STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONAL USE OF EVIDENCE

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What dashboards have made possible

Over the last decade, many colleges have invested significant effort in building dashboards of impressive range and sophistication. That work, often led by institutional research and analytics professionals, has strengthened the institution's ability to describe its own condition with greater consistency and care. By establishing common definitions, widening access to evidence, reducing dependence on anecdote, and giving people a more stable point of reference, dashboards have improved the quality of institutional discussion in important ways.

For colleges that once relied heavily on fragmented reporting, local spreadsheets, or competing claims offered without shared evidence, this has been real progress. Dashboards have made it easier to monitor patterns, track priorities, and anchor conversations in a common set of measures. They have helped colleges become less dependent on informal impressions alone and more capable of looking at the same information together.

College leaders are often right to view these systems as part of a more mature institutional practice. A college cannot improve coherently if it lacks reliable ways to describe what is happening. Dashboards help meet that need. They support a more serious kind of institutional learning by making evidence more accessible and more usable across the organization.

At the same time, broader access to evidence brings additional responsibilities. Once information is easier to share across the institution, colleges have to do more work to interpret it carefully, determine what it suggests, and connect it to decisions and follow through. That does not lessen the value of the dashboard. It reflects the fact that making information available is one important part of the work, though it is not the whole of it.

Why access to data is only part of the work

Dashboards widen access to information, but access to data alone does not establish meaning. Data still require context, judgment, and discussion. The same indicator may point to different questions depending on timing, student mix, local conditions, or the way the measure was defined. A dashboard can make an indicator visible to many people at once, though it cannot supply all of the interpretation needed for sound action in every setting.

This helps explain why institutional research and analytics professionals remain essential after a dashboard is launched. Their contribution does not end when the platform becomes available. In many respects, another phase of their work becomes even more important at that point. They are often best positioned to explain how measures were constructed, what cautions should accompany them, which comparisons are reasonable, and where additional inquiry is still needed.

For that reason, the technical platform should be understood as part of a larger institutional process rather than as the end of the work. Once a dashboard is in use, the institution still needs settings in which people can ask careful questions, test interpretations, and connect what the evidence shows to the responsibilities of different offices. The quality of those conversations has a great deal to do with whether data become useful in practice.

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What transaction data can and cannot show

Much of what appears on a dashboard is drawn from student information systems and related administrative records. These systems are essential to institutional work because they record enrollment, course registration, grades, withdrawal, completion, and other formal academic events with consistency and scale. They allow colleges to describe patterns across large numbers of students and over time, and they provide the foundation for much of the dashboard work that colleges now rely on.

At the same time, transaction systems were not designed to capture every part of the student experience that matters for improvement. They are strongest at recording events once those events have become formal and observable within the institution's administrative processes. They can show that a student withdrew, stopped out, failed a course, or did not persist. They are much less able to show the earlier signs of strain that may have preceded that outcome and that, if recognized in time, might have allowed for a different result.

In many cases, the most consequential parts of student struggle emerge before the institution records a formal change in status. A student may be confused about course expectations, fall behind on early assignments, begin missing class intermittently, lose confidence, encounter a work schedule change, or experience a growing mismatch between the course and what the student understood it to require. Those conditions may build for days or weeks before they appear in any structured institutional record. By the time the system registers a withdrawal or failing grade, the college may be looking at the result of a longer process that was only lightly visible, or not visible at all, in its routine data.

This does not make transaction data weak or unimportant. It simply means that such data have a particular character. They are often better at showing where a process ended than at showing how difficulty accumulated along the way. For that reason, dashboards built primarily from administrative systems remain essential, but they cannot by themselves provide a full picture of the earlier points at which student momentum may have begun to weaken.

That limitation matters because colleges sometimes ask administrative data to answer questions those systems were never designed to answer on their own. If the goal is not only to describe outcomes but also to learn where earlier correction was possible, then transaction data often need to be complemented by other forms of evidence, including course level signals, student feedback, withdrawal narratives, advising notes used carefully, or other information that sheds light on the period before the formal outcome appears in the record.

Why shared data do not automatically produce shared understanding

Even when a dashboard is widely available, its meaning is not always understood in the same way across the college. Some units work closely with institutional research or analytics staff and develop a stronger understanding of what measures do and do not support. Other units may approach the same information through older assumptions, partial familiarity, or local interpretations shaped by different experiences. That variation is normal in a complex institution where people hold different roles and have different degrees of exposure to the underlying evidence.

As a result, a college may have a shared source of data without yet having a sufficiently shared understanding of what the data suggest. Coordination depends on more than access to the same numbers. It also depends on enough interpretive consistency that people can distinguish between what the evidence clearly supports, what remains uncertain, and what kind of response may be warranted.

When colleges encounter this gap, it is best understood as a predictable stage in the broader use of evidence. The issue is usually not that the dashboard has failed. It is that wider access to data has surfaced the need for more deliberate interpretive routines than the institution may have developed previously. Progress in one area often reveals the need for additional work in another.

Where the larger institutional challenge often appears

Even when evidence is clear and interpretation begins to converge, improvement may still move slowly. Colleges often distribute responsibility across several units, and many important outcomes are shaped through the interaction of multiple offices rather than through the decision of any one person. In those conditions, a college may understand a problem reasonably well and still find that the path to change is difficult to organize.

A dashboard may show that an outcome is off track. Leadership may take that finding seriously. Institutional research may clarify the pattern with care and precision. Even so, progress may remain uneven if questions about ownership, sequence, coordination, and decision rights have not been worked through. The challenge in those cases is less about whether the evidence is available and more about how the institution is organized to respond.

This helps explain why colleges can become more evidence informed without becoming faster or more coordinated in the same proportion. The issue is often not a lack of concern, and it is usually not a problem in the data system itself. More often, the institution has become better at identifying issues than at acting on them across layered processes and shared responsibilities.

Meetings often make this visible. A great deal of time may be spent reviewing indicators, clarifying trends, and discussing possible explanations. That work can be valuable. Still, there is often less time devoted to determining what will change, who owns that change, how coordination will occur, and how the institution will judge whether the response is working. Under those conditions, the main limit is usually found in the institution's operating routines rather than in the dashboard.

What colleagues learn from follow through

People across a college notice whether priorities discussed in strategic language are reflected in everyday work. They notice whether evidence reviewed in one setting leads to changed routines in another. They notice whether the institution behaves differently after the meeting has ended and regular work resumes. Over time, those observations shape expectations.

When follow-through is uneven, people often become cautious about new rounds of institutional language or new presentations of evidence. That caution is not necessarily resistance. In many cases, it reflects accumulated experience with the distance between discussion and execution. It is a way of reading the institution based on what people have repeatedly seen.

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This can be frustrating for many parties, including leaders and institutional research professionals. Serious work may be taking place, yet the broader institution may still absorb and act on new knowledge more slowly than people hope. In those cases, dashboard builders and analysts may have created powerful user-friendly tools, while the institution as a whole remains slower to translate insight into coordinated action. It helps to understand that pattern as an organizational issue so that the burden does not fall unfairly on those whose work has already strengthened the college's capacity to understand itself.

What stronger practice requires

The implication is straightforward. Colleges should continue investing in dashboards, institutional research, analytics, and shared evidence systems because those capacities remain essential. They make serious inquiry possible and provide a stronger basis for institutional judgment.

At the same time, that investment needs to be matched by equally deliberate attention to how evidence is interpreted and used. Measures need agreed definitions. People responsible for acting need regular opportunities to work through the meaning of the evidence with those who know the measures well. Leadership processes need to clarify ownership and reduce ambiguity about responsibility. Review routines need to support decisions, adjustments, and follow-through in addition to displaying conditions.

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No single office can do all of this alone. It depends on partnership between those who help the college know more clearly what is happening and those who hold responsibility for direction, coordination, and performance. Dashboards remain a necessary part of that work, though they do their best work when they are situated within a broader institutional practice that recognizes both the value and the limits of transaction data and that links evidence to interpretation, interpretation to decision, and decision to action.

Closing reflection

The colleges best positioned for the coming years are likely to be those that pair strong evidence systems with strong routines for interpretation and decision making. They will continue building and refining dashboards because those tools remain important to shared understanding. They will also recognize that wider access to evidence creates further responsibilities for the institution. People still need time and structure to interpret what the evidence shows, clarify who is responsible for what follows, and coordinate responses in a timely way.

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They will also recognize that some of the most important questions about student experience are only partly visible in administrative records. Formal outcomes remain important, but they do not fully reveal the earlier conditions that shaped those outcomes. Colleges that want to learn not only what happened, but where a different result might have been possible, will need to complement transaction data with other forms of inquiry.

When a college has reached the point where the main questions are no longer about whether information is available, it has already made meaningful progress. The next step is to ensure that evidence is connected to the ordinary routines through which institutional decisions are made and carried out, and that the college continues to expand what it can learn about student experience before difficulty hardens into outcome.

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