

Using Your Data for Improvement: What to Track and How to Create a Data Culture

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Today's Discussion

1. What is a data culture and why do you want one?
2. What data should you track?
3. Build your capacity for data
4. How to use data to help achieve your strategic goals
5. Questions and resources

To be successful, you need three things

Wisdom from Dr. Lew Sanborne



Data needs to be:

Accurate

Actionable

Accessible



**What is a data culture and
why do you want one?**



1



“Culture is the way we do things
around here.”

- Terrence Deal and Allan Kennedy

A data culture can be **NEGATIVE...**



Question the data source, methodology, purpose, and response rate



Get lost in analysis paralysis



Look at the data and then leave it on the shelf (i.e., ignore what it tells us!)

What does a **POSITIVE** data culture look like?



Data from a variety of sources is **regularly gathered, distributed, trusted, and valued**



Data is sliced and analyzed in ways that **provide better perspective** for targeted initiatives



Data provides insight, raises new questions to be explored, and **informs decision making**



Data is shared to close the feedback loop, so people know what has been done and why

The Three D's of a Positive Data Culture





Data doesn't have the answers....

It helps you to know what questions to explore to determine the best action to take for improvement



**What data should
you track?**

2



“...if there’s no data, there’s no problem and
if there’s no problem, there’s no solution.”

- Patrice Willoughby
NAACP’s Chief of Policy and Legislative Affairs

What do we want to know?

Examples of questions the data may lead to

- Which subpopulations are impacted the most by this area?
- How are students/employees interpreting this initiative?
- When was the last time we implemented a new procedure/process here?
- What have you heard students/employees observe on this topic?
- What are the national trends in this area?
- How does this contribute to our goal of _____(X% retention, % increase in...)?

A positive data culture helps to facilitate an environment that is comfortable with digging deeper and asking questions

What kinds of data do you need to collect?

Recommended Reports

Retention

- Retention: Fall to fall and fall to spring
- Completion and graduation
- Predictive model

Academic

- D/F/W rates
- Academic support usage
- Advisor-advisee contacts
- Course-related information

Student Feedback

- Student satisfaction
- Incoming student motivation
- New student receptivity to support
- Mid-year and second-year feedback

Strategic/Institutional

- Institutional strategic plan
- Written retention plan
- Strategic enrollment plan

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**Build your capacity
for data**

3

1. How are data collected on your campus?

- **Systematically**, on a regular cycle
- Good **representation**
- **Reliable, valid instruments** and data sources
- **Intentionally**, with planning
- **Student data** (attendance, utilization, satisfaction, motivation) and operational data (processes)

Once it is collected, it needs to exist somewhere

2. How are data stored at your institution?

- **Accessible** to the right people
- **Interactive** vs. Static
- (Just static reporting / checking a box is not going to lead to meaningful change on campus)
- Look for ways to **centralize data** from a variety of resources
- Consider **tracking and reporting** with three comparisons points
 - Over time
 - Against internal targets
 - Against external peers

Safely storing is important but what really matters is...

3. How are data shared? (Who gets what, when?)

- Determine **who is responsible** for distributing data
- Recognize that people may need **training to understand** the data
- Provide data that is going to be **most valuable** to the audience it is being shared with
- Quantitative data is a **starting point** that may lead to the need for qualitative data (i.e., focus groups, listening sessions)
- Provide the **time and space** for people to work together in their review of the data, to raise questions, make sense of the findings, and to identify the best **action plans**
- Provide opportunities for **cross-functional brainstorming**

Sharing data is critical so it can be used to inform decision making

4. How are data used at your college or university?

- **Build buy-in** for relying on data as a place to begin
- **Collaboration is key** between individuals and departments
- Document to-do items and **have accountability** with timelines and identification of who is responsible
- **Track what is done with the data** and what outcomes it leads to
- Establish a method for **closing the feedback loop** so everyone knows what has been done and **why**

Ultimately you want data to lead to action!



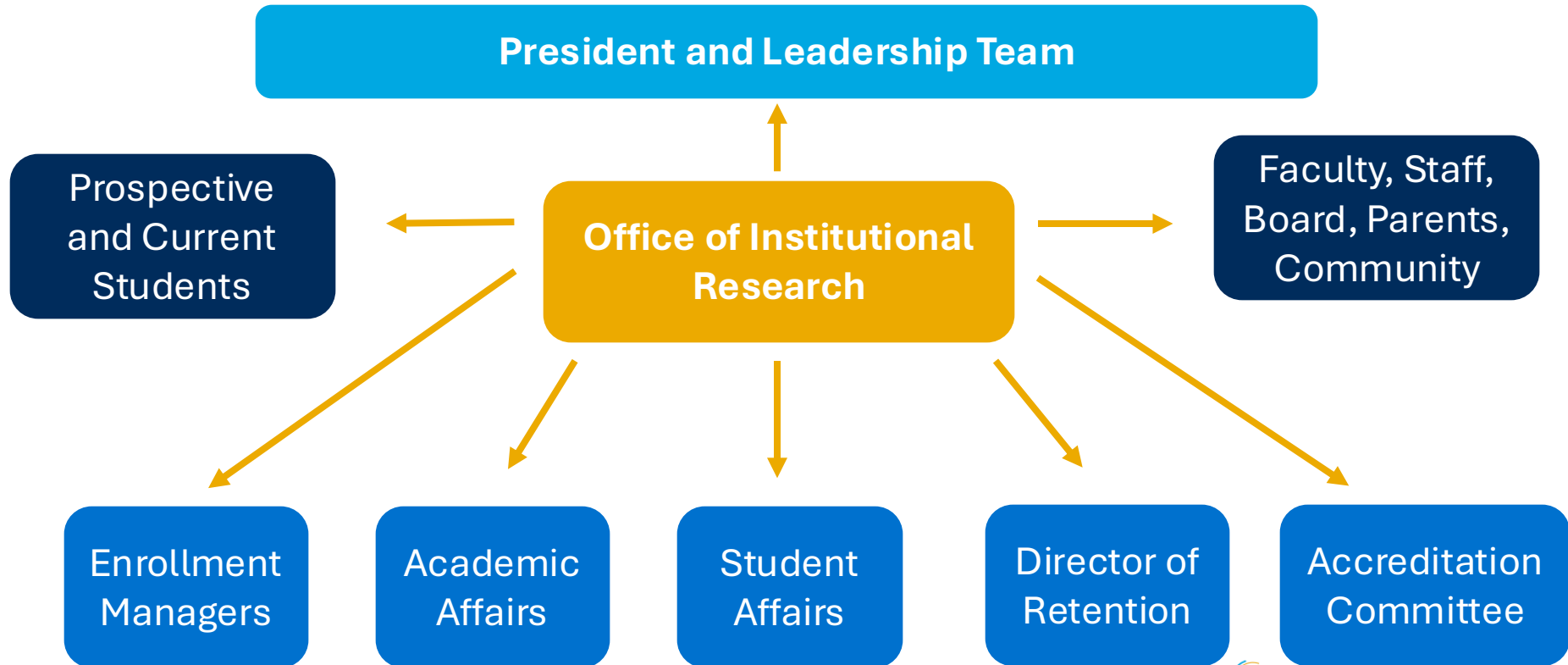
**How have you built
capacity in these four
areas?**



Make friends with your Institutional Research office and the data subject matter experts (SMEs)!

They are your key resources for internal and external data

IR office can provide relevant data across campus



When people know data exists...

...and they feel comfortable with how to interpret it:

- They will ask for it
- They will use it
- They will look forward to it

Data will become part of your culture!



How to use data to help achieve your strategic goals

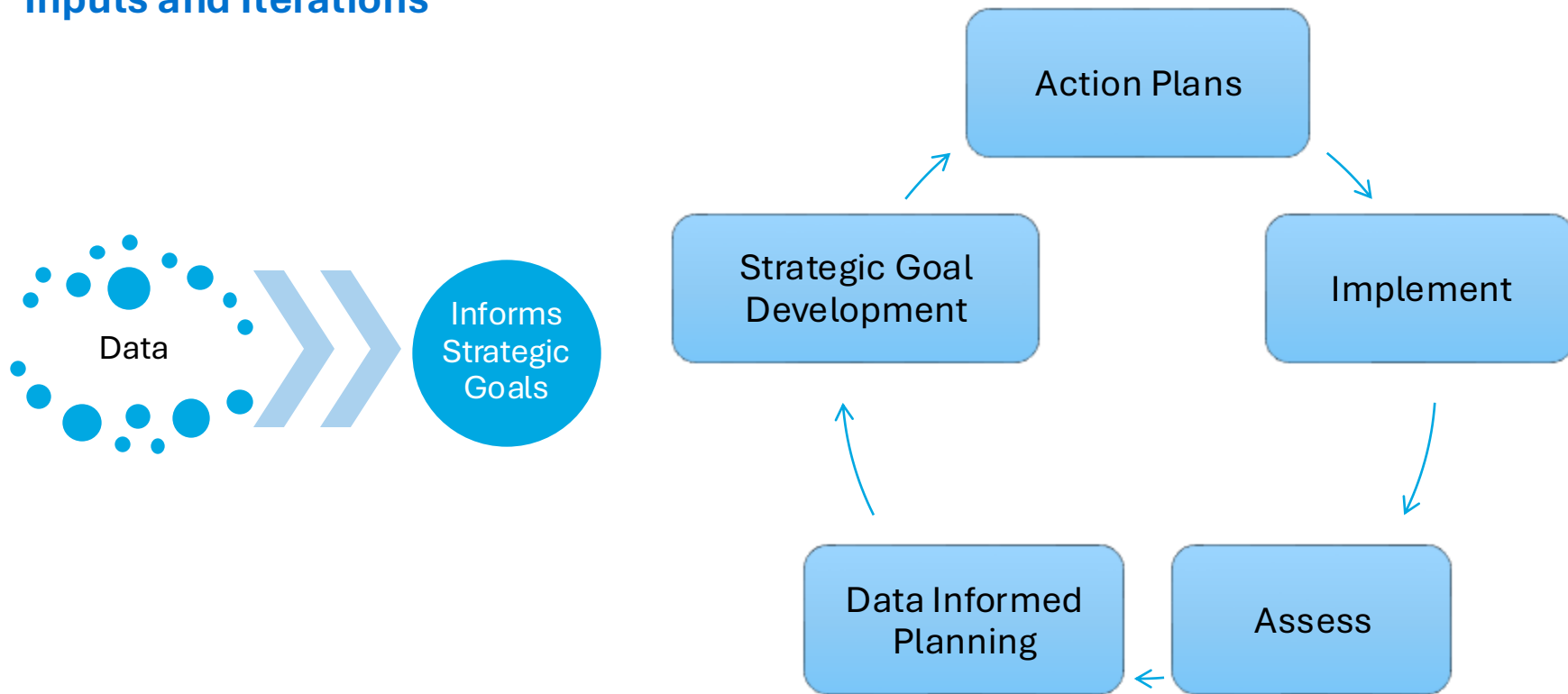
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What can data help you accomplish?

- Retain or gain **funding**
- Identify gaps in **performance**
- Improve **processes** on campus
- Know how you **compare** over time and externally
- Achieve **accreditation** or re-affirmation
- Plan for the **future**
- **Celebrate** improvements that have been implemented
- **Target** resources where they will make the most impact

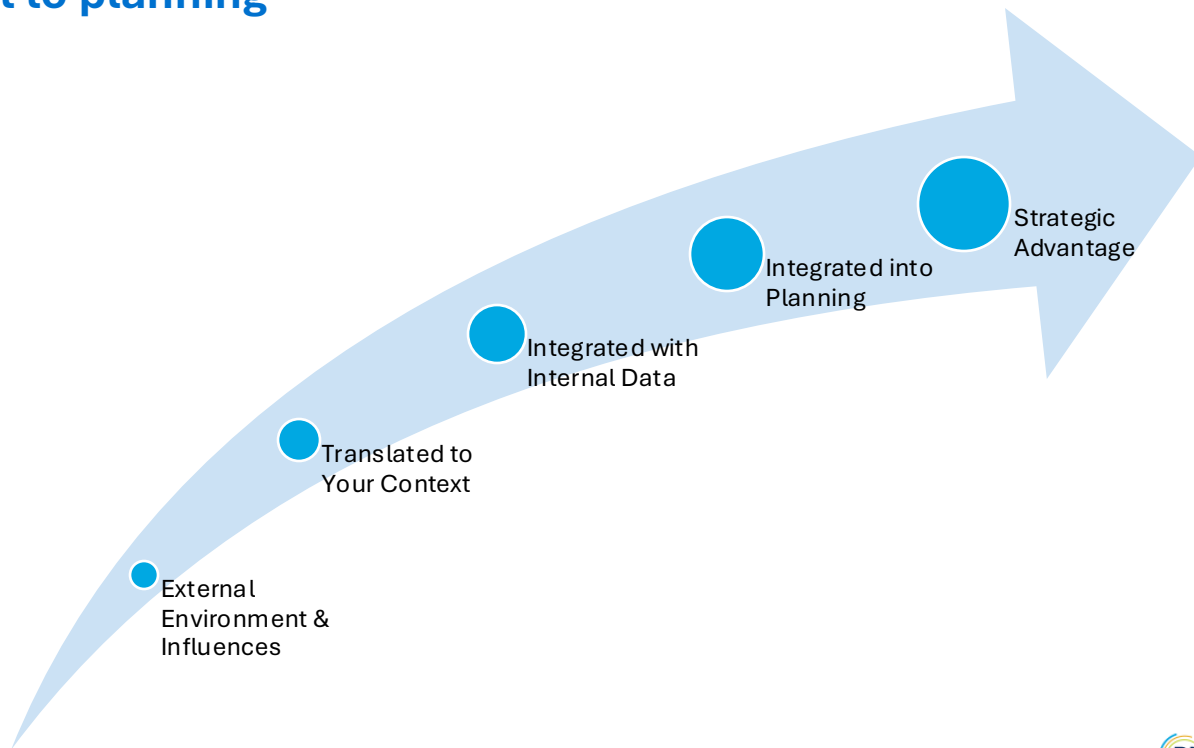
Two Related Approaches to Using Data

Inputs and Iterations



Using Data for Strategic Advantage

Strategic advantage is formed by a data-informed understanding and alignment to planning



Using Data to Form New Strategic Goals

Be data-informed

- Gather data you have – consider both **strengths and opportunities**
- Identify data needs ... but **don't be paralyzed by what you don't have**
 - Use both internal and external data
- **Share the data** and make meaning as a team, community, or planning groups
- **Discuss what the data tells us** about existing priorities and what new priorities does it help to uncover?
- Blend what you've learned from the data with local knowledge and context to **inform new or enhance existing strategic goals**
- Be committed but not married to **our plans**



Perception vs. Reality

Decisions = Action Items

What are ways we can approach changing the reality or the perception?

1. Make immediate changes to policies or procedures
2. Plan for additional resources (time, money, people) to make a **future change**
3. Use information to communicate better or differently about **why something is the way it is** or what is available

Also important to **communicate** after something new has been implemented so people know **why the change was made** and that **you value student/employee feedback**

Understanding Your Planning Process

The ideal and the actual



Aligning Planning and Improvement

Integrative and Integrates



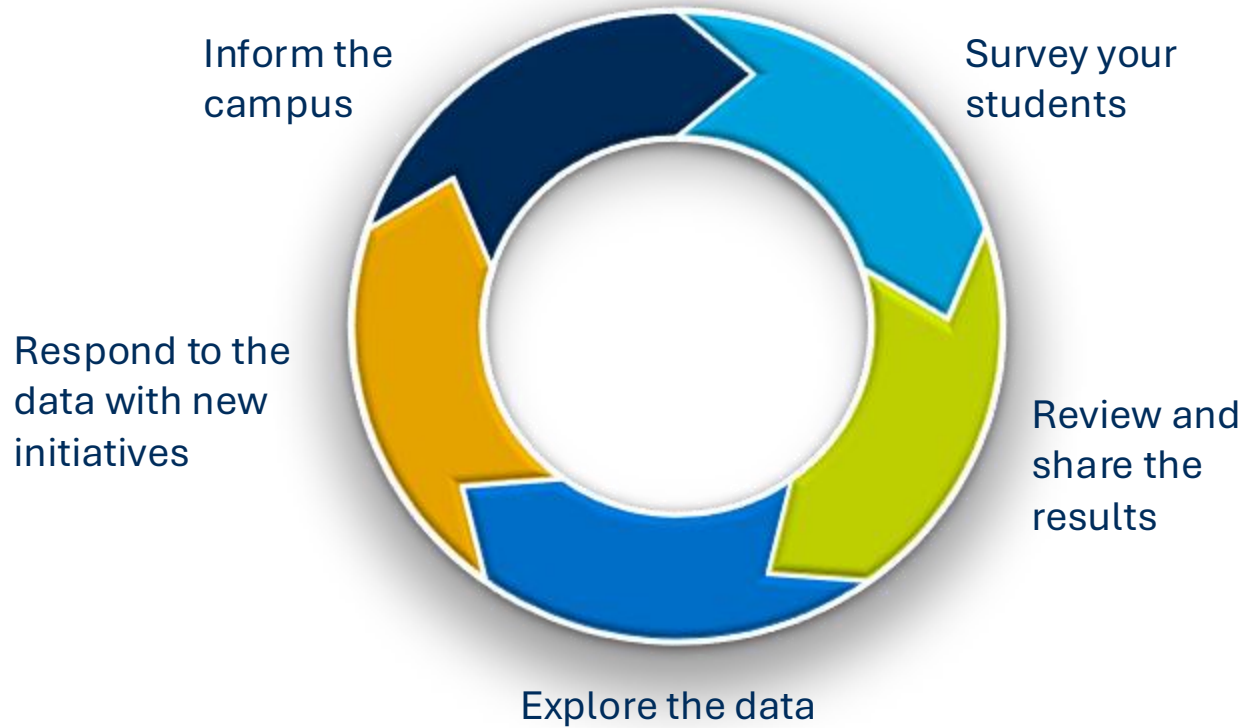
Have specific calls to action with the data

- How can the college ...
- How can your office / department ...
- How can you...
- Gather recommendations and “I will” statements

The background is a solid blue color with a faint, semi-transparent image of interlocking gears and a hand. The gears are of various sizes and are arranged in a way that suggests a complex mechanical system. A hand is visible, with fingers spread, as if reaching out or interacting with the gears. The overall image has a technical or industrial feel.

**There needs to be time /
space to
DO SOMETHING
between data collections**

Example: Data Cycle with Student Satisfaction





The feedback our students provide to us with the student satisfaction data is a **gift** that we need to take seriously and use wisely.

- President of an SSI Client Institution

Intentionality and Practice

Culture can develop through repeated successes

- **Discuss** how the data informs planning and decisions
- **Celebrate** positive outcomes
- Be willing to **fail and try new ideas**
- **Engage the community** in making meaning of both data and outcomes
- **Model and incentivize** data-informed planning processes
- Include those in planning processes that can **support a data-informed approach**
- Acknowledge that data will not replace **local knowledge and sound judgement**



Questions and Resources



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Recommended reports: Retention and Student Success

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Retention Reporting

Report Type	Responsibility	Cadence
Fall-to-Fall retention <ul style="list-style-type: none">Total retentionFirst-yearTransferTargeted populations (Online, Adult/returning, Graduate, race/ethnicity; gender; financial need)Region/market segment—aligned with recruitment goals		Annual census (Fall) for each cohort and progression at least through first four semesters for each cohort (1 st to 3 rd ; 2 nd to 4 th)
Fall-to-Spring retention (with the above categories)		End of Fall Semester
Completion/Graduation rates <ul style="list-style-type: none">6-year graduation rates for first-time full-time4-year graduation rates for transfer studentsTargeted populations (see above for possible categories)		Annual
A predictive model to establish an attrition curve for the total population and specific cohorts		Annual (Build model in spring/summer)

Advising/Academics

Report Type	Responsibility	Cadence
Courses with high D/F/W rates		End of semester
Monitor student usage of academic support services by academic major, courses, and/or difficulty of courses		Annual
Advisor-Advisee contacts: Number of contacts and by delivery mode (in-person, virtual, asynchronous support)		Annual
Advisor load report by department		Annual
Track credit hours attempted versus completed/earned for each term; track SAP		End of Semester (aligned with SAP)

Wealth of resources

- 2025 Effective Practices for Student Success
- 2025 National Motivation to Complete
- 2024 National Student Satisfaction Report
- 2025 E-Expectations Report
- 2025 Marketing and Recruitment Practices




research report
2025 E-Expectations* Trend Report
Learn what college-bound high school students expect when visiting college websites, responding to communications and ads, interacting with social media, and more.

[Get This Research Report](#)



research report
2025 Effective Practices for Student Success, Retention, and Completion Report...
Learn which student success practices are most widely used in this survey of campus retention leaders at four-year and two-year institutions.

[Get This Research Report](#)



research report
The AI Divide in College Planning
Read research into how high school students use AI tools during the college planning process.

[Get This Research Report](#)



research report
2025 RNL National Alumni Survey
Dive into data and insights from more than 50,000 alumni on giving preferences and connection.

[Get This Research Report](#)



research report
2025 Marketing and Recruitment Practices for Undergraduate Students...
See the most used and most effective strategies for communications, advertising, digital marketing, AI, admissions events, and more at four-year and two-year institutions.

[Get This Research Report](#)



research report
Guide to Selecting the Right Digital Assistant
Find out the key features and questions you should consider when choosing a digital assistant to increase engagement with prospective students and families.

[Get This Research Report](#)

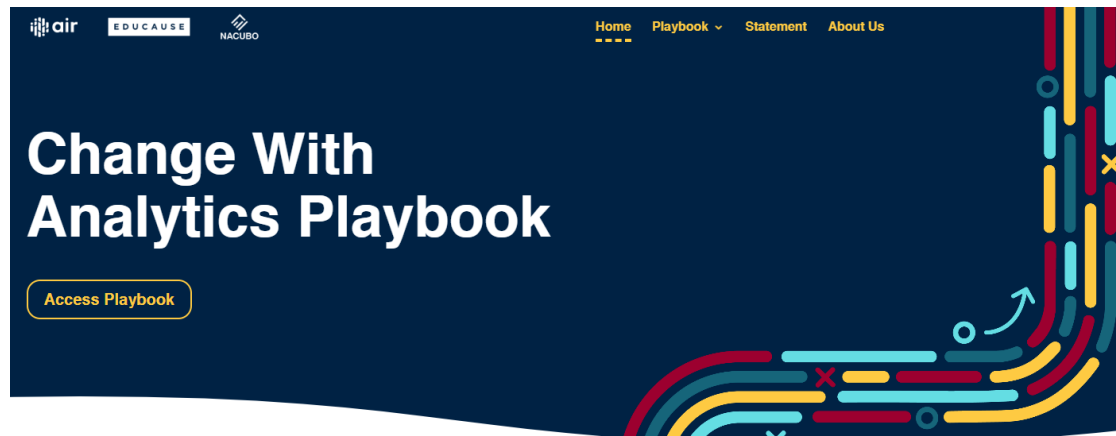
RNL Tools to Gather Data

- Motivational survey for incoming students: [College Student Inventory](#)
- Retention analytics tools: [Student Retention Predictor](#)
- Student success planning support: [Retention Consulting](#)
- Satisfaction survey for currently enrolled students: [Student Satisfaction Inventory](#)
- Employee satisfaction: [College Employee Satisfaction Survey](#)
- External data analysis: [Market Research Services](#)

[Learn more at RNL.com](#)

Data Resource – available for free

[Changewithanalytics.com](https://changewithanalytics.com)



The Association for Institutional Research (AIR), EDUCAUSE, and the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO) stand together with a strong sense of urgency to reaffirm higher education's commitment to the use of data and analytics to make better strategic decisions. Since the release of *The Joint Statement on Analytics* (2019), our three associations, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, have partnered with subject matter experts from colleges and universities to develop the *Change With Analytics Playbook* to support postsecondary institutions in meeting this call to action.

Thank you!



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The 39th Annual National Higher Education Conference