

## WHAT COLLEGES CHOOSE TO SEE

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Community colleges live inside an evidentiary architecture that shapes what they can know about themselves. Some truths are vivid and quantifiable. Others are visible only to people who stand close to the work and pay careful attention. The way institutions privilege one kind of evidence over another does more than organize reports. It defines which stories about students, equity, and performance feel authoritative, and which remain local and tentative.

This essay looks at how different kinds of evidence travel through a college, what each can reveal, and what remains out of view. Along the way, it considers how the institutions own learning about itself can drift toward what is easy to count and away from what is harder to capture, even when both are equally real.

### Two streams of evidence

Most colleges rely on two broad streams of evidence, even when they do not name them that way.

One stream is transactional evidence. This is the data produced as a byproduct of the core transactions that keep the place running. Students enroll in courses, drop or withdraw, complete credits, receive grades, declare programs, and earn credentials. Advisors open cases and close them. Faculty post attendance and final marks. These activities flow through the student information system and related platforms in ways that lend themselves to regular extraction and analysis.

The other stream is nuanced evidence and consists of what becomes visible only when someone watches closely and listens. For example: a student who can explain a concept verbally but freezes on timed assessments; a pattern of partial understanding across sections that suggests a concept is routinely under-scaffolded; advising conversations where an initial declaration of intent dissolves under gentle questioning; and faculty who see students' work improve when deadlines are clustered differently, even though that shift never appears in any institutional field.

Transactional evidence is structured and repeatable. Nuanced evidence is contextual and interpretive. Both describe reality, but only one feeds the official picture of how the college is doing.

### What institutional research is built to see

Institutional research sits mainly on the transactional side of this divide, not because it lacks curiosity, but because of what the institution asks it to do.

Its primary materials are records the college must keep in any case. Course enrollments, credit loads, grades, term to term persistence, completions, and disaggregated versions of these indicators are the backbone of standard reporting. From these building blocks, IR can

construct the views the college needs for accountability and planning while addressing questions such as: “Which pathways have the steepest losses between first and second term? How do outcomes differ by race, income, age, or enrollment status? Which courses, on average, pose the greatest barriers?”

This is invaluable work. It translates millions of individual transactions into patterns that would otherwise remain invisible. It allows colleges to see inequities they might deny, and to track whether interventions change outcomes over time. Without this transactional base, institutions would be operating on intuition and isolated anecdotes.

At the same time, the very strengths of transactional evidence define its limits. The data correctly record what happened, such as a course drop or a shift to part time, because those transactions are defined the same way every time. To compare across years and groups, each event has to fit into the same set of fields and codes. What does not fit as neatly are the shifting reasons behind those events. A student may drop a course because of a childcare crisis one term and because of a change in job shifts the next. Both are recorded as the same transaction, even though the underlying story is very different. Those stories tend to live in advising notes, classroom interactions, local surveys, and informal conversations. They matter deeply, but they rarely cross into the datasets that shape institution-wide narratives.

The result is not a failure of institutional research. It is a structural constraint on what any office, working from the ERP outward, can reasonably be expected to see.

## How evidentiary choices shape institutional self-understanding

Once this architecture is in place, it does quiet work on institutional self-understanding.

Because transactional evidence is what most easily scales, the institution learns to ask questions that match what it can count. How many students completed within a certain time frame. What proportion persisted from fall to spring. Where do students tend to stop out along a sequence. These are important questions, and they carry moral weight when disaggregated by race, income, and other characteristics.

However, other questions are harder to pose at scale using the same data. How often do students adjust their goals midstream in ways that the system never records. In which courses do small changes in feedback timing make a disproportionate difference for working adults. Where do students experience a strong sense of progress even if their pace does not fit traditional measures. These questions often rely on nuanced evidence that is visible to those close to the work but does not travel easily upward.

Over time, the institution begins to see itself mainly through the lens provided by transactional indicators. Success is framed as movement through the official pipeline. Struggle is framed as slowing down, stopping out, or failing courses. Responsibility is framed in terms of improving those flows. The more textured realities of student experience remain present, yet they function as supporting anecdotes rather than as coequal forms of evidence.

In this way, evidentiary choices do not just inform the story the college tells. They constrict its plot. They make some explanations feel natural, such as “part-time students do less well” or “students in program X have lower completion.” They make other explanations, tied to design details or lived constraints, feel speculative, even when they are repeatedly observed on the ground.

## How evidence travels upward

As evidence moves up through an organization, the gap widens. The higher you go, the more the conversation relies on aggregated measures that can be tracked over time and compared across groups. Completion, transfer, persistence, course success, and enrollment patterns become the language in which performance is described and where response strategies are first drafted, even if only in broad strokes.

Within that language, institutional research is often asked to serve as interpreter and guardian. It makes sure that counts are correct, that trends are honestly reported, and that disaggregation is handled responsibly. It is natural that senior leaders grow comfortable with these numbers. They look solid. They move predictably. They support target setting and high-level goal statements.

When these indicators dominate the conversation, they also begin to define what it means for the institution to be data informed. They bring questions about volume and rate to the foreground and push questions about lived experience during the learning process toward the background. The more nuanced evidence, which does not lend itself to simple charts, arrives less often and usually in small samples, as a special presentation or a single qualitative story.

Leadership discussions then operate inside a relatively narrow evidentiary band. People can see *where* the pipeline narrows but not always *why* in terms that reflect the daily interaction of design, constraint, and learning. They can notice that part-time students complete at lower rates, but they may not routinely hear the finer grained accounts of how schedule patterns, course combinations, and feedback cycles interact with volatile lives.

## The cost of a partial view

None of this implies bad faith. It does suggest that colleges often navigate with a partial view of themselves.

When transactional evidence dominates, institutions tend to understand problems at the level of aggregates and labels. Part-time students, developmental sequences, gateway courses, and programs with low completion become the natural units of analysis. These categories are real, yet they mask considerable variety within them. Students with twelve credits and students with three can share a label and live very different academic lives. Students who intend to complete degrees and those who seek targeted gains can both be counted as non-completers. Courses that carry the same title can differ markedly in pacing and pedagogy across instructors and modalities.

Nuanced evidence can reveal some of these internal contours. It can show that within a broad group, a particular pattern of course pairing is especially fragile. It can surface the moments in a term when students most often reconsider whether the effort is worth it. It can highlight practices that quietly support momentum but never appear in a policy manual. Because this evidence is harder to standardize, it often influences local understanding more than institution wide narratives.

From this vantage point, a pattern comes into view. Institutions may come to understand problems primarily at the level they can see clearly in transactional data, even when the mechanisms that produce those patterns live closer to nuanced experience. Policy discussions may gravitate toward redesigning categories, while the finer grained dynamics

inside those categories remain less examined. The issue is not that one level of analysis is wrong and the other right, but that the evidentiary balance shapes which explanations feel complete and which remain preliminary.

## Rethinking how a college knows what it knows

Without prescribing specific actions, it is still possible to suggest different ways of reading this situation.

One move is simply to name, inside the institution, the distinction between transactional and nuanced evidence. Doing so does not diminish either stream. It clarifies that they answer different questions. Transactional evidence is well suited to understanding flows, rates, and distributions. Nuanced evidence is better suited to understanding processes, experiences, and mechanisms. Treating them as complementary sources, rather than as “real data vs. anecdote,” can change the tone and balance of conversations.

It can also help to see the institutional research office as an expert hub for one crucial stream of evidence, rather than as the sole custodian of all evidence. IR brings methodological rigor, standards for comparability, and a deep understanding of how to work responsibly with the data that live in core systems. That expertise is essential. At the same time, IR can be positioned as a partner to colleagues who are closer to nuanced evidence, helping them frame, test, and interpret what they see. This framing eases the pressure on IR to somehow capture everything through transactional systems and raises the status of other, properly designed forms of inquiry as part of the institution’s evidentiary base.

Another interpretive shift is to treat widely used metrics and dashboards not only as reflections of reality but also as artifacts of what the institution has built itself to see. The presence of some indicators and the absence of others say as much about systems, tools, and history as they do about underlying performance. Recognizing that can open space for questions about which important dynamics are missing from the current view, and what that absence reveals.

Finally, the distinction between transactional and nuanced evidence invites a broader reflection on institutional learning. Colleges ask students to integrate quantitative and qualitative feedback, to attend to grades and also to comments, drafts, and discussion. Institutions themselves can drift into a pattern of favoring the equivalents of grades and credits when they think about their own performance. Noticing that parallel can be a starting point for reexamining how the college knows what it knows about itself, especially while learning is still underway rather than only after it has concluded.

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