

# Do Colleges Need a Chief Data Officer?

Universities today recognize the importance of having access to meaningful, quality data. In fact, there is often an overabundance of data, with many departments equipped with specialized technology platforms to manage and report on their discrete programs and functions.

The current world health crisis has served to emphasize how critical this capability is, as leaders have been thrust into a position of continuously modeling a variety of health-related, personnel-related and finance-related scenarios in real time. No institution has been immune from the ripple effects of the pandemic, but those who lack the data-driven insights needed to make sense of a complex situation are at risk of more scrutiny and being left behind in an increasingly competitive environment. As an example, understanding how changes in the program portfolio make an impact on enrollment and research growth provides a line of sight well ahead of siloed analytics efforts.

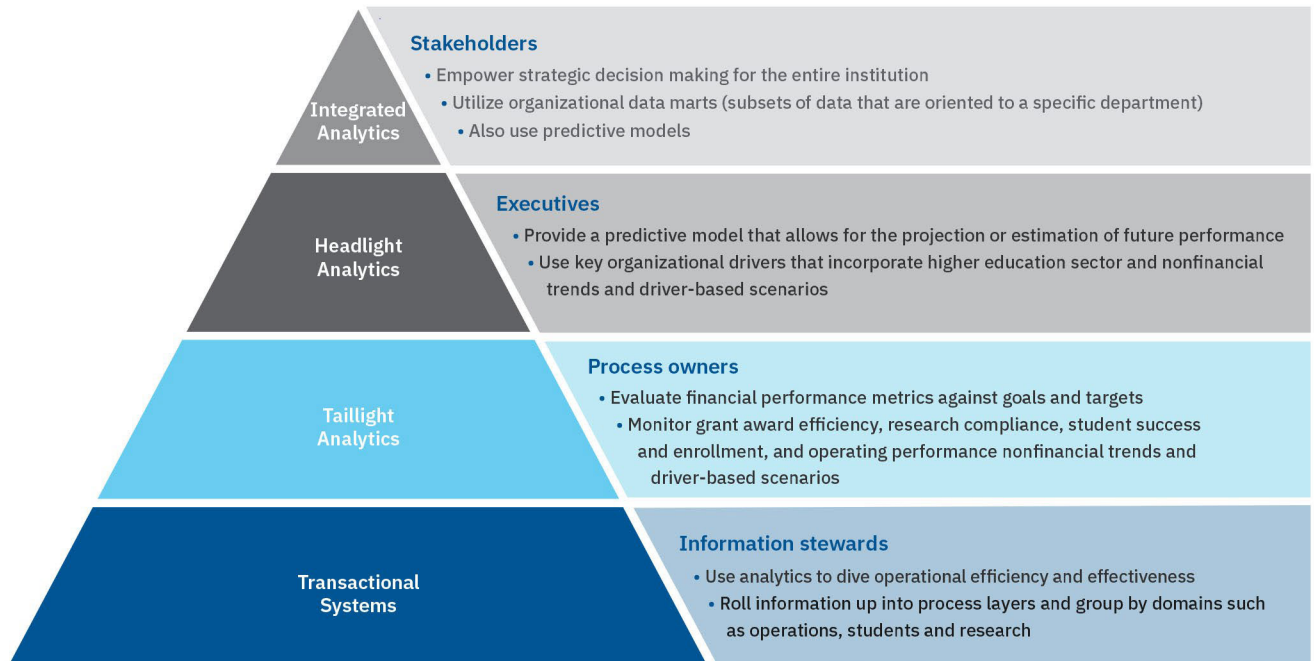
## What is the value of an integrated data dashboard?

Data University leaders want quicker access to information they can act on, as opposed to having time spent waiting on reports. The expectation is

that the unknowns we encounter in day-to-day life are responded to with data-informed decision making. This is why many boards and leadership teams are learning that distinct leadership roles and centralized institution-level dashboards are worth the investment, as they make decision making easier and integrating operational and strategic viewpoints faster, primarily because multiple participants in the decision process have consistent views of accurate information.

The value of an integrated dashboard will extend far beyond the immediate need to model ways to pivot during a crisis. Laying the foundation for a dashboard can shape institutional behavior for the future while also facilitating data-informed, strategic decisions today. This work benefits greatly from the institutional empowerment of a dedicated leader whose sole focus is bringing together disparate analytics efforts into a single cogent enterprisewide lens.

Some institutions may have analytics initiatives running in parallel, perhaps viewed as “side projects” worthy of effort but not necessarily focus. Colleges and universities that are well recognized for implementing integrated institutionwide analytics, however, have invested the resources to do so. Arizona State University and The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center are often touted as exemplars; both have committed leadership and investments to the endeavor. Purdue University also has a dedicated business intelligence leader and unit. Oftentimes, such a position reports directly to a chief financial officer, provost or other senior leader and carries a title



and purview that enables them to work agilely with stakeholders across the institution. It is important to note that, while IT plays a critical role in enabling and supporting the effort, data analytics is rarely an IT function. Rather, it should be viewed as a specific capability within the organization.

## Where do chief data officers fit in higher education?

With this in mind, do colleges and universities need a chief data officer (CDO)? Can an enterprisewide data competency be realized or optimized without a single point of accountability?

To answer this question, consider the integrated data dashboard model. What's interesting about this model is that each of the dashboard's subsets may focus on different members of leadership: presidents, provosts, chief financial officers and deans. The role of a CDO is essentially to own and oversee the entire dashboard, ensuring the right insights can be gleaned by the applicable audiences. Absent this coordinating role, leaders are coming to the table with data that do not marry and find themselves asking "Whose version of the truth is most accurate?"

Colleges and universities will be best served if their CDOs are charged with taking full accountability for all data across the organization. In less than a decade, the chief data officer position has taken off in higher education. The growth of the CDO role in higher education is similar to what is seen in commercial markets, with the CDO going from being a fixture in only 12% of companies to 65% of them, according to NewVantage Partners' "2021 Big Data and AI Executive Survey." Yet only half of them had "primary responsibility for data," and merely a third characterized the role as "successful."

"I'm now even more convinced that it's unbelievably necessary for higher ed institutions to really be able to get the most value out of the data they have, to have a person whose job it is to think about data all the time," Sam Cannon, associate vice provost

for data governance and CDO at the University of Rochester, said in a podcast by The Tambellini Group. "When you have someone whose job it is to look at data full-time, they're able to help connect dots in places where someone that only has a little data piece to their job can do."

The key difference is how leaders look at data across an organization. While department heads and deans may look at data locally — within their departments and teams — CDOs analyze and

share it globally to see how all of the information fits together. With such unique needs in higher education, CDOs are able to help better position the institution while aligning with the mission and work of the various stakeholders.



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## Key Takeaways

To capitalize on the abundance of data colleges and universities collect, leaders must:

### Think differently.

Given the governance structure in higher education, consider the local and global data that can be collected and utilized. How do these fit together, and who needs access to what when? With rapidly changing dynamics in higher education today — such as demographic and corollary enrollment trends for both traditional and nontraditional education programs — how do you act and react quickly to the marketplace? Creating a data-driven culture is critical to the short- and long-term success of an institution.

### Plan differently.

When considering adopting a CDO role within your institution, be thorough in thinking through the position's qualities and role. What will the roles and responsibilities be to optimize enterprisewide value? What is the intention, and how will the role affect institutional strategy? How does institutional decision making incorporate the contributions of a CDO? This kind of insight will capitalize on the position.

### Act differently.

With more integrated access to data, be prepared to make the most of the information and insights you glean. By employing a chief data officer, an institution can use a single cogent enterprisewide lens to tap into the value and data ranging from the department level to the comprehensive institutional view. Access to coordinated management information can help shed light on the unknowns that leaders encounter today and help them shape institutional behavior for the future.