

External Reviewer's Report

**Office of Planning and Institutional Research
Davidson College**

By Reviewer:

**David L. Davis-Van Atta
Director of Institutional Research and Analysis
Carleton College**

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Purpose:

At the invitation of the Director of the Office of Planning and Institutional Research, Linda LeFauve, William (Bill) Berg and I visited the Davidson College campus from April 25th through the 27th, 2005, as external reviewers of the IR office and function. The primary initiative for this review was to provide examination of Davidson's preparation for its upcoming self-study and reaccreditation site visit by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), with particular attention paid to the role that Institutional Research has played in support of the current reaccreditation cycle through its work in general, as well as work it may now perform specifically for the SACS process. The reviewers were requested to offer suggestions regarding support that the Office of IR might provide Davidson in preparation for the self-study and reaccreditation.

In addition, the visit was also requested in order to provide a broad-ranging, general review of the IR office and function at Davidson. This report provides one reviewer's observations and suggestions on these topics.

Visit:

Dr. Berg and I were on campus from the late afternoon of April 25th until mid-afternoon April 27th. We met with many key campus officers and faculty while on campus during the 26th and 27th. We were honored to be invited for this review, and are indebted both to Davidson for its confidence in our visit, and support of it, and to all those who gave their time and considerable thought to us during our visit. Davidson made us feel most welcome and comfortable.

During our time on campus, we met with the following campus staff and faculty:

Tom Shandly, VP for Student Affairs

Bobby Vagt, President

Stephen Davis, Professor of Mathematics and Chair of SACS Compliance Committee

Jeanne Neumann, Assoc. Professor of Classics

Linda LeFauve, Director of Planning and Institutional Research

Laura Boyles, Assistant Director of Planning and Institutional Research

Hansford Epes, Registrar and Professor of German and Humanities

Wanda Underwood, Assistant Registrar

Ruth Bratton, Director of Administrative Computing

Cole Barton, Professor of Psychology

Magdalena Maiz-Pena, Associate Professor of Spanish

Elizabeth Mills, Professor of English

John Swallow, Associate Professor of Mathematics

Vivien Shen, Associate Professor of Chinese

Verna Case, Professor of Biology¹

Malcolm Campbell, Associate Professor of Biology¹

Michael Dorcas, Assistant Professor of Biology¹

¹ Invited, but unable to attend in person; invited to submit commentary to the reviewers directly

Clark Ross, VP for Academic Affairs
Kristin Bradberry, VP for College Relations
Karen Goldstein, VP for Business and Finance
Jim Murphy, Director of Athletics
Cris Gruber, Interim Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid
Christi Shi, Information Technology Specialist

This abundant and diverse set of people provided an excellent overview of many aspects of Davidson in general, as well as of the Institutional Research office and function, and the upcoming SACS process.

Observations:

The Office of Planning and Institutional Research is being run expertly. It is clearly a source of broad and varied information that is sought out by many campus offices, committees, and individuals. It appears to be highly trusted for accuracy, completeness, and a lack of bias in its work by those with whom we spoke. These are highly prized professional traits, and campus conditions, for any office, but especially so for an Office of IR. If the office is not sought out and incorporated into general and specific campus planning and decision-making, it is not being used to its real potential. And if the office is seen in one or more quarters as being either less than competent in its work, or, perhaps worst, biased in what it provides, it will have a very difficult time being effective and useful to the College. None of these negative conditions presented themselves during our visit. Indeed, quite the opposite.

We did hear one or two comments along the lines of, “I really don’t know what it is that Linda does.” These were a bit more than simply genuine questions. In addition to being honest statements of fact, at least one or two had some tone of criticism to them. This lack of understanding of the work of IR is not entirely uncommon. If one says, “Dean,” you know what that person does. If you say, “Professor of Economics,” it is generally clear what that person does. However, if one says, “Director of Institutional Research,” it is not clear at all, not necessarily even to another Director of IR. The functions, reporting point, many of the duties, and the studies undertaken by IR vary considerably from campus to campus. They also vary on a given campus over time, as the information needs of the school change. These can make IR something of a mystery office. Usually, comments of doubt regarding the work of IR derive chiefly from lack of significant exposure to its work. More on this in a moment. (See “Recommendations.”)

Both Linda and Laura are consummate professionals in their work. As noted, they appeared to have earned the trust of the campus for good information, analysis, and reporting. They take direction from senior officers, campus committees, and other originators for substantive input to the research agenda for Davidson. They also initiate other studies and reports based on findings from their work that they judge to be informative in some useful way, enlightening to those involved with a given issue, and the like. They possess a good understanding of the key aspects of the operation of a college such as Davidson, as well as things that make Davidson unique. All

primary functions typically performed by and Office of IR at a small, private, selective college appear to be covered reasonably well (some details below).

I should note here that Linda's work is widely known and respected within both the Higher Education Data Sharing (HEDS) consortium of selective private colleges, and within the Association of Institutional Research (AIR). Her presentations within these societies have been among the more interesting that I recall. She brings a special set of perspectives from her background and discipline. This decidedly enables her to approach and illuminate her studies from new, interesting, and informative vantages, often different than the usual ones. I have to believe that some of her work within Davidson would also provide this unique creativity and certain insights to the campus.

One useful way of examining the work of IR, and offering some specific observations from the reviewer's visit, is to consider IR from the vantage of a set of general functional areas. These are listed below, with some brief, core comments on each.

Information Source to Senior Administration

The Director of IR sits on the President's staff. Everyone reported this to be a useful placement. It is very helpful to the Director to be included and involved at this level. It provides both an excellent, on-going information source to IR regarding the primary issues that Davidson faces, current topics of import, the thinking of the Board of Trustees, and the like. This is a superb resource for IR on which to base the agenda of much of the work that it conducts. It keeps IR "in the loop," and the work it performs relevant and current. It also provides an excellent opportunity for IR to provide information that it has to senior officers as issues come up in discussion. Without IR at the table, such immediate, unstructured exchanges occur much less frequently, and tend to be more formalized. While there is a place for this, also having the free two-way flow is very useful, and difficult to assure without having IR at the cabinet level. Too few institutions place their IR Director at this level. Davidson is to be applauded for doing so. Senior officers seemed quite pleased with the information that they get from IR, both in collective caucus, and more formally through their various undertakings with the office. If anything, they wished chiefly for more, and higher-level information than what has been provided to date. (More on this in "Recommendations.")

Information Source to Campus Committees

IR regularly serves several committees, and is an occasional participant in others, both standing and *ad hoc*. The reviewers saw only a limited exposure to this aspect of the office's work. What we saw was generally good. One exemplary project was probably the recent work on the Report on Faculty Compensation. Committee members found the information useful, well-prepared and presented, and the office of IR helpful and pleasant to work with. There may be more of this type of work that occurs than met the reviewer's eye. One way of enhancing the function of IR and its value to the campus is a limited expansion of involvement with central organs of campus governance. More on this in a moment. (See "Recommendations.")

Survey Conduct, Analysis, and Reporting

Davidson surveys a number of its primary constituents and stake-holders on a periodic basis. This type of surveying has become a central aspect of work in IR for many campuses, if not most. It is something that campuses now need for all manner of informed decision-making, and for basic, periodic, structured keeping in touch. This is particularly the case as schools approach reaccreditation cycles. Getting regular, structured profile information from freshmen, and feedback from current students, graduating seniors, alumni, parents, and faculty form a core of this surveying. While Davidson has not periodically conducted all of these, it does conduct some. The work appears to be useful. A number of the offices and individuals with whom we met noted findings from one or more of these omnibus surveys, cited them generally as useful and informative, or cited specific findings that had been important at some point. Here too, the only desire we heard, and recommendation we might make, is for more in the area of survey research and reporting.

Assessment

This is an area that is just emerging on the campuses of private, selective colleges and universities. It has yet to take clear form, establish itself as something of a discipline with research methodologies and a body of knowledge. However, there are now first steps in this direction. Davidson is as well positioned as most other similar schools to undertake work in the area of assessing student learning and other outcomes. The omnibus surveys above are one good beginning and example. However, genuine assessment expands well beyond surveys and other self-reported data. A strong call for such work appears yet to have emerged on the Davidson campus, although some beginnings certainly have, in student affairs for one example.

If, or when, assessment begins to take root and grow at Davidson, it may be unreasonable to expect that IR will be the office to pick this function up, at least not without additional staff, for two reasons. First, assessment of student learning outcomes is a highly specialized field of study, one that will benefit greatly from having someone on staff for whom assessment is a genuine and specific area of expertise. Davidson may want to consider, long-term, the Assistant Director of IR position for this function. Second, IR typically has a great deal of information for which it is counted on to provide across campus. It would be difficult to add full assessment on top of this load without experiencing sacrifices the campus might regret. Having noted these points, it would probably be equally a mistake to set up a separate Office of Assessment, divorced from IR, and the considerable stores of knowledge and expertise it has.

External Reporting

This is an area that has become much larger for most IR offices over the past decade or two, and is now both central and demanding. While some of it can be done from standard campus sources, and some of it does generate useful information for the campus, it poses a high level of demand on IR's time. The Office of IR at Davidson is no exception, and no stranger to this reporting and the realities of its demands. Much of this work is mandatory (or effectively so),

and IR appears to be taking charge of much of it very well. Consider the acronyms for this work, many of which require multiple reports annually: IPEDS, EADA, NCAA, SACS, NCHED, CDS, HEDS, US News, the State of NC, to name some. Various college guidebooks, foundations, and other external agencies can be added. This is voluminous work.

It makes sense for IR to coordinate this work, and to perform much of it. Doing so provides both a central source for basic information, and generates sets of consistent numbers on subjects such as enrollment, faculty counts, graduation and retention rates, and a host of topics. Often an IR director will understand certain nuances, know the proper data sources, and the pitfalls, to such campus accounting tasks. It also makes sense to keep as much of this as possible centered in the Assistant Director's position, freeing the Director for higher-level work.

The warehouse project jointly undertaken by ITS, IR, and the Registrar was positively cited by everyone who mentioned it to us. It appears to have reduced the workload of a variety of obligatory reporting. Even so, as noted, such reporting remains a large time demand for IR offices all but everywhere, including Davidson. Any and all further routinizing, automation, and multiple purposes to which the external reporting obligations can be subjected will be helpful in freeing the IR office for other more in-depth projects of specific value to the College.

Comparative Data/Benchmarking

This too has emerged as a most important function that IR performs for most campuses now. Sets of comparative data that produce key strategic measures, evaluated against these same measures as they are found at peer colleges, provide essential overviews of institutional health: a kind of institutional CAT scan of all the major organs. This information is most useful to senior administrative officers in evaluating where Davidson currently stands in relative strength on a variety of core indicators, as well as providing both the recent and long-term trends. These benchmarking studies also prove useful occasionally to standing and *ad hoc* committees charged with specific topics (e.g., faculty compensation). The Board of Trustees is the third primary audience for these measures, and perhaps the most important. They provide the Board with the CAT scan and overall picture of the institution's health and strength evaluated within the context of similar measures for peer colleges.

Davidson has done a good job of establishing a set of peer colleges for these comparisons, a set of strategic measures to be studied, beginning to routinize collection of relevant data from peer schools, and development of reports to circulate the results of these studies. Davidson's very active participation in HEDS speaks centrally to its wish both to collect such key data on itself, and to share these data with peers, and thereby acquiring the parallel data from them.

Recommendations:

If there were one theme that ran through the conversations the reviewer had, and heard, while on campus, it would be for the Office of Institutional Research, and its Director, to be more active, more involved, take more initiatives, and be more centrally involved in core aspects of campus

management and governance. These sentiments were genuine and repeated independently by multiple individuals with whom we met. They are based on, and driven from, the excellent work that IR has done for Davidson to date. This theme would not exist without strong campus trust in, and appreciation of, the work that IR does for Davidson.

Members of the President's staff, and the President, would appreciate greater input from IR, more active contributions of its best thinking, integration of the various bodies of knowledge that it possesses, and the like, both in its work with individual senior officers and divisions, and in the periodic meetings of the President's staff. Again, these comments were not critical of IR. They were meant earnestly to encourage IR to move from basic information provision toward more synthesis, insight, and educated viewpoints based on information. While it can be a bit of a tightrope that IR walks concerning some of these contributions, needing not to become overly committed to one side of an issue, within the privacy of the President's cabinet meetings, this expanded role is felt to be not only appropriate, but actively desired now for best decision-making.

This interest was not limited to the President and staff. There appeared to be considerable room to expand the presence, role, and value of the Office of IR through participation in campus committees and governance. This clearly would need to be handled carefully. IR should not be forced upon any committee, nor appear to be placed there as a kind of administrative voice under the questionable guise of being an information source. In addition to the President, the academic Dean, and selected others, might consider whether IR could usefully help to inform several central committees. This might be best done in a "staff to committee" type of role. I would recommend that it not be as a voting member. Keeping the non-voting, staff role can often significantly diminish the concern and suspicions regarding having IR present on committees. And IR, for its part, must continue to be careful to be an honest broker, and not take sides in issues other than as sound information dictates – let the data do its own speaking.

This could assist too in addressing the issue of "Just what does IR do?"

One opportunity for this at present, and a subject to be covered in this report, concerns the upcoming SACS self-study and reaccreditation process. If not planned and being done already, giving IR a central place in this process will help not only IR but Davidson as well in doing a good job of its SACS review. There was no indication that such involvement by IR would be resented. Indeed, a number of those charged with responsibilities in the SACS process are *very* much hoping that IR *will* play a central role. IR already owns a great deal of data, and higher information, useful to this process. The next two years' work on the SACS self-study and reaccreditation process provide both an opportunity to help move IR into higher roles and prominence, enhance the outcomes of the SACS process, and substantively assist those with primary responsibilities for it.

Davidson has a good beginning on benchmarking. It is probably worth considering work to formalize these studies in an easily accessible form, e.g., one that members of the Board of Trustees can easily access, and from which they can quickly absorb the key information. The usual form this is taking now is so-called "dashboard indicators" (usually as opposed to an "airplane cockpit"). A number of good models for dashboards are being developed to provide

key benchmarking information at a glance. These can be hardcopy or online. Some advanced dashboard systems also offer some form of drill-down facility for users to go beyond the surface-level summaries into more detailed examinations, as desired.

As noted, IR assists Davidson importantly in conducting a number of periodic omnibus surveys. Examples include the annual CIRP Freshman Survey, and surveys of current students and/or graduating seniors. These will prove useful not only for the SACS process, but can genuinely inform Davidson regarding any number of aspects of students' academic and campus life. Some use of these data appears to have been made, but more may well be possible. E.g., does this information make its way into departmental reviews and other assessments on the academic side of the house? Having asked this, I should note that effective, rich study and distribution of findings from these omnibus surveys is something every Office of IR struggles to accomplish well. These are very large and rich data sources. Studying and distributing them well is a genuine challenge. There is information in them for many campus elements and operations. However, some systematic examination of: the information currently available, and the potential consumers, or uses, of it may reveal untapped potentials for these survey data.

There is at least one prominent hole in Davidson's surveying. It lacks good information from its alumni. Here too, this will be most helpful (perhaps demanded) in the SACS process. Perhaps more though, it will also be a first-time systematic examination of how Davidson alumni view their time, learning, and experiences as undergraduates in light of 5, 10, and perhaps more years' time since they were on campus. They will be well-embarked on advanced degrees, careers, families, and all the other activities of adulthood. Their perspectives on Davidson will be different than they had as students, and in at least some ways more thoughtful and matured. These can be a rich source of information across campus, not just to alumni relations and development. The HEDS Alumni Survey is a relatively low-cost and excellent survey instrument. So is the COFHE Alumni Survey².

Another interesting survey, and one probably worth conducting at least once every 5 to 10 years, is a survey of faculty. Faculty are the core of any college, and knowing about their views on teaching, scholarship, and campus life can provide very important information to an administration as well as to certain faculty committees. If one never surveys faculty, at least some such useful information is never systematically collected and studied. The Higher Education Research Institute's (HERI) Faculty Survey (next offered in 2007-08) is one good faculty survey to consider.

Many IR offices struggle with how to maintain an informative, rich, well-constructed website, and how to keep it updated with most recent information. Davidson is no exception. (I count Carleton's IR website as one in need of serious development and attention. We have not yet cracked this nut here either.) Considering what should be on an IR website, how it will be maintained, and who will have the expertise (and time) to do the work is probably something that all IR offices now need to do. The web is the primary way in which many people wish to access information. Since information is the primary stock in trade for IR, it is reasonable that IR websites need to become much more populated with this stock, be current, and be easy to locate and navigate. Dynamic links from the datasets created by the studies that IR conducts (e.g., the

² COFHE surveys are public domain documents which non-COFHE institutions can use, borrow from, etc.

annual freshman survey; comparative benchmarking data, graduation and retention rates, etc.) to the website are challenging, but ideal if they can be created. In this way, the regular work that IR performs will be moved to the web without a great deal of additional specific effort to do so. Other data and reports will require specific attention and efforts to post to the web. Accomplishing more and richer web presence will almost certainly require support from (or the office responsible for web development if Davidson has this centralized elsewhere).

Finally, the reviewer notes that the name of the office is the Office of *Planning* and Institutional Research (ital. mine). It was not clear that the planning function is formally or functionally an active aspect of the work of this office. We did not have time to adequately come to know how planning is done at Davidson. The College may want to consider greater involvement of IR in the planning function, in effect, as one way of moving Institutional Research into both a greater level of participation in institutional management, and seeing it provide higher-level information; that is, more information than it has historically provided that is prospective rather than retrospective, integrative rather than topic-, survey-, or project-specific, and oriented toward management of larger picture, and longer time-frame matters.

I hope that this report offers some useful information and recommendations. I am happy to discuss any aspects of my visit to Davidson, my observations from it, and the recommendations here if desired. All my best wishes, and thank you again for the confidence and support for our visit to Davidson.