



DATA GOVERNANCE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION:

How to Turn Institutional Data Into a
Competitive Advantage



Have you ever found yourself trying to answer simple questions in a committee meeting only to realize that every department is looking at a different number and insisting their version is correct?

This familiar frustration is a symptom of a problem that exists among even the highest-ranking higher education institutions. Colleges and universities unearth wide discrepancies among departmental data, submit inaccurate data to institutional research, and struggle to steward the data they need to manage their business and plan for the future.

The quantity of data is no longer the problem. Departments across every campus collect some kind of data, whether formally or in homegrown departmental shadow systems. This is where the problem lies: data is ubiquitous and plentiful, but it's rarely organized, standardized, or leveraged for a common purpose.



“A data governance framework is a structure for classifying, defining, organizing, and communicating what data is and how you use it within an institution,” says Jonathan S. Gagliardi, associate director of the Center for Policy Research and Strategy with The American Council on Education. “But as more and more data is created, we’re coming to the point where the traditional paradigm of the framework is outmoded. Great social, cultural, political, and economic changes have worked to erode the typical higher education business model, leading to a technology and analytics revolution that changes how universities approach student success and sustainability. Data governance must evolve to reflect this reality and take on a more dynamic and fluid form.”

The potential of properly harnessed data is incredible. According to the American Council

on Education’s *The Data-Enabled Executive: Using Analytics for Student Success and Sustainability*, some institutions are using data to estimate the likelihood of student progress or to support underserved students in certain courses and majors.¹ Others have used data initiatives to improve graduation rates and close equity gaps.² And yet only 12% of presidents rank the use of institutional research and evidence among the top five areas of growing importance for future presidents, even though many of the areas deemed important require sound research and evidence.

Why is it important to implement a data governance initiative? And why should data governance be the #1 concern for all incoming educational leadership? How your organization treats and uses data can be directly correlated

with how well it identifies and manages a host of other institutional challenges.

“From an institutional perspective, you may see the symptoms of a problem everywhere, but lack of clarity in the source of the problem,” says Laura Zimmermann, managing director of Enterprise Solutions at Huron. “So, band-aids are applied to the symptoms by implementing process changes or shadow systems. But if you really looked at your reporting challenges and got to the root cause of many of them, you would find that data governance would play a key role in resolving a significant portion of them.”

Let’s explore what impact data governance has on three common institutional challenges and how your organization can get better traction on implementing a data governance plan.

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LAURA ZIMMERMANN

Managing Director of Enterprise Solutions, Huron

LACK OF DATA GOVERNANCE

AS THE HIDDEN CAUSE OF COMMON INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES



The need for data governance in higher education isn't a trendy burst of pressure to upgrade outdated technology systems – though for some institutions, that might be enough of an incentive. It's an essential foundation that gives institutions the ability to accurately report on their activities, make good decisions, and steward data for the future.

Let's take a look at challenges that often erupt at institutions that don't prioritize data governance.

1 Data silos lead to discrepancies and distrust

Many institutions source data from separate departments using different tools. In this way, they've "gotten by," piecemealing insight from one report or another. Not only is their data fragmented by location and the intention of the collectors, but it's also defined differently between offices and departments. As a result, it is difficult to draw insights from the larger picture. This leads to a common phenomenon of "operation-

al uncertainty," where multiple versions of the same data cause a lack of trust and confidence in data and the people responsible for it.³

When an institution has a functional data governance plan in place, it can ensure the quality and accuracy of the data and the downstream reporting, analytics, and decision support systems that leverage and rely on that data. The result is an enterprise-wide improvement in confidence in the data and an ability to make informed decisions based on a single source of truth.

“When there is a common and broadly accepted understanding of core data elements across your institution, you can integrate data campus-wide and more effectively collaborate with other departments,” says Matt Jones, managing director of IT Strategy at Huron. “Enabling access to a unified view of organizational data can drive institutional goals and objectives, such as improving recruiting efforts or enhancing the student experience.”

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MATT JONES

Managing Director of IT Strategy, Huron

2 Lack of data flow leads to institutional inefficiencies

The lack of consistent data across the institution makes it difficult to report on institution-wide activities, leading to increased and unnecessary tension among leadership, administrative functions, and academic departments and colleges competing for limited funding opportunities. Even as stakeholders are pressured to squeeze their budgets and compete for students, they are unable to be sure of the answers to important questions, such as:

- *What's the cost to run our program?*
- *What is the time to degree across campuses?*
- *What are the employment outcomes for our students?*
- *How can we teach more effectively?*
- *How do we create a better, more effective student experience?*
- *How can we identify operational efficiencies in administrative functions?*
- *Are our trending reports and externally reported survey data accurate?*





When data governance is in place to identify and mitigate redundancies in data collection, distribution and maintenance, stakeholders have access to the metrics they need to make informed decisions.

This organized and collaborative approach to data offers the potential for substantial reduction in costs and increases in efficiency.

“One of the major benefits of having a data governance system in place is enhanced communication and joint decision-making,” says Nancy Gourash Bliwise, vice provost of Academic Planning at Emory University.

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NANCY GOURASH BLIWISE
Vice Provost of Academic Planning, Emory University

“When everyone can go into the data warehouse, pull the report, and agree on the numbers, it cuts off a lot of redundant communication. Everyone has the same numbers, so we’re able to talk about the same thing and inform our decisions with shared data.”


3 Reporting inaccuracies and lack of data security protocols lead to compliance and liability issues

Inaccurate reporting within an organization can create one set of challenges, but inaccurate reporting outside your institution can pose much greater risk. Significant discrepancies in reporting can permanently damage an institution’s reputation or, in the case of not abiding by federal policy or regulations, lead to compliance failures and legal charges.⁴

“Accurate and consistent reporting is vital in year over year comparisons and benchmarks. Institutions are evaluated based on their responses to national surveys,” says Zimmermann. “Determining how to report externally is just as nuanced and potentially more impactful than answering questions within the institution.”

Beyond concerns of compliance, a lack of data governance can impact the constantly evolving concept of data security. Some protected data classes offer clear legal guidelines around student health and records information, but what about important information such as evolving cultural changes? Structured data governance provides an outlet for these questions so the institution can proactively avoid problems in the future.

“When we implemented a data governance plan and gathered our data into one repository, we took HIPAA data off the table, as well as student data protected by FERPA,” says Dipti Ranganathan, former associate vice president of academic and administrative information systems at the University of Texas Southwestern and current assistant dean of information systems at the University of Chicago. “But employees still needed guidance around whether or not it was acceptable to collect other potentially sensitive data. For example, the governance committee was asked ‘What about country of origin or marital status? How broadly should we expose that data?’ That’s what they’ll need to be able to walk through with a data governance committee.”



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DIPTI RANGANATHAN

Assistant Dean of Information Systems, University of Chicago

BUILDING A PLAN FOR DATA GOVERNANCE

The most common reasons higher education institutions hesitate to embark on implementing a data governance plan isn't due to lack of importance, but often because it is too big to tackle, particularly across the enterprise. Many institutions that have taken this step have found it to be less strenuous to tackle if there is a supportive leadership team and a relatively small group of willing stakeholders who work together as a team to solve the problem. These institutions have implemented institution-wide data governance plans that build on small successes to create universal buy-in from staff and stakeholders.

The following includes a summary of seven steps higher education institutions can take to get greater traction on data governance and reporting within their schools.

1 Define data governance

Every definition of data governance will speak to the policy, processes and procedures around the standardization of data definitions, collection processes and access to data. The institution will have its own final definition, however, because the agreed-upon definitions of data terms and the how and why of data collection will be unique to each institution.

2 Establish executive sponsorship

A comprehensive data governance initiative needs strong leadership support to get off the ground. Without executive sponsorship, it will be difficult to get buy-in from data owners and different departments and offices within the institution.

3 Translate institutional strategy into guiding principles

The most effective data governance plans are unique because they are tied directly to an institution's goals and drive important institu-

tional objectives. When an institution communicates its strategy, leverage that strategy to identify what's important to measure.

4 Identify and prioritize the primary needs

Who needs accurate data for decision-making? The Board of Regents and Institutional Leadership? Or is there more concern with federal and state constituencies? Perhaps it's as narrow as the need for efficiency in the payroll or general ledger that the institution could be taking advantage of? Identify the institution's primary needs and roadblocks to data governance so that the planning can be prioritized accordingly.

5 Build a data governance authority framework

Defining terms and organizing data collection is just the beginning. The institution also needs to outline the rules and procedures that will coordinate the proper separation of duties among data stakeholders, including data governance council members, data stewards and custodians, and data owners.

6 Assess Technology Options

Once the ideal data governance framework is in place, assess whether or not the current data structure and technology can provide the

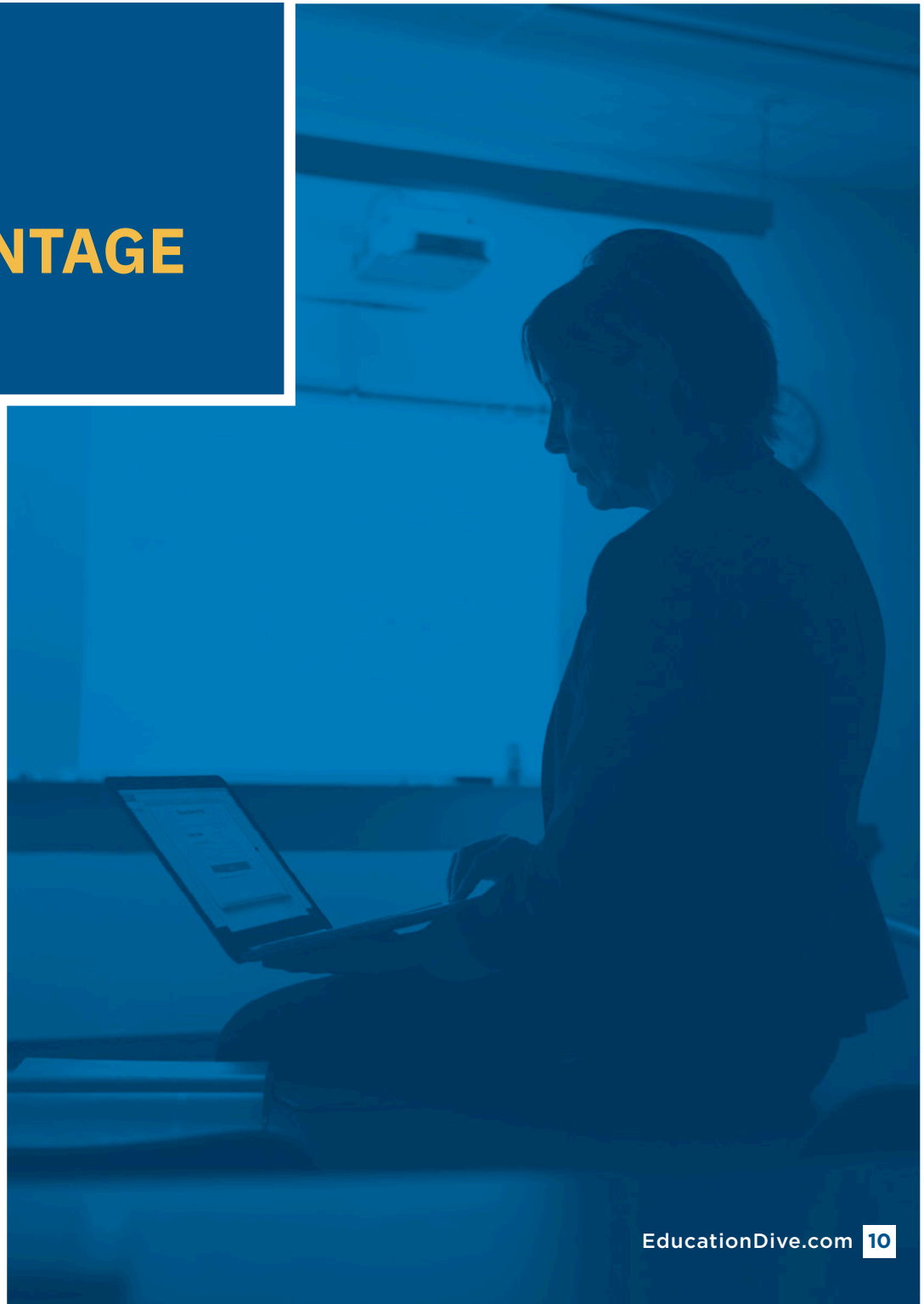
reporting needed and insight into the changes that should be implemented.

7 Make a change management plan

After years of developing shadow systems and having control over data, it can be hard for departments and administrative offices to "let go" and opt in to a new way of managing information. As an institution rolls out its data governance plan, pay special attention to ensure there is an approach for change management - communicating with stakeholders and achieving buy-in from employees who will need to share data and use new technology.

FROM CHAOS TO **COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE**

If you are in the midst of experiencing the evolution of technology changes that can enable transformation in higher education, you are well aware of the critical role that data can play in institutional success. Designing and implementing a comprehensive data governance plan will undoubtedly set up an institution for success and create the potential for a distinct and powerful competitive advantage.





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SOURCES

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