

Making Sense Of It All:
The Partnership Between Institutional Research and Presidential Decision-making in Higher
Education

By

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Abstract: This paper seeks to explore the various ways in which campus institutional research offices can support presidential leadership. The impact that information provided by an IR office on a range of institutional policy choices, strategic planning, administrative functions, and external relations are covered. The various uses to which institutional data may be put by presidents as they carry out their essential job functions are discussed, as well as the support the IR function provides in the management of meaning, also known as sense making. The possible influence of institutional research on executive decision-making and the development of governing ideas are also covered.

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Introduction

The American college presidency is cloaked in a dignified history and is today a position that holds many challenges as well as great promise. As higher education in the United States enters the 21st Century, a number of challenges and opportunities loom on the horizon for its leadership. The modern president is faced with an agenda that often includes:

- Meeting expanding public expectations
- Dealing with financial uncertainty
- Pressure to increase enrollment and student quality simultaneously
- The almost constant need to raise funds
- An expectation for elevated national rankings
- Producing winning athletic teams
- Effecting change without tension
- Demonstrating accountability

And the list goes on. In order to meet these challenges, campus chief executives and other senior decision makers bring a variety of “skill sets” to the table including learning to take greater advantage of information systems that support informed and intelligent leadership.

Just as the nature of presidential leadership has become more complex in recent years (Moore, 2001), so has the nature of the institutional research function on college campuses (Terenzini, 1993). Whether an institution of higher education is public or private, higher education has grown increasingly accountable to a variety of stakeholders, including but not limited to state and federal governments, governing boards, accrediting bodies, the private sector, alumni, donors, faculty, students, the media and other interest groups (Matier, Sidle & Hurst, 1995). This accountability has necessitated the systematic collection, storage, analysis, and dissemination of large amounts of data, which are intended to demonstrate institutional

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effectiveness and improve campus and system level decision-making.

The extent to which senior administrators make use of these data is dependent upon campus context, the capabilities of the IR operation, and the management style of the chief executive. It is our contention that presidents can more effectively convey institutional effectiveness and excellence, improve campus policy formulation, and enhance the strategic direction and position of the institution by taking full advantage of the growing resources made available by the IR function.

College presidents would be the first to agree that their responsibilities are myriad and complex. Moore (2001) has distilled these into six major areas; namely:

- Managing meaning or sense making
- Developing “governing ideas”
- Addressing wicked problems
- Managing resources
- Assessing institutional performance
- Advocating

Our premise is that the management of meaning holds a primacy among these other essential functions and is at the center of the president’s role, and radiates outward to influence not only the other essential functions, but many others as well. In all matters of significance to the institution and its stakeholders, presidents play a critical role in helping others to interpret reality, frame and reframe the issues, and to make sense out of constraints and events that confront them and the institution.

Utilizing Moore’s (2001) model of six presidential functions, this paper will describe those tasks and suggest ways in which institutional researchers and their work can help university

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presidents become more effective leaders. In many ways these tasks are not discrete categories, but overlap and reinforce one another in many ways. So too do the functions of institutional research. In attempting to demonstrate the relationships between the management of meaning and other important presidential functions, we have borrowed from the literature on process re-design to show how a modified process map can present these tasks and the actors involved in them (Sharp & McDermott, 2001). Figure 1 on page 24, readers will notice sense making (or the management of meaning) is the primary process engaged in by presidents of colleges and universities. It is this process through which the president and institutional researcher filter their various activities to assist the campus community in reaching its goals. Readers will see several examples of this as we proceed.

Furthermore, we have added here a 7th function to those listed above we call “celebration” or “celebratory leadership.” Even those with a cursory interaction with colleges and universities are familiar with the academic celebrations that occur on campus each year (i.e. commencement exercises or opening convocations). However, just as important in the life of the institution are other celebrations that mark the completion of capital campaigns, a department’s completion of a major research project, convocations honoring outstanding students, or the activities surrounding homecoming, the big game, or a major musical or dramatic production.

These celebrations, more than allowing the institution to publicize its achievements, are opportunities for the campus community to pause and rejoice over its hard work. Whether large or small, scheduled or impromptu, celebrations are an important aspect of the life of a community and provide ample opportunity to those involved to attach meaning to their work.

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The Literature

The American college presidency is, at the start of a new century, a demanding and complex role with enormous responsibilities. An institution's continued vitality is in the hands of its president. In considering the 6 essential functions of the college or university president as outlined by Moore (2001), we believe sense making, or the management of meaning, is the core task of the institutional leader. Ideally, this fundamental task is performed when each of the other functions is being carried out. For example, when addressing a wicked problem such as a precipitous decline in state financial support for public higher education, the president's "sense making" role is to:

- Identify the problem to focus the attention of various stakeholders, especially those on campus, on the challenge at hand.
- Define and discuss the problem in such a way that participants can clearly understand what is at stake.
- Provide the necessary information and insights that allow various stakeholders to agree on the nature of the problem, its causes and implications.
- Assist stakeholders to take responsibility for addressing the issue and to identify solutions that are consistent with institutional goals and values.

In the life of organizations, sense making or the management of meaning is essential for institutional and personal self-understanding (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Organizations need to have a clear understanding of their mission, critical functions, and purpose for existence. Members of the organization need to comprehend and internalize how their unique contributions further the

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aims of the whole. Community members also need to be prepared to assume appropriate responsibility for the institution's well being.

Organizations, like most human contrivances, do not exist in a vacuum. They are of the world as well as in it, and must respond to frequent changes in their internal and external environments if they are to survive. Institutions of higher education are no more immune from this phenomenon than are financial institutions, business and industry, or government agencies. However, few of these organizations can claim the complex activities, endless political intricacies, and far-flung outcomes as the academy. Making this point correctly, a university president when asked in a conversation among CEO's what he did, replied: "I manage schools and training institutes, hotels and restaurants, athletic teams, a symphonic orchestra, medical clinics and hospitals, and a police department, among other things."

As a university function, institutional research was a part of administrative activities years before it was actually called by its present name (Dressel, 1961). As institutions have desired to learn more about themselves, become more effective, and satisfy growing demands for accountability, the function of institutional research has moved from being a subordinated activity performed in other administrative areas (i.e. the Registrar's office), to a self-contained unit, responsible for a host of assessment, evaluation, and planning activities. Institutional researchers have developed an increasingly complex set of higher order skills to take advantage of improvements in measurement, evaluation, and technology (Knight, Moore, & Copperthwaite, 1997). The growth of professional organizations, like AIR and SCUP (along with their regional subsidiaries) has fostered a nationwide dialogue for the exchange of ideas, and codifying

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professional standards for their members. As the academic environment changes, the information needs of campus decision makers will continue to change as well (Keller, 1995).

Delaney (2001) found that institutional researchers who are more heavily engaged in the planning and policy process viewed themselves as more effective professionals who were making an important contribution to their institutions. She also found that those IR professionals, who were engaged in the more mundane but important task of gathering and storing facts, and responding to requests for descriptive information, viewed themselves as less effective professionals.

Despite all of the efforts made to advance institutional research, it is still difficult for practitioners to explain in simple terms what it is they do for a living, and why it is of such value to the universities that employ them (Terenzini, 1993). While it is particularly hard to explain the IR function to those outside the academy, it is still something of a challenge within it as well (Delaney, 1997).

University presidents and chancellors do not always take full advantage of the IR function when making decisions or in dealing with stakeholders. Rather than viewing the IR office as a resource for the enhancement of strategic planning and institutional performance, presidents often view it as a repository for facts and figures, satisfying requests for descriptive data, but not viewed as a place where policy analysis and inferential reporting expertise can be available (Lohmann, 1998). By tapping the know-how available on their campuses, we believe that presidents can more effectively lead by utilizing to a greater degree the strategic planning function and decision-making support apparatus of institutional research (Bagshaw, 1999). In short, the

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ability of IR professionals to explain as well as describe.

Institutional research, though informed by the theories of higher education and allied behavioral science disciplines, is in essence action research. The results of such research are intended to inform and stimulate policymaking and strategic decisions on the part of campus leaders, trustees, and state oversight entities (Thorpe, 1999).

Although there is necessarily some variation based upon context, institutional research operations are often responsible for studying, among other things, student persistence and enrollment behavior, student impacts and outcomes, faculty demand and salaries, faculty workload and productivity, facilities utilization, financial resources management, academic program review, and cost analysis (peer institutions and benchmarking). Furthermore, reporting lines for directors or deans of institutional research vary widely, with Academic Affairs or Provost, and Planning and Institutional Assessment being two common homes for the IR office. At smaller institutions directors often report directly to the president. Less often they report to the chief student affairs officer or the vice president for enrollment management.

Regardless of its place in the structure of the institution the institutional research function can facilitate presidential and executive level performance and leadership. Specifically the IR office can format data and information in support of institutional executives as they perform the critical leadership functions of managing meaning (i.e. sense making), developing “governing ideas,” addressing wicked problems, managing resources, assessing institutional performance, and advocating.

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Institutional Research Supporting Presidential Decision-Making

Managing Meaning

Even in the modern world of technological and scientific advancement, when our environment seems at times to be quite a rational place, the irrational or unexplainable still happens with stunning regularity. When this happens, the management of the meaning of those events, both large and small in their impact and scope, becomes the necessary function of organizational leadership (Bolman & Deal, 1997). It is in our nature as human beings to attempt to make sense of the unexpected or irrational and to fit these events into some sort of logical and ordered pattern.

In many ways, managing meaning or sense making is a critical and fundamental function of presidential leadership in the academy. When engaged in process re-design, organizations must distinguish between a process and a task. Borrowing Sharp and McDermott's process mapping (see Figure 1 on page 24), we make the distinction between management of meaning as a process and the other presidential activities as tasks; vitally important to be sure, but without strategic purpose if the meaning of those activities is not managed appropriately or effectively (2001, pp. 168-169). As we have adapted process mapping here, it is to emphasize the primacy of sense making and the relationship of the other activities or tasks to it.

In Figure 2 on page 22, managing meaning is at the core of presidential functions, representing the function that is manifested daily through the actions of the president and other executives. It is often the president who has the perspective and experience to help those around her understand the environment in which the institution currently functions. Rather than present a

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re-hashing of the facts in evidence, the president provides the context for those facts, some amount of explanation, and ideally, a way to move from the present situation to a future, hopefully improved, situation. Because the university president must lead by consensus, sense making is an ongoing task that consists of continuous dialogue with disparate stakeholders. Frequently it involves helping others to understand, clarify, and reconcile conflicting values and interests among them. Regardless of whether the news is good or bad, or the proposal controversial, the president will be taken seriously if her constituents perceive her as informed and honest. Candor serves the academic community nearly if not as well as academic freedom. It can also promote a serious and reflective debate about the best course of action and provides the president with helpful feedback.

Support for this task from the institutional researcher's perspective can be internal and external scanning for information related to the institution's driving forces. Examples of the kinds of data that would support such a task are enrollment analyses and projections, market analyses, population demographic studies in the university's major markets, and discussions of revenue and expenditures.

Again, the strategic planning process is an excellent way to get both locals and cosmopolitans on the faculty, staff, administrators, students, alumni, and external stakeholders involved in the discussion of the central mission of the university, and the challenges and opportunities before it. Effective planning can remind those whose vision may be necessarily narrow and focused, that they are part of a larger academic and external community, which needs their participation in planning and governance, just as it needs and benefits from their solitary

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scholarly pursuits. In other words, data and information provided by the IR professionals during the planning process helps to illuminate the issues, enlighten the participants, and generally help everyone find common understanding. In this way the IR professional is facilitating the management of meaning.

The strategic planning process also benefits from the availability of institutional data. These data can come in many forms, but fundamentally provide planners with evidence to support their intended actions, and some basis for the assumption of desired outcomes. The data also can assist in making sense of the perspectives of external stakeholders and at times what may be a hostile environment. If the university faces a retention and graduation problem, which is rather central to the core mission, data can help distinguish what sectors of the student body may be most affected by the attrition. This in turn can help make sense of the climate if, for example, students of color are leaving in far greater numbers than white students, it may be true that the campus culture is insensitive to ethnic minorities. Providing informational support for the sense-making task can also facilitate governmental or legislative relations, interpreting problems or threats, shedding light on opportunities, and discussing budgetary constraints.

Similarly, the data and information provided by the IR staff can assist campus executives to interpret the institution to external stakeholders. The challenge of sense making occurs in multiple arenas, both on and off campus, and the IR function is critical to its success. As Bolman and Deal so aptly wrote, “What is most important about any event is not what happened, but what it means.” (1997, p. 216).

Developing “governing ideas”

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Figure 1 on page 24 shows the development of governing ideas at the top of the list of presidential leadership functions. This is a deliberate placement because institutions of higher education are a polyglot collection of skills, temperaments, and interests, and it is incumbent upon the leader to frequently articulate to all participants a sense of shared mission, vision, and core values. Well crafted, consensually developed, and internalized governing ideas provide the fundamental criteria and rationale for decision-making and action. Without this motivation, asserts Moore, “there is little to motivate people beyond self-interest” (2001, p. 4).

Campus agreement on commonly held “governing ideas” is supported by information that makes the leader’s case reasonable and persuasive. Factual information provided by institutional researchers can give the leader additional credibility, which can be lacking in the anecdotal, and can facilitate achieving desired consensus among stakeholders. The reader will note how the support for the strategic planning process filters through the sense-making lens to support the development of governing ideas. Furthermore, the arrows appear at both ends of the connection, showing that there exists a pathway for feedback that further refines and enhances the supporting role that IR plays.

As Birnbaum (1988) and others have noted, faculties generally consist of locals and cosmopolitans. The former are those faculty members mainly concerned with the affairs of the campus where they are employed. The latter view themselves as members of a guild, their loyalty primarily placed with their academic discipline and their contributions to it; their colleagues within the discipline are often spread across the country. Though the categories are not discrete, both locals and cosmopolitans are necessary and important players on any campus. However, because

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colleges and universities are such far-flung and multifarious enterprises, presidential leadership is required to remind all actors of primary institutional values, purposes, and aspirations.

Participation in the strategic planning process, with emphasis on the development of governing ideas, does much to bring these various actors together and remind them of the sense of shared purpose. As institutions change in the organic sense and adapt to respond to various environmental stimuli (Birnbaum, 1988), discussions about what ought to be the institution's interests and an effective president, who is in turn supported by evidence, leads obligations that adaptation is necessary and desirable. A concrete example of this would be a study conducted by the institutional researcher, which analyzes change over time in the institution's student base. Evidence on shifts in population demographics, the number of high school graduates expected in the near or long term, and shifts in demand for certain types of programs, can support discussions about the governing ideas of the institution.

Addressing wicked problems

Each institution of higher education faces its share of what Weicke (1995) called wicked problems. These problems may be local in context (declining retention rates or increasing campus crime), state (decreasing state support for higher education), or national (reduced federal spending for basic research). Dealing with these increasingly complex problems requires that decision makers be armed with strong, relevant, and timely information upon which to make decisions that will help the institution move beyond the wicked problem of the moment and continue to prosper.

Knowing intuitively that a problem exists is not the same as having concrete empirical

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evidence that defines and interprets it, and focuses institutional attention on appropriate alternatives. Faculty members, who by training often are skeptics, require substantive evidence of institutional problems no less than they require it in their fields of expertise. We hearken back to the issue of presidential credibility, and having the evidence to enhance it. Data not only support the framing of wicked problems in their proper context, but also provide the foundation for the development of solutions that move the institution beyond them. Of particular value to the decision-maker are data and information that reflects the oft-competing interests of individuals and groups.

In this context institutional researchers, as always, should insist on good scholarship for the valid and reliable collection and interpretation of data. A rigorous application of good research methodologies promotes credibility with the faculty and other stakeholders that is required for addressing problems in a manner that is in keeping with academic and scholarly values.

Managing resources

Whether at a large public university or a small private college, the president plays a key role in the procurement and distribution of financial resources (Moore, 2001). And regardless of whether an institution is enjoying good economic times or suffering through a slump, competing priorities are waiting to take a bite at the fiscal apple, be it large or small. Making decisions about how scarce resources are to be allocated is often difficult and fraught with political perils.

Presidents who make use of the analytical tools available in their institutional research office are often able to make difficult and defensible choices from a position of strength. The availability of

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data does not dictate the decision by the president. Only judgment and experience can inform responsible decision-making. Rather the data may clarify choices about the allocation of resources, or in some cases support reallocation decisions. Data and information contribute to increased credibility and trust in the decision-making process and the decision-makers themselves.

When it comes to the garnering of resources, the president must assume a primary role in making the case for support from the legislature for public universities, or from donors and foundations for private institutions. This requires a special dedication and talent for persuasiveness that is often buttressed by the availability of data and analysis that demonstrate the need for funding new programs, for continued funding of existing programs, or a return on the investment in the form of improved outcomes. Furthermore, effective presentation of information and data related to resources helps to demonstrate that the institution is a responsible steward of the assets entrusted to it. Making sense of the ways in which dollars have been allocated in the recent past, and the return on the dollars proposed makes the case that the institution is a worthy investment of private and public monies.

The table below shows an example of the kind of data resources presidents and institutional researchers might have access to that would support sense making in the management of resources:

<u>Kinds of data and information</u>	<u>Uses</u>
Longitudinal revenues data	1. Support for enrollment management 2. Support for leveraging FA dollars
Longitudinal allocation data	
Longitudinal expenditure data	1. Decision making in the management of costs.

Longitudinal key financial indicators	1. Analysis of institutional fiscal effectiveness and responsibility.
Longitudinal academic program or unit budget data	1. Identification of high demand programs in need of reallocation. 2. Making the case for additional support of highly effective or over-burdened units or programs.
Longitudinal academic program productivity data	1. Analysis of human resource needs. 2. Identification of programs in need of review or evaluation.
Longitudinal faculty workload data	1. Making the case for increasing faculty salaries. 2. Making the case for faculty effectiveness and productivity.
Space allocation and utilization data	1. Identifying space inefficiencies or inequities.

An important role is played by the institutional research office, allied with the budget or finance office, in a thoroughgoing analysis of the various inputs that stakeholders look to for information. As with other presidential functions, the management of resources is more effectively carried out in an environment where there is more information rather than less, but a glut of information that lacks the appropriate contextual analysis is of little more use than insufficient information. In managing resources the president relies on the alliance between financial officers and institutional researchers, along with other line administrators, to provide the necessary context in which the president and other stakeholders must make often difficult choices.¹

Assessing institutional performance

An important recent trend in higher education has been the need to justify certain activities and demonstrate institutional effectiveness to those who make the most significant investments in American higher education (Keller, 1995).

University presidents must necessarily assume the leadership role in getting stakeholders

¹ As John F. Kennedy once said of the American Presidency, leaders seldom get to choose between good and bad courses of action. Often the choices are all bad, though hopefully not

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to understand the relationship between their inputs of societal needs, policy direction, and resources, and the various outputs generally associated with educational effectiveness. The institutional research office on campus can substantially support this role.

At public universities, legislators, trustees, and state governing boards desire evidence showing that the university is responsibly accountable for the public monies as invested by the legislature. At private universities, trustees, who assume a much greater role for the provision of resources, also require some indication of the return on their often substantial investment in the university. At both public and private colleges and universities, students, parents, and faculty members require some indication that the administrative leadership is effectively fulfilling the institution's intended purpose. Faculty members need reassurance that their concerns are being addressed and their needs are being met.

In assessing institutional performance, institutional researchers may be asked for analysis and interpretation at the university level, or at the academic unit level, or even of individuals. The institutional researcher has the opportunity to contribute to discussions surrounding institutional effectiveness at multiple levels. This can include studies of the teaching, research, and service activities of the faculty, the quality and productivity of programs and units, and the readiness of the institution for an accreditation visit.

One context of current interest at many institutions is the relevance and importance of popularly published college guidebooks. Many stakeholders, especially those external to the campus, place a great deal of credence in these rankings, which have often been characterized as

equally so.

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subjective by those inside the academy (Kuczynski, 2001). In this context, a number of important presidential functions can overlap to deal with one issue, crafting thoughtful and strong arguments to focus the discussion of institutional quality on what students are learning is one example of how the institutional research office can support presidential aims. What do the rankings mean for the institution's financial well being? Its competitive position in the marketplace? Its vision and core values? By managing the meaning of information, and addressing wicked problems (some would consider a precipitous drop in the rankings to be a wicked problem), the president can utilize information from the institutional researcher that places these rankings in their appropriate context for the campus and its stakeholders.

By demonstrating leadership in the development of alternative measures of institutional quality and effectiveness, presidents, allied with their offices of institutional research, can begin to re-frame the discussion around the quality of experiences students have while in college, as opposed to measurements of resources. The core function of managing meaning, gives the president and the institutional researcher the unique opportunity to answer what has long been a central and difficult question, namely, what makes a good college?

Advocating

As with the procurement and distribution of resources, a well-informed president becomes her university's best advocate for continued support and vitality, and defense against unwarranted or ill-informed criticism. Presidents who can effectively marshal facts to bolster the argument for support from individuals and agencies are more likely to be successful in making their case.

Along with increasing accountability, supporters of higher education are keenly interested in the

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return on their investments (not to themselves, necessarily, but rather to students and society).

The focus has shifted to an environment where institutions must be accountable in ways that are clearly demonstrable and measurable. While the latter can be difficult to achieve because of the often nebulous nature of educational outcomes, educators are beginning to arrive at some agreement about the variables that constitute effective educational practice and the means of measuring those variables (Hossler, Kuh & Olsen, 2001a).

Advocating goes beyond the acquisition of financial resources of course, as it moves toward attracting and retaining a talented faculty and student body. Presidents who are successful advocates for their institutions possess credibility that emboldens others on their campus to attract new and vital young talent. In these advocacy roles it is important for institutional researchers to provide the president with current and factual data that assists the president in making a persuasive case and managing the meaning of the activities associated with them. There are even instances when it is desirable to know the bad news as well as the good so that the president can effectively argue for much-needed remedies. Advocating often takes the form of interpreting the institution's activities to external stakeholders and at times defending against public criticism. In external venues presidents need to be well informed about all facets of their institutions in general, but often more specifically about some issue that is currently under public scrutiny.

Effective leaders are those who possess credibility (Bennis, 1989). Just as accurate and timely information can bolster a president's (or institution's) credibility, flawed information can erode it. The institutional researcher can best serve a president by objectively providing information essential to the solid foundation of executive leadership and institutional credibility.

Conclusion

Historically, the role of academic leaders has often been a difficult and complex task. The “revolving door” of the modern American college president is stark testimony that the job can be taxing to even the ablest of leaders and administrators (Moore and Burrows, cite). No longer just an academic leader and educator in her own right, the modern president is part politician and part corporate executive. The role of the modern president is multi-faceted and the information needed to perform the task of the presidency is multi-faceted as well. In a recent opinion piece in *Newsweek*, Fareed Zakaria suggested “one of the minor tragedies of modern America has been the transformation of the college president from public intellectual to fund-raising bureaucrat” (2002, p.64). While some presidents might agree that they sought the office for higher purposes, there is some truth to what Zakaria suggests. But other presidents indicate that fund raising or the acquisition of resources, while a central part of their routine, is not their only function (Siegel, 2001). Here again is an example of the management of meaning at work.

For a president to be successful in his or her role as an academic leader, credibility is of vital importance. By providing the president with timely and relevant information, the institutional researcher becomes a partner in the management of meaning, and provides the president with critical evidence to bolster his or her credibility, and by extension, the credibility of the institution he or she serves.

College presidents also suffer a handicap, if you will, imposed by the expectations of external stakeholders who have a less than thorough knowledge of the academy, its cultures, and processes. In our corporate society we readily understand the role of the president and/or chief

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executive officer. Upon this person is placed the power and status to make things happen; to turn his or her office into the center of action, and to exert great influence. In many instances this is not analogous to academe. External stakeholders may equate the academic presidency, by virtue of its title and office, as the most powerful position on the campus. Depending upon the context, the presidency may be seen in entirely different light by those internal stakeholders who vie for resources, attention, and power. Trustees immersed in the top-down structures of the corporate system are often exasperated by the inability of the president to corral an irascible faculty or an impertinent student body.

This paper is not meant to suggest that the president can ask her IR director to develop a magical formula out of which come the answers to the vexing questions facing modern institutions of higher education. Data are not meant to be a substitute for well-reasoned judgment and leadership, but to provide evidence for consideration. Nor is it meant to suggest that there is no room for empiricism in a president's decision-making. It is hoped that presidents can, in the proper context, employ both intuition and empiricism in order to become better leaders. By tapping information and analytical assets in her own institutional research office, the president can find a supporting function that has the opportunity to enhance her own and the university's success and vitality.

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Figure 1: The Institutional Research Functions Support The Management of Meaning

Presidential Leadership

Institutional Research Functions

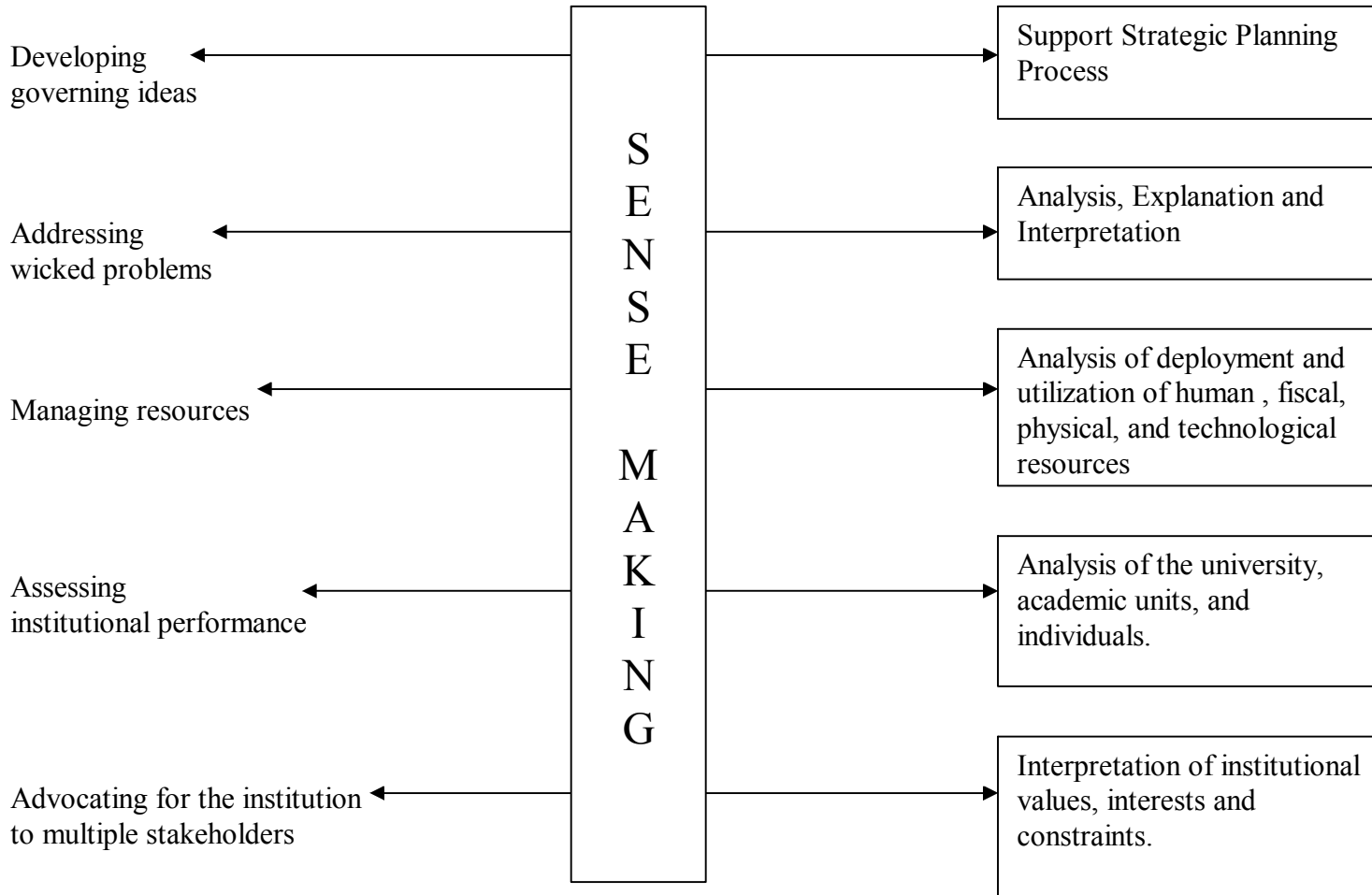


Figure 2:

Model of Presidential Leadership Functions

