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Exploring the Role of Institutional Research in Graduate and Professional Education

By Tiffane Cochran

Background

The AccessLex Center for Legal Education ExcellenceSM, with support from the Association for Institutional Research, undertook a small study to learn more about the interactions between the institutional research community and graduate and professional schools. Specifically, the Center sought to understand the role and placement of institutional researchers within the context of graduate and professional education, as well as the type of studies institutional researchers conduct on behalf of graduate and professional programs.

Methodology

The Association for Institutional Research drafted and fielded a short survey to a random sample of its members on behalf of the Center, resulting in a total of 500 survey invitations. The survey was designed to answer two main research questions:

1. For institutions with graduate and/or professional units, how many of those units have their own institutional research (IR) function?
2. What types of institutional research studies are conducted and by whom—the IR office, the graduate/professional units, both, or another office?

For the latter question, the survey asked about the following types of studies:

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|---|--------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Surveys/Reports for Guidebooks, Magazines, etc. | Completion Studies | Post-graduation Outcomes | Enrollment Projects | Financial Aid Modeling |
| Space Utilization | Course Evaluations | Learning Outcomes | Student Satisfaction | Accreditation |

Survey Respondents

Of the 500 Association for Institutional Research members who were invited to participate in the survey, 149 responded—a response rate of approximately 30 percent. Of those respondents, 110 reported working at an institution offering graduate and/or professional education and were, therefore, eligible to complete the remaining survey items. A total of 77

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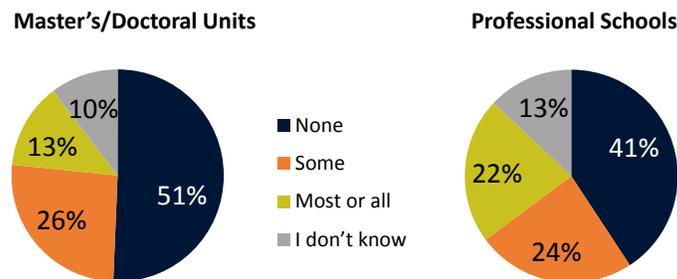
eligible respondents continued the survey beyond the first question, with all 77 respondents answering items specific to master's/doctoral programs, and 48 respondents completing items about professional schools.

Findings

Professional schools more often report having their own IR function compared to master's/doctoral programs.

More than a third of respondents at schools with graduate and/or professional programs reported that some or all of these academic units have their own IR function. Compared to master's and doctoral programs, independent IR functions were more often reported within professional schools. While thirty-nine percent of respondents reported that some or all master's/doctoral units have an IR function, 46 percent reported that some or all professional schools have an IR function.

“How many graduate/professional units have an institutional research function within unit?”

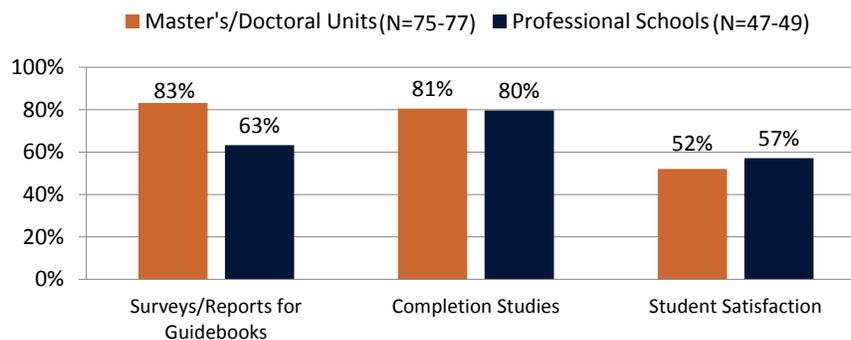


Source: Association for Institutional Research

External surveys, studies of retention, attrition, and graduation, and student satisfaction studies are most often conducted by or with assistance from the IR offices.

Among the studies included in the survey, surveys/reports for guidebooks, completion studies, and student satisfaction studies had the highest number of respondents reporting IR involvement in, or responsibility for, the study. For each study type and for both graduate and professional programs, the majority of respondents indicated IR involvement, though fewer professional school respondents reported IR involvement in surveys/reports for guidebooks.

IR Involvement Reported



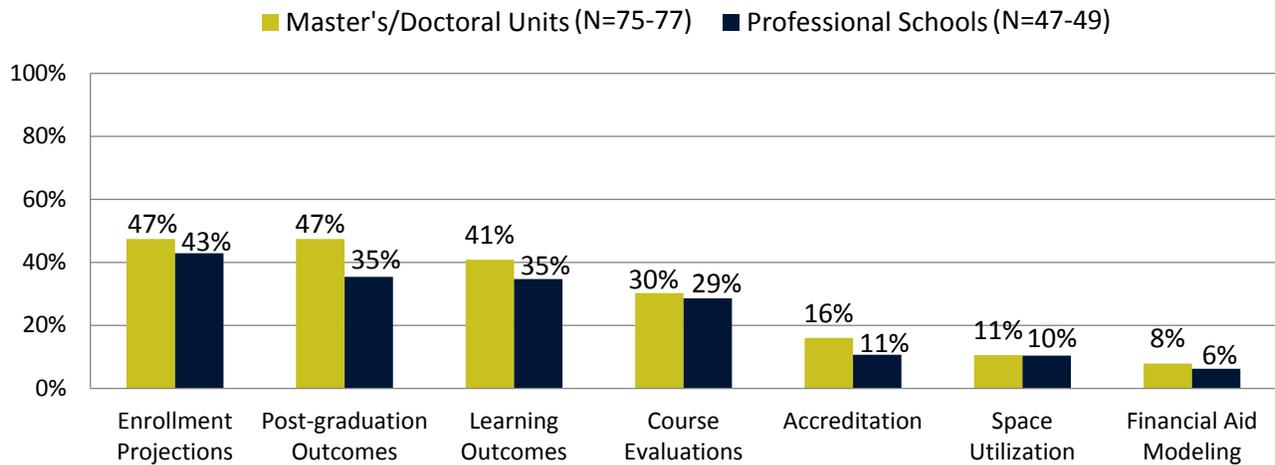
Source: Association for Institutional Research

IR offices are somewhat involved in enrollment analyses and assessment, and are least involved in accreditation, space utilization, and financial aid analyses.

Although IR offices lend support to graduate/professional programs in areas other than guidebook surveys, completion studies and student satisfaction studies, survey responses indicated they are much less involved in other analyses. More than 40 percent of master's/doctoral respondents and more than a third of professional school respondents reported IR involvement in enrollment projections, post-graduation outcome studies, and learning outcomes assessment. Fewer respondents reported IR involvement with course evaluation for graduate

and professional programs (about 30 percent), and even fewer (less than 20 percent) indicated IR involvement in accreditation, space utilization, and financial aid analyses—perhaps because these studies are conducted by other campus units.

IR Involvement Reported

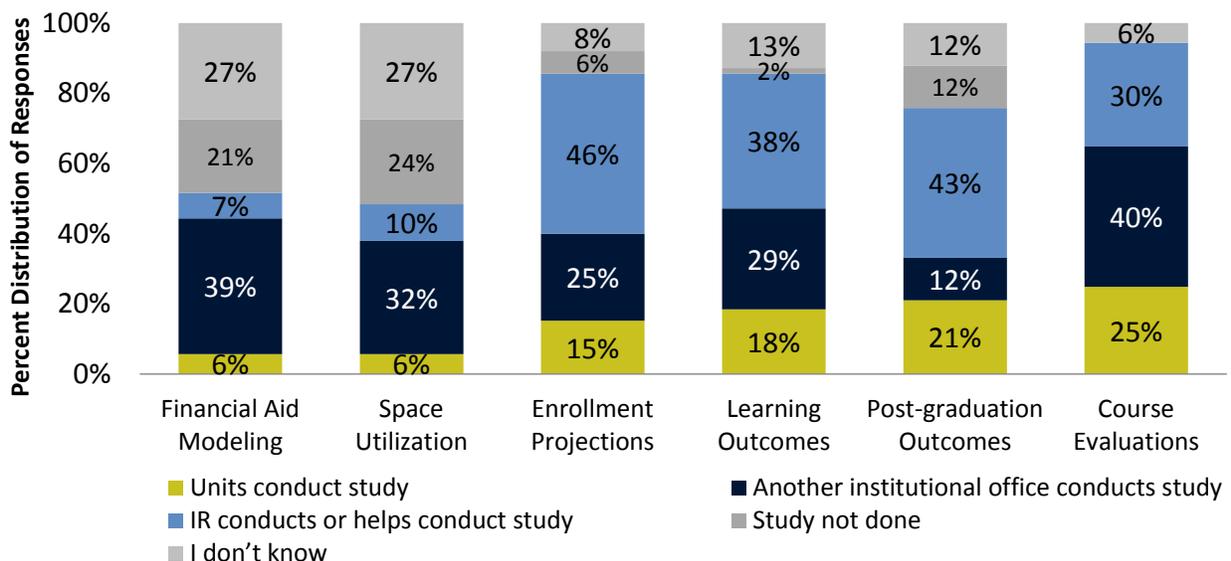


Source: Association for Institutional Research

Studies in which IR involvement is less prevalent tend to be conducted by another office on campus rather than solely by the graduate and professional units themselves.

The combined responses from master's/doctoral programs and professional schools indicate that other campus units—as well as IR offices—are typically responsible for conducting most studies of graduate/professional programs. The exception is accreditation—75 percent of respondents indicated that the graduate and professional units conduct these studies themselves. Survey respondents also indicated that graduate/professional programs tend to be more involved in post-graduation outcomes (21 percent) and course evaluations (25 percent).

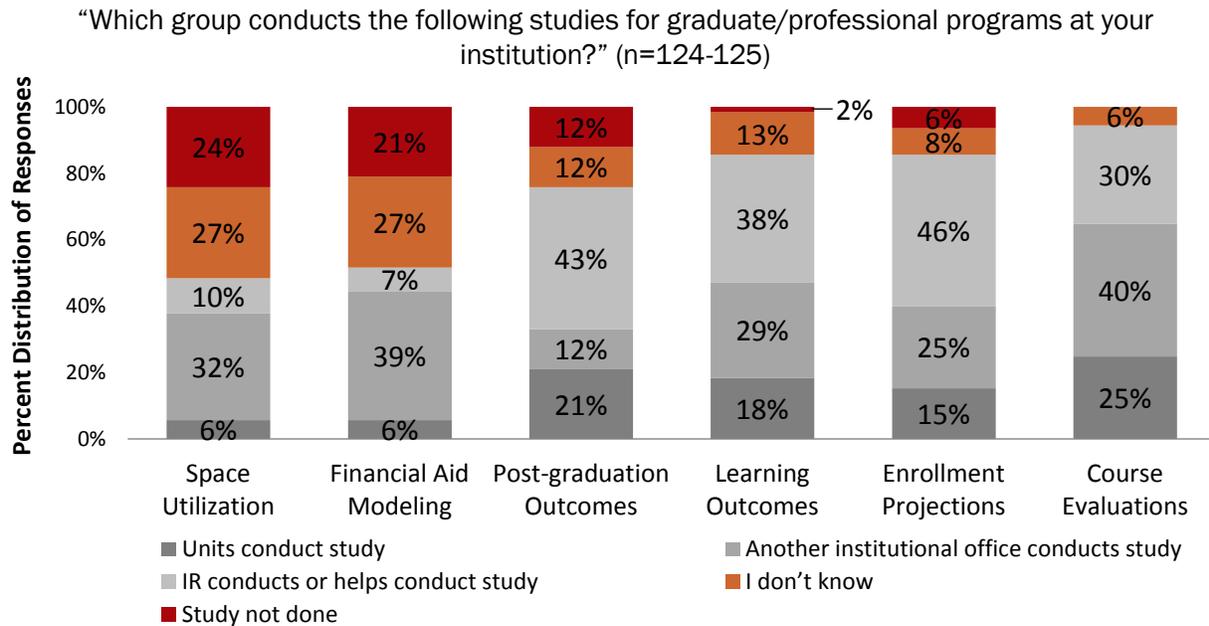
“Which group conducts the following studies for graduate/professional programs at your institution?” (n=124-125)



Source: Association for Institutional Research

Survey responses hint at institutional study gaps within graduate and professional education.

In some cases, respondents reported that the study in question either was not conducted at their institution or they did not know which office was responsible for completing the study. The figure below uses the same graph from the previous section to highlight these responses. As shown, space utilization (24 percent), financial aid (21 percent), and student learning outcomes (12 percent) analyses were most often reported as not conducted for graduate and professional programs, and over a quarter of respondents indicated that they did not know which campus office analyzed space utilization and financial aid. These responses indicate that these areas may be understudied and are not frequently analyzed among graduate and professional programs.



Source: Association for Institutional Research

Summary and Implications

Overall, the survey results indicate that institutional researchers play a critical role in providing analytical support to graduate and professional programs, whether they are staffed centrally or within the academic units. IR offices lend the most support for guidebook surveys and reports, completion studies, and student satisfaction surveys. Studies where IR offices are less involved tend to fall in areas that are managed by another campus office, specifically financial aid, course evaluations, and space utilization. The exception is accreditation, which is usually managed independently by the graduate and professional programs themselves.

Studies with relatively high response rates for “I don't know” and “Study not done” may indicate knowledge gaps within graduate and professional education at some institutions. These potentially understudied areas—space utilization, financial aid modeling, and post-graduation outcomes—are becoming increasingly significant for graduate and professional programs as the cost of higher education increases and institutions face increased difficulty and scrutiny in how they leverage their resources, reduce the financial burden of their students, and prepare their graduates for success beyond degree attainment.

In light of these findings, it is important that academic leaders regularly assess their data collection methods and analytical needs to ensure that institutional studies of graduate and professional education adequately address the strategic concerns of programs and their students. Additionally, because institutional studies of graduate and professional education are largely shared between academic units, IR offices, and other campus units, those overseeing graduate and professional programs should strengthen their relationships with IR and offices that support them in order to clarify analytical roles and responsibilities. Sharing information about what institutional studies are being conducted and by whom could also help graduate and professional programs better leverage data and resources known to others outside of their academic units.

About AccessLex Institute

Founded in 1983, AccessLex Institute is a nonprofit membership organization comprising nearly 200 nonprofit and state-affiliated American Bar Association-approved law schools. The organization works to further access, affordability, and the value of legal education, specifically, and graduate and professional education more broadly, through research, policy advocacy, and direct member and student educational services.

About The Center

The AccessLex Center for Legal Education Excellence collects and analyzes data, conducts research, and provides grants to other organizations to address some of the most critical issues facing legal education, including the following:

- Enhancing access to law schools for students from diverse backgrounds;
- Increasing affordability for students pursuing legal education; and
- Expanding the value of a legal degree.

About The Association for Institutional Research

The Association for Institutional Research is the world's largest professional association for institutional researchers. The organization provides educational resources, best practices and professional development opportunities for more than 4,000 members. Its primary purpose is to support members in the process of collecting, analyzing, and converting data into information that supports decision-making in higher education.



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