thus, bias can easily enter into the process, albeit unintentionally.

To ensure that decisions aren’t made without context and just by looking at “numbers,” schools should disaggregate data whenever possible by race, gender, and other factors

as they relate to the school’s definitions of diversity, equity and inclusion. A deeper dive across these lines can help the school truly understand what is happening; aggregated data may be masking challenges particular sub-groups at the school are facing. Another promising practice, shared by the researchers interviewed for this piece, is to use multiple data sources to triangulate results and therefore improve accuracy—for example this may mean utilizing both survey data alongside focus groups, as well as interviews with faculty—to truly gain an accurate picture of what is going on.

Growing your school's IR capability: Two Case Studies

A school's IR capability is not something that can necessarily be "turned on" overnight, nor should it be. In fact, an approach that nurtures and grows the function over time may allow for this type of work to better become part of the culture and ethos of the school.

Below we share two case studies, based on two very different types of schools, and how they evolved over time in their IR function. These studies represent a composite of various schools, and present some examples for how schools could think about the evolution of this work over time.

Case Study 1 K-8 "Small" School

ABC Academy is a small independent K-8 school in Western Massachusetts with approximately 100 students enrolled across the school in any given year. A few years ago, the school revised its strategic plan and The Board of Trustees had some key questions, specifically around the experiences of students once they moved on from ABC to a secondary school of choice—how did they decide which school to attend? How easy or hard was the transition? How are they doing academically and socially at the new school?

Leadership at ABC realized that while they had data on the schools students attended upon leaving them, it was only for tracking and reporting purposes; while they anecdotally heard from students on how they were doing, they did not have any real insights that could inform their school's goals in ensuring an effective transition from their school to the secondary school space.

Given the small size of the school and the desire for contextual information, a Board member recommended the school consider embarking on a set of interviews and focus groups with alumni of the school across different types of high schools they attended.

The school wasn't sure how to initially approach this work, so they hired a consultant to support the effort.

The consultant helped leadership to identify and categorize secondary schools students attended into sub-groups, and then organize the focus groups with alumni, including developing a list of the most helpful questions to ask, conducting the interviews, and gathering the data for themes. Based on the project, recommendations were made on potential curricular improvements and specific ways to help students prepare for the transition from ABC to another school.

During this process, it became clear that some faculty were quite interested in exploring these types of research questions and leading the charge, and also had some experience in qualitative research methods. The school is working with one faculty member to reduce her teaching load for the upcoming school year so that she can explore pertinent research questions using qualitative research methods.

Case Study 2 9-12 "Large" School

XYZ Prep is a larger independent 9-12 boarding school in the Midwest with approximately 750 students, 90% of whom are boarding and 10% of whom are local day students. Last year, a new Head of School was hired, one who is extremely focused on making "data-informed" decisions. The Head has suggested that the school look into hiring an institutional researcher full-time, as his prior school had one on staff, but he doesn't want to rush the process.

First, he wants to better understand the school's data systems, the types of questions they want to have answered, and what exactly they need in an IR role. To do this, the Head assembles a small team of people across the school who can help him think through these components: the Director of Information Systems, a math teacher who teaches Calculus and Statistics, and a Department Chair who has been at the school for some years and often asks probing questions about the school's need for data to inform the future.

The group dives deeply into the data the school has on hand, how the systems already speak to one another and ways in which they should speak to each other, and develops a core set of research questions they want to explore. The Director of Information Systems begins

to organize data systems to better work together, and the Head works with the committee to develop a job description for a full-time IR person. In the interim, the math teacher involved in designing key research questions has taken on a project of interest to her around the participation of students in extracurricular activities, with an eye towards understanding whether students across racial and ethnic groups are fully involved with non-academic activities the school has to offer. An ability to analyze the data using a variety of quantitative methods will be a critical component of the work.

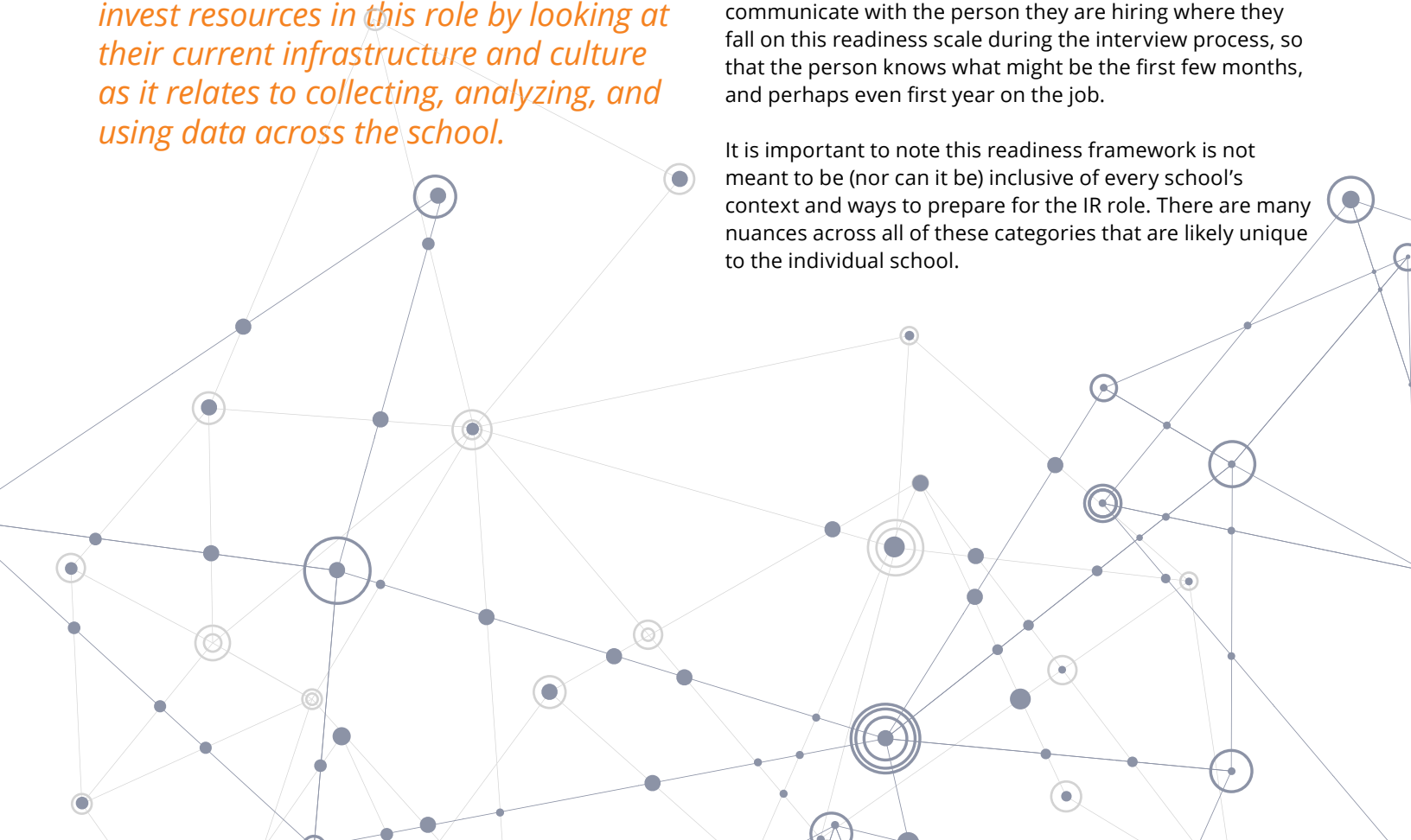
In these case studies, the approach taken varies based on school size, the impetus for the shift to become more focused on institutional research at the school, and the capacity and budget to hire for the work. However, in both narratives the work is evolving and maturing over time.

IR Readiness Framework

Data from interviews resoundingly confirmed a hypothesis that EXPLO Elevate had been considering for some time: before a school can embark on the important work of developing a fully-formed institutional research function, it is critical they evaluate their readiness to invest resources in this role by looking at their current infrastructure and culture as it relates to collecting, analyzing, and using data across the school.

On the following two pages (18 and 19), we share a framework by which a school can assess their readiness, aligned to the key themes that came up during conversations with those currently in the role. It is important to note that it is possible for a school to hire an IR person to help move them from level one to level five, or that the school could embark on the work themselves (perhaps in partnership with a consultant) to prepare for an effective onboarding when a full-time IR person is hired. If it is the former, the school should still be able to communicate with the person they are hiring where they fall on this readiness scale during the interview process, so that the person knows what might be the first few months, and perhaps even first year on the job.

It is important to note this readiness framework is not meant to be (nor can it be) inclusive of every school's context and ways to prepare for the IR role. There are many nuances across all of these categories that are likely unique to the individual school.



Readiness Assessment

CATEGORY	READINESS LEVEL 1 ————— 3 —————> 5		
Alignment between Board and School Leadership	Data-based decision making is pushed by the Board but is not a shared belief within school leadership (Head, Assistant Head), and thus there is some active or subtle resistance.	While school leaders may not be fully bought in to data-based decision making (in contrast to the Board), there is a "sponsor" (e.g. the person who manages an IR function) who has institutional capital and cares deeply about this line of work.	Leadership and the Board are in alignment to the importance of data and generate, or are open to, thoughtful research questions that promote school-wide improvement and interrogating the status quo.
Leadership Support of a Data Culture	Leadership (Head, Assistant Head) has some sense that data can inform school-wide improvement, but does not promote a culture of data across the school.	Leadership has considered some research questions related to basic data-based questions around enrollment and attrition, but has not considered more complex research questions.	Leadership recognizes the importance of data-informed decision-making and promotes a data-based culture across the school.
Data Systems + Infrastructure	Some data exists, but it is disorganized and disjointed. Systems do not speak to one another and data collection is messy - data integrity principles are not followed to ensure data is valid and able to use.	Data is usable, but only for basic research questions that ask "how much, how many, etc." Questions that are more thoughtful and require an in-depth data analysis using multiple data sources cannot be answered due to the current state of the systems themselves.	Data collection systems are in place - e.g. data is housed in databases, collected systematically, and there is a point person managing the data systems across the school. Different types of databases are able to speak to one another to generate reports. Data integrity is important, and data is validated to determine accuracy which allow for trust in the systems themselves.
Data Access	There are only 1-2 people across the school who have access to the data systems and there are significant bottlenecks to gaining access, if desired for running any type of analysis.	The people who need access to data and/or reports are able to obtain it, however it is not a streamlined process that can be followed every time a report is needed.	There is an ongoing, symbiotic relationship where those who manage the systems and those who analyze it, and thus they are able to work in a partnership.

CATEGORY	READINESS LEVEL 1 ————— 3 —————> 5		
Data Culture Across the School	Faculty recognize that data exists, but do not buy-in to the use of it and do not necessarily understand what data reports are showing/signifying.	Some faculty are open to using data as a way to drive improvement, and also understand how to use it.	Faculty are not suspicious of data as a means to drive improvement. Faculty are trained to understand data and reports at a baseline level. Faculty are interested in using data, via surveys and through analyses, to better understand their students.
Budget + Planning	There are no funds available to allocate resources to an IR function at the school and the school has not considered the importance of hiring for either a full or part-time IR function.	There is some budgetary commitment to building out an IR function, but the school is unclear as to what direction to go and how to move along the path (e.g. whether they should hire someone or not, what line items the budget should include).	There is a budget that is ample enough to support the institutional research based work at the school that includes not only the capacity to pay someone, but also additional expenses such as software purchases and professional development needs. The school has thought about a strategy to fulfill the institutional research role in the long term, whether that is through internal capacity building or an external hire.
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)	Data that is collected is not considered as a way to better understand issues of diversity, equity and inclusion at the school. Data is siloed, and not shared proactively with those who manage the DEI work across the school.	Data is sometimes collected to better understand issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion at the school but those in charge don't always examine the biases that may exist in the systems themselves, and how that needs to play a part in the analysis and use of the data.	There is a recognition that data can both benefit and support efforts to promote diversity, equity and inclusion, and can also be inherently biased - both sides need to be considered when data is used. There is a belief that there should be a partnership between the work of an IR function and the work of the DEI office.

Examples of Projects



ST. PAUL'S SCHOOL

The types of projects institutional researchers work on is often based on the school's mission, vision and key strategic initiatives. For example, Libby Barlow discussed how the school recently distributed a student identity survey, because data around the race/ethnicity of students that they had on file was not as accurate and clean to use for decision making. This was a real challenge for the school because diversity, equity, and inclusion has become such a significant focus for the school, and it was critical to gather more accurate data in this space. Now that the survey is complete and the results are back, Libby's next step is to look at student grades across race/ethnicity to see whether grades (controlling for test scores) look different and whether and where any bias exists in the grading process.



At Maret, Eric Heilman has been developing a Student THRIVE index model in collaboration with other independent schools nationally. The model is a measurement system that provides a profile of how students experience various aspects of school life. It synthesizes and unifies data the school already collects and incorporates measures like student performance in academic progress, athletic participation, artistic work, community engagement, and physical/emotional health.



PUNAHOU

While in the role of Institutional Researcher for Punahou School in Hawaii, Denise Uehara analyzed alumni data to determine the transfer rates of graduates to a different college. She had heard people say anecdotally and often that graduates go away to college but do not always end up graduating. Based on her analysis, she found that most students did end up graduating but that many did transfer and graduate from their second choice college. This finding helped to solidify that there was a significant pattern of students transferring to certain colleges and universities that were not their first choice, but that college completion was actually quite high for Punahou graduates.



GILMAN

At Gilman, Rachel Gorsky has been spending quite a bit of time focusing on teacher evaluations and answering the question, "We have excellent teachers, but how do we prove it?" Through secondary research on what successful teacher evaluation models have and qualitative research via focus groups with faculty and administrators, she has built some models on what teachers want to be evaluated on. She is now working on implementing a multi-perspective model of teacher evaluation that includes self-reflection, peer, student, and admin data.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the institutional research function at independent schools may be fairly new but in schools where there has been a focus on this function, it has already proven itself to be an invaluable function. Schools who are interested in investing capacity in this role can start out slowly and build on the capability over time both in terms of staff commitment and the type of work the role is focused on. Though the vision should adapt and grow over time, school administrators should begin building this capacity by articulating a few key questions they would like to explore, based on input from stakeholders such as the Board, faculty, parents, students and more. Finally, models on how other independent schools have approached the function provide insight on best practices and potential pitfalls schools should consider as they establish a new IR function.



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