

The Consultant Role in Institutional Research

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Introduction

This chapter examines ways in which consultants are used for institutional research (IR) and assessment. It highlights issues to consider when selecting and evaluating a consultant and makes recommendations about how to effectively use consultants in different settings for different types of tasks. The process of finding, hiring, and evaluating consultants for IR-related tasks is discussed, along with other considerations.

The work of IR is multifaceted, occurring at many levels and in many types of settings, addressing numerous audiences, and embracing an almost infinite array of topics. While most other functions and offices are concerned with the daily transactions of the postsecondary education enterprise, from teaching students to employing faculty, IR is uniquely focused on the use of data, tools, and information for management decision-making.

There is relatively little literature about the use of consultants in higher education (Mathews, 1983; Pilon and Berquist, 1979; Wergin, 1989, 1991). This is due in part because, at many institutions, “using consultants was an acquired skill” (Pilon, 1991, p. 10). “While literally scores of books have been written to assist the prospective consultant, few guides are available to help the institutional client” (Wergin, 1991, p. 1). Wergin’s (1991) *New Directions for Higher Education* monograph Using Consultants Successfully is one of the few sourcebooks available.

Most of the discussion that does exist in the literature is not directly related to IR. For example, there is information about consultants for the academic search process (Greenberg, 2002; Lester, 1993; Pulley, 2005; Rent, 1990), financial aid and admissions (Burd, 2005), fundraising (Olsen, 2004; Walters, 1990), marketing (Strout, 2006), media (Barbalich, 1991), specific disciplines such as medical education (Romberg, 1991; Jenkins, 1996), asset management (Galloway, 2005), tenure (Fogg, 2006), salary equity (McLaughlin and McLaughlin, 2003), and security (Webster, 2002). Given the critical relationship between information technology (IT) and IR, the use of IT consultants is particularly relevant (Carlson, 2004; Fleit and Hawkins, 2004).

The IR community is well served by understanding the role that consultants play in the panoply of postsecondary education. With the growing complexity and diverse offerings of colleges and universities, as well as increased reliance on outsourcing and a climate of scarce resources, consultants can serve an important need at a critical time. Consultants should not be seen as competition for IR offices, but as a natural extension of the IR function when there is an overload of work, immediate need that can’t be met, new technology that can’t be leveraged, or an analysis or report that can’t be developed within the required timeframe. The analysis or report needed in a situation may require a perspective that can only be gained by working with many similar organizations on the same problem. Given these competing tensions and priorities,

it is important for IR professionals to know when and how to use consultants effectively for their organizations.

Why use a consultant?

As discussed elsewhere in this volume, institutional research occurs in a variety of settings, including the institution, system, state, federal, and international level, as well as in consortia, policy institutes, corporations, foundations, and associations. Across these settings, consultants are hired for different reasons, both general and specific.

Fleit and Hawkins (2004) describe how consultants bring objectivity, experience with similar situations, knowledge of best practices, and awareness of new opportunities. The consultant has a “results-oriented framework” and brings a “sense of urgency” to bear on the issue or problem being addressed. She or he is able to provide independent judgment, an impartial opinion, and “take internal issues into account without being invested in the institution’s culture, politics, or historical context” (Fleit and Hawkins, 2004, p. 41). Consultants bring credibility to the problem and to the organization’s response (Wergin, 1991).

Consultants “will be able to distinguish symptoms from root causes” (Fleit and Hawkins, 2004, p. 41) and provide “objective assessment of complex situations and assistance in processing change in an organization” (Wergin, 1991, p. 3). Lindquist (1991) explains that “What we need is professionally constructive criticism, the kind that points us toward feasible improvement without withering us personally.” However, “Constructive criticism is as rare as applause” (p. 67).

A number of factors may lead to the need for a consultant, including a problem that arises suddenly or changes in federal and state regulations. An example of this was the development of the federal Title III program, which required specialized consultants to help institutions apply for these substantial financial grants. “It is not too much to suggest that perhaps one of the single largest causes of the boom in the use of consultants in the smaller colleges was the evolution of Title III” (Wergin, 1991, p. 7). Similar evolution of the consultant role occurred as a result of increased interest in faculty development in the 1980’s and assessment in the 1980’s and 1990’s.

Sometimes, though, there are “feelings of embarrassment about calling in a consultant,” especially “without a clearly defined problem agenda” and this level of ambiguity should be acknowledged (Wergin, 1991, p. 19). Enteman (1991) breaks apart this ambiguity, categorizing the spectra of need as complex or focused, analytical or action oriented, one time or long term, and team or individual.

Consultants are by nature external to the setting and utilized short-tem or intermittently, not replacing staff temporarily or used to “relieve an episodic overload of work” (Wergin, 1991, p. 2). Rather, they “provide high-powered expertise on an as-needed basis... so that the financial exposure of the client is therefore far more limited than it would be if a full-time employee were added to the payroll” (p. 3).

Wergin (1991) analyzes the types of problems for which consultants are needed and presents the following situations:

- An ad hoc project or crisis that requires a highly specialized level of knowledge
- A need to lend external credence to an already identified course of action
- A need for an outside, disinterested opinion on potential courses of action
- Changing institutional responsibilities
- Sensitive investigations
- Controversial campus issues
- A long-standing, chronic problem
- Problem definition (Wergin, 1991, pp. 15-18)

Particular attention needs to be paid to why the consultant is being used and what the “problem” is that requires that a consultant be hired. Wergin explains that:

While all agree that the ultimate success of a consultation depends on how accurately the problem is identified and defined, the difficulty is that “problems” (“causes”) are often hard to distinguish from “symptoms” (“effects”) – vague dissatisfactions with general education requirements, for example – and campus administrators are often too close to the situation to tell the difference (Wergin, 1991, p. 18).

The flip side of this discussion of need is understanding why existing resources in the organization can't meet it. “What is keeping my own staff from solving the problem?” asks Wergin (1991, p. 19). Other questions are framed:

- What, specifically, do I want a consultant to do that my own staff cannot do? What evidence is leading me to that conclusion?
- What would have to happen that would enable my staff to handle the problem or issue themselves?
- If the need is primarily for a particular expertise, could the need be met and costs reduced by sending staff to programs or workshops off campus?
- If the need is for problem definition or conflict resolution, how might campus resources be mobilized to address the issue?
- Assuming that a need for a truly external perspective exists, what are some alternative ways of gaining this perspective, short of hiring a consultant for one or more campus visits? (Wergin, 1991, p. 20).

The Council for the Advancement of Small Colleges (later the Council of Independent Colleges or CIC) developed out of a network of fifty, small independent colleges working together with the help of a Ford Foundation grant to gain accreditation, helping each other. “In spite of the abundance of consultants and consulting firms, administrators of small private colleges continue to have difficulty locating knowledgeable consultants who are familiar with the special needs of small colleges” (Garth and Rehnke, 1991, p. 24). The current version of this network, the Presidents Consulting Service, works to “provide realistic and rapid assistance, grounded in experience in similar types of institutions” (CIC, 2006, n.p.). Twenty consultants are currently listed as of October, 2006.

The nature of consultant work

The nature of consultant work varies widely by topical area and type of activity. Different taxonomies are available to describe this. For example, the U.S. Department of Education catalogues federal contractor capabilities for its Multiple Award Task Orders (MATO), multi-year contracts. The categories include: (1) research and policy analysis/assessment; (2) research and evaluation design, data collection, and analysis; (3) performance measurement; (4) program assessment; and (5) other (specific technologies such as webcasting, along with translation services, technical assistance, and conference planning and support among others).

Potential topics of consulting work include the following, broken out by category. These are co-mingled somewhat between the type of work and the topic. For example, enrollment projections are a task or activity within the larger, enrollment management function.

- *Technology* – Building, maintaining, training for, and supporting the development of applications for a data mart, data warehouse, website, web-enabled data application, online survey, online Factbook, administrative information system, learning management system, portal, Intranet, executive information system, and digital dashboard of performance measures
- *Planning* – Assisting with strategy, data-driven decision-making, accountability, performance measures, competitiveness, governance, board relations, policies and procedures, program design, change management, conflict resolution, business-industry partnerships, campus computing, privacy issues/FERPA, and technology transfer
- *Facilities* – Conducting space utilization, room inventory, space allocation, master planning, capital facilities planning, housing, space needs analysis, new campus development, workforce needs assessment, architecture and design, green building, and library planning
- *Assessment* – Providing, conducting, and analyzing results from tests, instruments, surveys, questionnaires, graduation rates, longitudinal tracking, and course evaluations; as well as work on curriculum design, program review, program evaluation, and online and distance education program planning
- *Analysis* – Conducting peer selection and comparisons, statistics, literature review, special studies, and environmental scanning
- *Research* – Conducting market research, policy studies, data mining, predictive modeling, and special data collections such as peer school surveys
- *Enrollment* – Assisting with admissions planning, projections, rankings, retention, attrition, diversity, financial aid, affordability, transfer policies, wait lists and course offerings, workforce development/nontraditional students, and records management

- *Finance* – Assisting with budgeting, fund accounting, resource allocation, tuition and fees price setting, administrative overhead, indirect cost analyses, economic impact, cost of instruction models, e-commerce, benchmarking processes, and outsourcing
- *Human resources/AA/EEO* – Assisting with workforce planning, benefits, diversity, campus climate, and compliance reporting for EEO/AA and the Department of Labor
- *Academic support* – Providing and conducting course evaluations, administrator evaluations by faculty and staff, faculty workload, student development programs, orientation, faculty development, salary equity studies, and accreditation support
- *Sponsored research* – Obtaining, evaluating, and planning for future grants and contracts funding, including equipment and space utilization studies, indirect cost analyses, and assistance in the negotiation of indirect cost agreements with governmental agencies
- *Miscellaneous* – Planning and analysis for public relations, alumni affairs, capital campaigns, fundraising, development, operations management, security, sports, auxiliary enterprises such as bookstores and dining halls, and social justice

Evaluating potential consultants

Bortolus (1999) outlines the steps to hiring a consultant. These include: (1) deciding what is needed; (2) evaluating in-house skills; (3) using what is available; (4) conducting research; (5) asking consulting firms key questions; (6) evaluating the information; (7) interviewing people; (8) selecting the consultant; and (9) signing the agreement. Wergin suggests “Be clear what you want; be open about the expectations; and be firm in your management of the process. And never, ever lose sight of your larger goals” (Wergin, 1991, p. 2).

In reviewing a potential consulting firm, it is necessary to evaluate its uniqueness and what it brings to the marketplace. Do the principal consultants bring leadership to the IR and assessment knowledge areas in which they are involved? What is the size and history of their consultant practice? Who are their clients and how satisfied have they been with the services that were provided? Every potential consultant should be able to provide references and examples of their work. Preferably, they have a website that includes a free knowledge base of articles that can be used to understand the consulting topic. Do the consultants have and share a vision of the profession of IR and the future? Are they engaged in the larger community of practice?

One problem with consulting firms is that they can appear to be all things to all people, offering everything from strategic planning to survey development to assessment to salary studies. While many IR professionals have had experience with each of these activities, it does not necessarily make them an expert or suitable consultant. Most people cannot reasonably be expected to understand the nuances and relevance of best practices and keep up with the “state of the art” in the profession. Prospective consultants and firms should have a relatively clear and

distinguishable niche in which to market themselves. The consultant vitae or track record should appear focused, telling a cohesive story of how she or he will meet a client's needs. Some consultant websites are very general in nature, while others are quite specific. With a talented web designer, the smallest, one-person company can appear almost multinational in scope. Therefore, a consultant's web presence should be evaluated with caution before generalizing from it about capabilities.

When investigating claims about services and products, there should be evidence of sequential publications and presentations over time within the same topical areas and at the national level. There should be evidence of engagement in the national network of associations, federal and state agencies, and professional opportunities for consultants to become visible in the community of practice. IR does not exist in isolation. It relies on a vast and expansive network of colleagues engaged actively in sharing information, data, and effective practices. In his 2003 AIR Presidential address, Voorhees calls this process of contributing to this community "feeding the network." Consultants' records should show evidence of their helping to feed the network.

They may not need to be on the cutting edge of change and technology in their field, since the use of technology and data is sometimes a slow and plodding process in settings that are often wedded to the status quo and resistant to change. However, there should be signs that the consultant and/or firm uses current tools and is familiar with the latest research, especially for access to national data and studies related to the topic of interest.

"There is no such thing as the 'right person' – someone who is the perfect, ideal consultant under all circumstances," explain Fleit and Hawkins (2004, p. 42). "The 'goodness of fit' depends on the relationship you develop" (p. 42). It should be recognized that "One of the best consultants in a particular area may be incompatible with your institution's ethos," explains Dehne (1991, p. 39). For this reason, it is important to ask prospective consultants to make both a formal proposal and an in-person presentation, especially if the contract is very large, greater than ten thousand dollars. It is critical to read the consultant's curriculum vitae or resume, review his or her client list, and check references. However, "You will generally get evasive rather than negative responses from a client who was not satisfied" (Dehne, 1991, p. 38).

Dehne (1991) provides a list of questions for consultant references, including "Did the person who made the presentation or wrote the proposal head the team? (Be wary of absentee senior consultants. The "bait and switch" is fairly common)" (p. 38). When large firms are engaged, "be careful of the senior partner of the firm selling the job but having a junior person actually do the work" (Fleit and Hawkins, 2004, p. 44). Another concern is if a prospective consultant "works hard to expand the scope of work" beyond what the request for proposal (RFP) already states (p. 44).

Other questions for prospective consultants include:

- "How does your expertise match what has been described as our situation?"
- "What will your process look like for dealing with us?"
- "Will you work alone or with a team? If the latter, what is the added value?"
- "What deliverables can we expect?"

- “How will you know when your work is done?” (Fleit and Hawkins, 2004, p. 43).

The differences between working with companies versus individuals in consulting are discussed by Sheffer (2002) for a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article about careers in educational consulting. Asking “What do educational consultants do?” the answer is “Just about everything.” An interview with a managing associate of the Art and Science Group suggests:

It would be impossible to describe a typical day precisely because there is no such thing as a typical day... Some days I work with clients on defining the issues that concern them and discussing the design of the research. Some days I spend most of my time scheduling team meetings in the office and visits to client campuses. Other days I meet with my project team to discuss the project, analyze data, etc. Or I might spend several days writing reports and presentations. I also travel quite a bit (Sheffer, 2002, n.p.).

An associate at the consulting company A.T. Kearney describes the work as “like jumping into a new research project every six months” (Sheffer, 2002, n.p.). Often, the larger companies require a great deal of teamwork. A KPMG senior manager explains that “project teams can consist of dozens of consultants who work together – sometimes via computer – until the project is completed and then the group disbands” (Sheffer, 2002, n.p.).

There are various types of consulting venues which exist, including: individual, small, large, vendor, research center, and association. These follow several continua: (1) individual or organization; (2) large or small; (3) commercial or non-profit; (4) whether or not a product is also being sold; and (4) mission, with a focus on research and policy, member services, or sales.

The following are examples of each type:

- *Individual consultants* with specific expertise in a topical area, such as the assessment of competencies, financial aid, using national datasets, data mining, responding to college rankings, or developing a master plan. Examples of this type include Sandy Baum and Rocco Russo.
- *Small consulting firms* that have an established group of individuals working within a focused range of topics, such as strategic planning and evaluation. This group can consist of a loose affiliation of associates that work together on similar projects or an office of full- and part-time employees. Examples include the Voorhees Group LLC and JBL Associates.
- *Large consulting firms* with a section devoted exclusively to higher education and a broad focus on issues such as strategy, planning, and federal data collection. Examples of this type include MGT of America, Inc., RTI International, Westat, the American Institutes for Research, and MPR Associates, Inc.
- *Vendors*, both large and small, which offer consulting related to the use of their tests, software, or hardware, such as for administrative information systems, data marts, or course evaluation systems. Examples of this type include Scantron, Information

Builders, Inc., and Nuventive.

- *Non-profit research centers* which provide consulting relative to their research agenda and/or promotion of their unique instruments. Examples of this type include the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), and the U.C.L.A. Higher Education Research Institute (HERI).
- *Associations* which include consulting as part of their mission for higher education. Examples of this type include the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) Presidents Consulting Service and the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) Consulting Services.

The best known of the consultant firms with relevance for IR, assessment, and effectiveness is NCHEMS. With NCHEMS, Dennis Jones, Peter Ewell, and others have been engaged in continued, significant and sustained consultation at the national, state, system, and institution levels on many topics, including data structures, assessment, student effectiveness, technology, finance, and cost of instruction. NCHEMS remains the exemplary model of a non-profit, consulting organization.

Since 1980, NCHEMS has been particularly active in assisting states and national agencies to develop effective approaches to policy in the areas of assessment and accountability, budgeting and finance and governance. The NCHEMS staff is one of the major sources of expertise and technical assistance on issues related to state policy, structure and governance of higher education (NCHEMS, 2006, n.p.).

One other mechanism for institution-level consulting which is in place with accrediting bodies at the national, regional, and disciplinary level. These organizations utilize campus consultants in a unique role that involves promoting, assessing, and judging how well institutions meet accreditation criteria. Many of the assigned teams for regional accreditation agencies will include specialists in IR and assessment, varying with the importance placed on these functions by the body. This cadre of accreditation reviewers should be considered as potential consultants for issues which are within the scope of the accreditation process.

Examples of consulting projects

The use of consultants in different settings for different topics is infinite. It is useful, however, to visualize the types of projects for which consultants might be engaged. For example, institutions have the greatest complexity as organizations and the reasons to hire an IR consultant are multiple, ranging from help with conducting a special salary equity study to assistance developing a comprehensive strategic plan. Institutions will hire consultants to assist them with their administrative information system, detailing effective ways to cut extracts to be used in mandated reporting, something of critical concern after migrating to new software. Peer selection and comparisons using national data are other frequent uses of consultants at this level. Consultants may be brought in to evaluate the assessment or effectiveness program, to provide

insight into accreditation issues, to document indirect cost analyses, or to envision how a data mart or executive information system could be designed.

At the state level, consultants are used for specialized studies such as long-term enrollment projections, complex cost of instruction models, and mapping completions data to occupational outlook and trends in critical shortage areas. Technology consultants may be contracted to build a unit record data collection system for tracking teacher data quality or to prepare white papers outlining possible plans for a virtual university initiative.

Federal contracts may engage consultants in developing a new longitudinal tracking system, building a web-based data dissemination tool, or to provide a knowledge management perspective on organizational issues such as workflow and loss of historical knowledge due to retirements. Foundations may use consultants to assist them in their use of national datasets or to provide external reviews for a research project. An association may hire a consultant to conduct a comprehensive review of its technology use and how its technology plan impacts the future for member services or to track federal issues and meet with legislative staff. Associations use consultants to develop database-driven, web applications such as online program submission, review, and planning; online registration; search engines; members-only resources such as full-text articles and member directories; and customized conference planning tools.

At the international level, organizations such as the World Bank may use an IR consultant to prepare white papers about topics such as the cost of distance learning or to develop specialized software for collecting and dissemination information abroad about education programs.

Across levels, consultants may be used for the larger IR perspective of knowledge management, assisting an organization in analyzing its different databases and collections and how these might be made more efficient and effective. The lens of IR helps consultants look at data structures across many different types of database software packages and administrative information systems, helping to turn transaction data into information for decision-making. This process looks at how data are collected, coded, and stored; then at how datasets may be cut to make extracts; then how these extracts may be cleansed and normalized for use in analyses. The lens of IR also looks at taxonomies and organizational mapping issues. From this review come numerous ways to leverage existing data for further use, such as data marts, data warehouses, executive information systems, and digital dashboards of performance indicators. IR consultants are in these types of projects are called upon to help liberate data from administrative information systems for use in management decision-making.

Finding consultants

There are a number of sources for potential consultants. Dehne (1991) describes two ways to find consultants, through higher education associations and through networking with colleagues.

For general higher education, *University Business* magazine publishes an annual “Guide to Higher Education Consultants” (University Business, 2006). It includes over 200 listings and

is broken into broad categories, of which assessment, compliance, management, planning, research, strategy, and testing are clearly within the purview of institutional research.

The Learning Alliance brings together several consulting firms, policy centers, and higher education research programs to provide “just-in-time expertise” to decision-makers. Among the collaborators are the Jackson Hole Higher Education Group, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), and the Stanford Institute for Higher Education Research. The focus is mostly on four-year institutions. Zemsky describes the purpose of the Alliance as bringing together “a lot of separate expertise into a readily distributable format so that an institution doesn’t have to spend half its time trying to figure out who the right person is to talk to” (Goral, 2006, p. 1).

According to The Learning Alliance, approximately 20% of calls concern strategic planning and 30% involve a budget crisis. The Learning Alliance website provides a searchable list of experts, including four listings under the category of institutional research: Frederick Biedeweg of the Pacific Partners Consulting Group, John Cash of Marts & Lundy, Marvin Peterson of the University of Michigan, and Susan Shaman of The Peach Bottom Group. More information about each expert is provided on the Alliance website; see <http://www.irhe.upenn.edu/>.

For many years, CIC maintained its National Consulting Network for Liberal Arts Colleges, resulting in the “creation of a cadre of consultants with expertise in a variety of areas” (Garth and Rhenke, 1991, p. 25). CIC’s Presidents Consulting Service now helps “recently retired presidents provide advice to current presidents” to solve problems (CIC, 2006, n.p.). The focus of these consultations is on president-board relations, financial management, crisis management, presidential evaluation, mentoring, and administrative reorganization. Additional information is available on the CIC website; see http://www.cic.edu/projects_services/infoservices/pres_consultants.asp.

Potential consulting firms are listed by several of the national associations that support institutional research and planning, including the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP) and the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO). The National Association for College and University Business Officers (NACUBO), the American Council on Education (ACE), and EDUCAUSE also provide links to vendors/consultants.

The Association for Institutional Research (AIR) does not list a marketplace of consultants, but showcases vendors and consultants at its annual Forum meetings and makes this list of vendors and sponsors available on its website. A comparison of exhibitors for the 2006, 2005, and 2002 AIR Forums provides a list of potential consultants for IR, including services for survey/questionnaire research and assessment testing, products from specialized research centers, software, and management support. Among the listings is CollegeNet with a graphical space analysis tool, eCollege with course evaluation software, iStrategy Solutions with analytic reporting and a data warehouse application, and WEAVEOnline’s solution for tracking assessment data for accreditation and program review. No general consulting management firms are listed; mostly testing and software vendors and those promoting their data or data services, such as the National Science Foundation and the National Student Clearinghouse. Some of the corporations listed provide additional specialized consulting related to their products and services. The web-

site, address, contact names, and emails are provided by AIR for these listings; see <http://www.airweb.org/?page=882>. Regional AIR affiliates such as the Southern AIR (SAIR) and New England AIR (NEAIR) also include sponsoring vendors in their annual programs.

SCUP's "Higher Education Marketplace" includes a list of advertisers and a search feature on its website. While there are more vendors included in its annual conference, only 11 are included in the online version of the marketplace as of October, 2006. With the SCUP focus on planning, some campus architecture firms are naturally listed. Among others, Paulien & Associates, Inc. provides services for space needs analysis, space utilization, reallocation, benchmarking, inventory, environmental needs assessment, and planning. Ira Fink and Associates, Inc. is a university planning consulting firm that offers feasibility studies, market analysis, space planning, and facility programming. The websites, contact names and email, address, phone, and fax numbers are provided by SCUP for these listings; see the marketplace, under resources, at: <http://scup.org>.

The documentation of SCUP's Annual International Conference and Idea Marketplace includes a list of corporate sponsors for events and workshops and vendors providing in-kind donations. SCUP also provides an online list of requests for proposals (RFPs) and requests for quotations (RFQs) to which consultants may respond, though there are currently few listings; see <http://www.scup.org/knowledge/rfp/>.

SHEEO provides a searchable "Directory of Consultants" on its website. Like the *University Business* website, this includes executive search firms. It is not clear how comprehensive this directory is or how often frequently is updated, but it is the easiest to use. There are a few research centers, such as the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges Center for Public Trusteeship and Governance; as well as administrative information system vendors such as Datatel; plus consultants. Examples of the consultants include Dickmeyer Consulting, LLC for budget design and strategic planning, David Shupe with the eLumen Collaborative for accountability and outcomes, Mellenbrook Policy Advisors for problem solving and conflict resolution, and The Stillwater Group for board advising and financial analysis. The website, contact names and email, address, phone, and fax numbers are provided by SHEEO for these listings; see <http://www.sheeo.org/whatnew/consult.asp>.

NACUBO provides a "Campus Buyers Guide" that breaks out vendors into numerous categories. The category for consulting is very small and includes the Clarion Group for dining services and the Huron Consulting Group for financial solutions, operational solutions, strategic solutions, technology solutions, research administration solutions, research compliance solutions, and effort reporting. The website, email, phone, and fax numbers for these listings are provided by NACUBO; see <http://www.nacubo.org/x1564.xml>.

ACE includes a "Members and Associates Directory" that includes corporations such as Coca Cola and Microsoft. There are some consultant listings in the directory, among them the Pappas Consulting Group for strategic planning, policy, program assessment, and enrollment management services; and Kaludis Consulting for strategy development and assessment, financial strategy, and technology. Claiming that it is updated daily, the ACE site includes the state,

member type, and website for members and associates; see <http://www.acenet.edu/resources/memberdirectory>.

In its “Member Directory,” EDUCAUSE includes corporate and association member information in an alphabetical listing sorted by first letter. Like ACE, no categories are used. For each listing, the website and contact information for registered EDUCAUSE representatives are provided; see <http://www.educause.edu/memdir/806>.

There is an EDUCAUSE “Corporate Partner Program” in which organizations donate at four different monetary levels and receive various types of recognition. Platinum partners donating \$100,000 or more annually include Sungard Higher Education and VeriSign, while Blackboard and Jenzebar are included among the Gold members’ logos displayed with links to their sites.

In addition to these methods for locating potential consultants, it should be recognized that consultants are most often found through “word of mouth” via personal contacts (Dehne, 1991). Many institutions belong to peer groups, such as the Southern University Group or the AAU Data Exchange, with the agreement that institutional researchers will respond to queries from their peers. These peer relationships are an excellent source for information about consultants. Another source is through conferences and workshops, where their work is sometimes presented. For this reason, institutional researchers should pay close attention to the conference and training opportunities of AIR, SCUP, SHEEO, and the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE). In the case of ASHE, there is a much more academic and research focus among presenters, with special policy and international pre- and post-conference events.

Conference presenters and training leaders should be considered as potential consultants. The ERIC Clearinghouse for Higher Education used to catalogue many of the papers presented at the AIR, ASHE, AERA, and SCUP for the free, online, searchable ERIC database of education resources. It is unclear how fully this practice will be continued with the complete overhaul of the ERIC system. Where available, free, full text versions of conference papers can be found in ERIC up until 2005. The mechanism for submitting conference papers from associations to ERIC is not in place. Previous conference papers are still available in full text through the new version of the ERIC search engine; see <http://www.eric.ed.gov>.

Education Index and Higher Education Abstracts are examples of other bibliographic sources for these research materials. The full text of papers presented at AIR Forums back to 1999 is currently available to AIR members. Readers may assess how useful the papers are to their situation and consider the authors as possible consultants. Authors of the *AIR Professional File* and chapters in the *New Directions for Institutional Research* series are another source to be tapped. If they themselves do not engage in consulting or the RFP does not suit their schedule, workload, or research agenda, they may be able to recommend someone else.

Contracts

A key question to ask in planning for consultant work is: What will things look like when they're done? It is necessary to envision ahead of time, very specifically, the products, processes, and deliverables that will emerge from the consultation. These should be communicated in advance and included in the contract statement of work so that there is no confusion or misperceptions at the end of the consultation about expectations.

Curry (1991) lists six goals for contracts: (1) avoid misunderstandings; (2) maintain working independence and freedom; (3) ensure work; (4) ensure payment; (5) avoid liability; and (6) prevent litigation (p. 44). Five contract types are discussed: (1) verbal agreements; (2) letters of intent; (3) one-page contracts; (4) purchase orders or firm retainers; and (5) specialized, written contracts.

The reader is referred to the literature on contract law and federal and state regulations such as the Federal Acquisition Regulation (F.A.R.) for more detailed information. This overview is not intended as legal or contract advice, merely as a starting point in consideration of these issues.

In some settings such as the federal government, capability statements are requested in an announcement to potential, eligible contractors as a first step in the procurement process. These are submitted by prospective contractors and are used to narrow the field of approved contractors who are allowed to formally respond to an RFP. These may be used when a contract is limited to small business contractors and helps ensure that there will be an adequate pool from which to choose a proposal. Capability statements provide a useful description of a consultant or firm's ability and are usually written by the consultant specifically for the purpose of the contract, stressing previous, relevant efforts and highlighting why the company is able to conduct the work and is suited for the RFP.

Traditionally, there are several standard contract types, corresponding to governmental cost accounting standards, among them time and materials, fixed price, and cost plus. Other variations occur, but are not addressed here. Within cost plus, these are variations such as cost plus fixed fee and cost plus fixed fee plus award fee. Quality incentives or award fees may be included to ensure that delivery dates are met, that the project is on time and on budget, and that expectations are met.

For consulting firms, there are cost accounting standards that must be adhere to, especially if they receive any federal or state contract or subcontract monies. Unless the contract is time and materials, consultants are limited in the number of hours they may bill per month, subject to the calculation of their approved hourly rates for different labor categories or types of employees. The type of contract varies accordingly to the amount of risk that it entails for a government agency. With time and materials, there is a greater risk of cost overruns. The use of a fixed fee contract sets the price ahead of time. The consultant may make more profit if the cost is less, but stands to make less profit if costs (usually labor) are higher. Cost plus contracts are based on actual costs for salaries, benefits, and other direct costs.

Contracts typically incorporate indirect cost rates for overhead and for general and administrative (G&A) costs. Even a fixed price contract, in which the full price is set ahead of time

regardless of how much work it takes to complete, may require a general budget that includes loaded labor rates including salaries, benefits, overhead, G&A, and award fee/profit. These indirect rates must have been established as provisional or final by a federal agency and will be applied to all contracts with federal and state agencies. Sometimes, there will be separate parts of a consulting organization to handle governmental versus commercial contracts, since different cost accounting rules apply.

Indirect rates are established by the government agency which awards the highest dollar amount of contracts, with others required to use the agreed-upon overhead and G&A percentages for the period of agreement, usually one year at a time.

Cost plus fixed fee contracts usually set (what may seem to some) a low fixed fee, such as 4%, depending upon what is allowable by the government agency involved. This is the limitation on profit for the consultant.

IR professionals need to understand the contract types and how the rate structure is calculated for consultants they may engage. Individual consultants that are not part of a firm that is a prime contractor with government agencies may not consider indirect costs in their business proposals. However, these hidden costs should be understood in calculating what the organization thinks a consultant's overhead costs should be and how they will be born. At institutions, the sponsored research and general counsel's offices may be involved in the preparation and execution of a contract. This review and approval process is usually required for contracts over a certain amount and IR staff should anticipate this in their planning process for hiring a consultant.

In the process of drafting the statement of work, including any guidelines and general information about the project, federal and state agencies will often ask for a technical proposal in which the consultant describes how she or he will do the work, including staffing, task by task, for each activity. The technical proposal is where the consultant demonstrates expertise and explains how she or he will anticipate and solve any potential problems that are expected to arise. It documents prior work that is similar in nature and includes specific recommendations about project timelines and deliverable dates. A business proposal is usually prepared with detailed information about costs and rates, according to the required contract type.

Many IR-related consultants will make a proposal in response to an RFP and include a total price with relatively little breakdown, such as a fixed price contract. This is less risky for both parties, but relies on an accurate prediction ahead of time of the costs, so that it is not too profitable for the consultant and does not require too much effort on the part of the consultant organization or institution. A cost plus contract is more manageable, but only if there is good dialogue well in advance about any areas in which costs may increase, for example with an unexpected increase in the amount of work or type expected to be accomplished (otherwise known as "scope creep"). This is why the statement of work needs to be as explicit and detailed as possible. It is the responsibility of the organization to detail the statement of work. If not broken out sufficiently, it is the responsibility of the consultant to include more detailed language in the technical proposal.

While it may not be stated in the contract or statement of work, the expectation needs to be made clear that there will be “no surprises.” Any “unexpected discoveries” should first be communicated privately and “the public report of them should never come as a surprise to the administration” (Enteman, 1991, p. 61). Confidentiality should be included specifically in the contract, including some kind of non-disclosure agreement if necessary, such as in the use of individually-identifiable, student records. All applicable laws and regulations should be listed in the contract documentation as an appendix with the statement that these must be followed.

Lindquist explains that “consultant reports are not like academic papers... A consultant’s effectiveness rests not on how well received her reports are (although material success may come of that); the test is how useful and used to improve things the feedback is” (1991, p. 68). Formal reports, feedback to groups, and action planning all have their place in the consulting process.

A written report of the consultation should be expected, even for those that involve the creation of specialized software or training. The report needs to be prepared and shared on time. Administrators should be given early drafts in time to make comments and edits. If the team lead or lead consultant is not the one who prepares the report, this person should provide her or his endorsement of it. A final version should be prepared suitable for dissemination to a larger audience. Finally, nothing should be prepared which the organization or consultant would not want to be FOIAble, accessed through the Freedom of Information Act and comparable state “sunshine” laws and regulations.

In some cases, a team of consultants or organizations may work together to respond to an RFP and will present a proposal that lays out how the contract will be divided into subcontracts. This requires the principle investigator or prime contractor to make sure that subcontractors follow all applicable laws and regulations. Administrators need to carefully understand the use of subcontracts, especially if the organization expects the award of a contract to meet requirements for a small business set-aside or minority, disadvantaged, special zone, or other designation. The prime contractor may meet this designation, but the subcontractors that may be doing the bulk of the work may not. The question will also arise about what level of contact between the organization and subcontractors is appropriate and expected.

It should be communicated ahead of time who will be involved in the work and when, by task and activity. Contract proposals traditionally include a breakdown of responsibilities by task, including hourly estimates by individuals. Staff members are named and their qualifications listed, at least for key positions. The technical proposal should state specifically who is responsible for managing each part of the work, ensuring that the work is done, including communication about and getting approval ahead of time for any potential cost overruns before they occur. The RFP and proposal should also include a timely payment schedule and the method for evaluating and distributing any award or incentive fees for meeting expectations, being on-time, and on-budget.

Special regulations apply to the selection process for consultants and these will vary for commercial and governmental agencies and state and federal levels. Generally, an RFP is posted and consultants respond to it with a proposal. A capability statement may be required as an initial step, especially if the award is part of a small business set aside. After the proposals are

evaluated, finalists are selected and sometimes brought in for presentations and further negotiations. A final award is made based on both the technical and cost proposal information, with weighting of cost and the merits of the proposal, according to predefined evaluation criteria. Another iteration of the cost and/or technical proposals may be required to ensure that all expectations are met, prior to the decision of award. After this, the contract is finalized and executed. There is usually a kickoff meeting to discuss and refine the schedule and deliverable dates, as well as to answer any questions and build an initial relationship and entree for the consultant with the organization.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the use of consultants for IR and assessment, including types, selection, location, and contracts. With the onslaught of work and information overload throughout postsecondary education, these are challenging times for organizations when the work cannot always be completed as required and when a critical, impartial point of view is needed to bring effective practices, national data, and technology to bear on a problem.

The consulting arrangement should not be entered into lightly. Its results should be envisioned well in advance, so that the work is as fruitful and meaningful as possible. There is no substitute for communication, for a clear and comprehensive statement of work, and for taking responsibility to monitor the consulting process, budget, deliverables, and schedule. The organization should expect to spend as much time on the consulting task as the consultant, albeit with different roles.

IR staff need to understand the levels of risk associated with different contract types and choose an appropriate contract vehicle. A clear, detailed, statement of work is necessary to prevent misperceptions and differences in expectations. Activities, tasks, deliverables, and schedules should be made as explicit as possible.

There are many sources for consultants, though there is no comprehensive website for IR and assessment specialists. It is necessary to sort through different sources and types of listings to locate them. Word of mouth through peers, conference presenters, and others is sometimes successful. However, this may fail to find consultants with a different client base or who are new to the marketplace. Consultant websites are a critical resource and should include a knowledge base of previous work, a client list, and curriculum vitae.

Overall, there is no one best consultant to select. Rather, a process of investigation, evaluation, and acclimation is necessary in which the consulting relationship builds over time.

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