This chapter describes how an action research framework facilitates using evaluation and assessment results to improve programs and demonstrate institutional effectiveness.

Using Action Research to Support Academic Program Improvement

Michele J. Hansen, Victor M. H. Borden

Technological innovations of the past two decades have enabled institutional researchers to collect, store, analyze, and disseminate an unprecedented quantity of program-related information. But producing more data does not necessarily guarantee that recipients will use the information effectively to develop or improve academic programs and services. Action research provides a constructive framework for ensuring that critical information is used by key stakeholders to implement data-driven interventions for continuous academic improvement. This approach allows institutional researchers to move beyond the role of data conveyor to one of facilitator of critical program and institutional change. Most important, the action research paradigm changes the relationship between the information requester and information provider from that of client and service provider to a collaborative team engaged in reflective practice and organizational learning.

Lewin and colleagues introduced action research in the 1940s as a form of experimental inquiry applied to the resolution of societal and organizational problems. World War II provided a wide array of opportunities to demonstrate how action research can be used to address social problems such as intergroup conflict, racial prejudice, and food shortages (Lewin, 1952). Early action research paradigms were also employed to link employee survey data with productivity and morale improvements in manufacturing plants (for example, Coch and French, 1948; Likert, 1967; Whyte and Hamilton, 1964).
During the postwar reconstruction years, action research moved into the education sector. McKernan (1991) reported that action research was employed as a “general strategy” for redesigning curriculum to address multifaceted social problems, such as intergroup conflicts and prejudice in the school systems (as cited in Masters, 1995). According to Masters, action research was typically conducted by outside, expert researchers in collaboration with teachers and school administrators. Stephen Corey at Teachers College at Columbia University is recognized as one of the earliest advocates of action research in the field of education. Corey “believed that the scientific method in education would bring about change because educators would be involved in both research and the application of information” (Ferrance, 2000, p. 7). However, action research had its detractors. In the mid-1950s, action research was criticized for being unscientific and the work of amateurs (McFarland and Stansell, 1993). The growing split between science and practice also detracted from the acceptance of action research. The use of scientific designs employing quantitative methodologies in laboratory settings was advocated as a more effective approach in solving educational and other social problems. But by the 1970s, the pendulum had swung back, and action research resurfaced as an effective way to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Ferrance, 2000; Masters, 1995).

The resurgence of action research in the 1970s took several forms. It was incorporated in large part in the work of Argyris and Schön (1978, 1996) on organizational learning. According to Dick (1997), action learning and action research are similar processes, as they both involve acquiring knowledge from experiences and focus on implementing interventions (actions) and reflection in a cyclical manner. Following this line of development, Senge (1990) incorporated the action research paradigm into his work, *The Fifth Discipline*, as the discipline of “mental models.” The basic tenets of action research were also manifest in the growth of program evaluation research methods in both their quantitative (Rossi and Freeman, 1993; Rossi, Freeman, and Wright, 1979) and qualitative (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) forms.

The action research model has been used in more current educational and health care settings as a useful method for evaluating programs and implementing fundamental change. It has been employed as an effective approach for increasing the understanding of classroom dynamics and improving teaching and learning (Harwood, 1991), evaluating inclusive school programs (Dymond, 2001), examining the sociopolitical environment and concerns relevant for elementary school principals striving to work with disabled children and their families to implement successful inclusion programs (Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, and Schertz, 2001), improving a reading program for impoverished South African children (Flanagan and Nombuyiselo, 1993), and managing change in an interdisciplinary inpatient unit in a large health care organization (Barker and Barker, 1994). Thus, its employment has taken on several forms in a diversity of settings.
Harwood (1991) argues that action research can be an important tool for giving key stakeholders control at every stage of the research cycle and for advocating dialogue, reflection, and commitment to intended educational goals. Barker and Barker (1994) found the action research model to be an effective approach for reducing employee resistance to fundamental and necessary organizational changes. Their results suggested that the participatory model promoted positive staff morale, open communication, lower turnover, team problem solving, and improved goal attainment.

Colleges and universities are facing increasing demands to demonstrate that they assess the effectiveness of their programs and services and use that information to improve. As a direct result, many higher education institutions have invested significantly in building institutional research and assessment capacities. But administrators and faculty are often discouraged when they do not see these investments producing obvious improvements. We suggest in this chapter that there is a link missing in many institutional research and assessment programs and that action research facilitates the connection between evaluation research results and program improvement.

The Action Research Model

Like all forms of applied research, action research involves a process of problem identification, research question formulation, and data collection, analysis, and interpretation to determine how the results inform the research questions. As an evaluation process, the results of action research are used to develop plans for resolving the initial problem, thus “closing the loop.” Action research is distinguished from other forms of applied research in the way the researcher works with other stakeholders, such as program managers, front-line staff, and organizational administrators. Within this approach, research questions are determined in discussions among stakeholders and researchers. These discussions often require several iterations so that the perspectives of differing stakeholders can be accommodated. Data collection involves both researchers and stakeholders, as does data analysis and especially interpretation of findings. Results are reviewed as part of a stakeholder action-planning activity. Planned interventions are implemented and data are collected again to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions. The action research model is thus a cyclical, collaborative process of diagnosis, change, and evaluation.

Institutional researchers are often asked to contribute to the evaluation of campus programs and services, either directly or indirectly. Questions are posed based on real-world problems. Colleagues are consulted to refine the questions. Information is assembled, analyzed, and reported to those who posed the questions. The institutional researcher may even discuss with the client the implication of the results for decision making. However, the traditional information-support paradigm of institutional research often falls short in some notable ways from the action research approach.
For the institutional researcher, requests for information and analysis are typically viewed as independent tasks or projects rather than as a continuing cycle of planning, evaluation, and improvement. Although ostensibly some stakeholder needs will be met sufficiently following an articulate presentation of program outcomes supplemented with artful displays of graphs and charts, meaningful program improvement necessitates more explicit attempts to encourage stakeholder use of “supplied” data. The action research approach facilitates stakeholder involvement and investment in the research process.

To illustrate these differences, Table 4.1 compares the traditional institutional research approach to a specific task with the action research approach to systematic program evaluation and improvement. The comparison illustrates the ongoing and more intensive relationship between researcher and client inherent in the action research approach. The level of teamwork required by the action research approach can be intimidating or off-putting to institutional researchers and program staff alike. But before considering some of the barriers to adopting this approach, we will illustrate the model in greater detail through two examples of its application.

**Applications of the Action Research Model**

A comprehensive outcomes assessment program can ensure that academic support initiatives are achieving goals and are adding value to the students’ educational experiences. However, as we have improved our capacity to measure a wide array of student outcomes, it has become increasingly important that we develop ways to assess why our programs and processes contribute to desirable outcomes and decrease undesirable ones. Inquiry-based evaluations provide the kinds of in-depth process information necessary to inform practice and allow for a better understanding of when and how certain interventions are effective. They can also contribute to our institutional-level efforts to effect broad-based change in strategic areas. In this section we present two concrete examples in which an action research approach was used to support academic improvement efforts and to sustain strategic planning initiatives.

**Example 1: Evaluation of New Student Orientation.** New Student Orientation at our institution, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), is designed to provide incoming students with the resources and information they need to meet university demands and acclimate to a new environment. During orientation, faculty, staff, and a student-led orientation team share the responsibility of introducing new students to the supportive and challenging learning environment on the campus. The orientation program (a full-day program) serves approximately five thousand students yearly and many of their parents (through a Family Connections Program).
**Table 4.1. Action Research Contrasted with the Traditional Institutional Research Approach**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action Research Approach</th>
<th>Traditional Institutional Research Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research Question and Evaluation Focus</strong></td>
<td>The evaluation focus is developed together among the researchers and stakeholders (information requesters). The questions and focus are often deferred until appropriate vested parties are brought together as a team to consider the issues and possible spheres of influence that the research results can affect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data Collection</strong></td>
<td>The stakeholders often have some role in collecting data or in working with the researchers to understand nuances of available information. The responsibility for the integrity of the data is shared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data Analysis and Interpretation</strong></td>
<td>The researchers involve stakeholders in all stages of data analysis. Preliminary results are presented and discussed. Further analyses are shaped by those discussions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Report Presentation and Dissemination</strong></td>
<td>The presentation and report writing responsibilities are shared by researcher and stake-holder representatives. Presentations involve more discussion compared to traditional approach. The process of information sharing is more dynamic and iterative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Follow-up</strong></td>
<td>Key stakeholders design an action plan based on results. Data collection is included in the follow-up plan so that actions can be monitored and evaluated for effectiveness. Further lines of inquiry are established for the next cycle of research.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A comprehensive evaluation of the program was requested by a faculty governance committee to determine if the orientation program was achieving its intended educational outcomes for incoming students. Generally, the evaluation was designed to help provide an informed perspective on the major strengths and deficiencies of the orientation program to derive data-driven program improvements.

Research Question and Evaluation Focus. During the initial phases of the evaluation process, orientation leaders and planners were brought together to define clearly the desired outcomes of the evaluation process. A collective decision was made to focus the evaluation on reevaluating the goals of orientation, determining if the diverse needs of new students (including commuters, international students, students from underrepresented ethnic groups, and older students) were being met and to assess the extent to which orientation was affecting new students’ knowledge levels, attitudes, and behaviors. Active involvement of the multiple stakeholders involved in implementing orientation (orientation leaders, faculty, administrators, student affairs staff, and student peer mentors) was critical for defining manageable goals that had direct implications for potential programmatic changes. Moreover, it was also vital to seek input from a large sample of incoming student orientation participants.

Data Collection. Quantitative and qualitative techniques were employed to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of New Student Orientation on student participants. A series of fourteen focus groups was conducted in spring and fall 2002. The focus groups were designed to seek input from faculty, students, advisors, administrators, and student affairs staff, as they are critical stakeholders in the orientation program. In addition, a questionnaire was administered to first-year student orientation participants enrolled in First-Year Seminar courses during the fall 2002 semester to assess their perceptions of New Student Orientation. The questionnaire was designed to measure students’ self-reported changes in behaviors, learning gains, and perceptions of orientation three months after the start of the fall semester. At that point, students could report how orientation helped them in making their transition to IUPUI.

Orientation leaders were actively involved in designing the focus group protocol and the self-administered questionnaire. Seeking their involvement ensured that the instruments were designed to assess useful information and ideally served to increase the chances that the collected data would be used to guide program improvements.

Data Reporting and Feedback. The orientation leaders were involved in the initial stages of data analysis. Preliminary results were presented and discussed in a meeting with the Director of New Student Orientation, the Assistant Director of New Student Orientation, and the Assistant Dean of University College, the unit that houses all the orientation programs. The data feedback session included a written report and verbal discussions of key findings. The information was provided to inform the orientation leaders about the perceptions concerning the current state of the orientation pro-
gram and encouraged their involvement in implementing potential changes. The orientation leaders asserted that commitment on behalf of the campus community was essential for change to be initiated and sustained; so, following the feedback meeting and suggested report revisions, the written report was distributed to key faculty committees and other relevant campus groups. The written report was also distributed to all focus group participants.

**Development of Action Plans.** Findings were presented to orientation leaders and other key stakeholder groups in a way that facilitated dialogue, conversation, and the development of action plans. For instance, the recommendations were framed as questions to guide the action planning process. The following is an excerpt from the New Student Orientation Program Evaluation Report (Hansen and Lowenkron, 2003):

> We recommend that New Student Orientation planners use this report to develop data-driven action plans to improve the orientation process. The following questions could serve as a starting point to guide action planning:

Are the above goals the most appropriate ones for New Student Orientation at IUPUI?  
Would it be beneficial for orientation planners to take a strategic planning approach and engage in a self-reflective process in which they identify an agreed-upon vision, mission, and the specific goals of orientation?  
What implementation procedures could be introduced to create a more efficient orientation (e.g., less wait-time, reduced feelings of information overload, and a more organized experience)?  
What strategies could be employed to make orientation a more interactive, engaging process so that students make more meaningful connections with other students, faculty, advisors, and student affairs staff? (p. 4)

Action plans were developed to deal with the patterns found in the data, as prioritized by the orientation leaders. For example, evaluation results suggested that new students were not making sustained connections with other students, faculty, advisors, or student affairs staff during orientation. New Student Orientation planners decided to start the orientation program by having new students form small groups rather than beginning the day by having students listen to a large, lecture hall presentation. Other survey responses included complaints about long wait-times, information overload, and lack of organization; the data-driven action plans therefore included developing strategies to expand the campus tour; providing a more in-depth, interactive technology session; and implementing a more efficient process with more clearly defined goals; employing more intentional efforts to help new students make more sustained contacts and connections with the campus community during orientation; including more information about costs of attending and financial aid; and providing more extensive, meaningful advising sessions.
Implementation. Based on the dialogue surrounding the findings of the initial evaluation, orientation leaders implemented a series of program changes during the fall 2003 orientation program, such as moving the campus tour to the morning to provide students with a better sense of direction for the day; increasing the amount of interaction the students have with peers, university faculty, and staff during the program; creating a new student life program called Freshman Year in a Flash (designed to be a simulation activity of the student's first year); implementing a new group advising model; and developing a theoretical underpinning for the program based on academic integration, social integration, and self-efficacy (Hansen, Lowenkron, Engler, and Evenbeck, 2004).

Assessment. Once the action plans were initiated, further information was gathered to determine if the proposed changes had been implemented as conceptualized and were perceived positively by students and if further modifications in the plans were necessary. Orientation leaders and the researchers developed an orientation “exit instrument” (completed by students during the program) to monitor the impacts of these changes. Moreover, the questionnaire designed to assess student participants’ perceptions three months after the start of the fall semester was re-administered to determine the impacts of the changes employed during the summer 2003 series of orientation programs. It is notable that the exact instrument was administered in an effort to assess changes in students’ perceptions of the program. Results from the fall 2003 survey administration suggested that the program modifications were particularly effective in the following areas (based on significant findings from independent sample t-tests): providing opportunities for students to make meaningful connections with other students and faculty, providing effective advising sessions, creating feelings of pride in the institution, informing students about campus life (campus-sponsored events and activities), and providing students with information about critical academic supports (for example, the Math Assistance Center). Orientation leaders and researchers have continued to work toward data collection efforts to monitor program effectiveness and provide information on how orientation is meeting the academic needs of our diverse student body (for example, transfer students, students over the age of twenty-five, and ethnic minorities). Thus, the evaluation of the orientation program has become an ongoing, reflective, cyclical process.

Example 2: Improving the Campus Climate for Diversity. The IUPUI Chancellor’s Diversity Cabinet was established in January 1999 “to oversee the ultimate transformation of IUPUI from a campus that believes in diversity to a campus that lives its commitment to diversity” (Bepko, 2000). In its first year, the cabinet took stock of the campus climate for diversity by conducting a self-study under the guidance of a nationally renowned expert. As part of this process, the cabinet invited to its meetings representatives from the various academic schools and administrative areas
to learn about initiatives under way in each unit to promote diversity as an organizational and academic asset. By the end of that first year, the cabinet developed a vision for diversity at IUPUI that includes the following working definition of diversity for the campus:

“At Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), diversity means three things: (1) diversity is an educational and social asset to be reflected in our learning and work objectives, (2) the persons who comprise our academic community reflect both the current diversity of our service region as well as the evolving demographics of a state and city that aspire to participate fully in a global society, and (3) IUPUI’s social and physical environment will enable all of its members to succeed to the fullest extent of their potential.” (http://www.iupui.edu/diversity/vision.html).

The Vision for Diversity also included thirteen concrete performance objectives that require significant participation from virtually all academic and administrative units. In the fall of 2002, the chancellor asked the staff of the Office of Information Management and Institutional Research (IMIR) to develop a set of diversity indicators that would provide a “score card” regarding campus progress toward obtaining the concrete objectives and broader goals stated in the vision.

**Research Question and Evaluation Focus.** Rather than proceeding directly as requested, IMIR staff requested a meeting with the cabinet to discuss how this request for a summative evaluation could be transformed into a more formative process. During this meeting, a sequence of steps was described wherein two steering groups would be formed to guide the process. One group—the technical measurement group—would bring together individuals with expertise and experience in conceptualizing and measuring diversity. This group’s task would be to work from the Vision for Diversity to develop a manageable number of general performance objectives that represented the breadth of the vision. The product of this group would be sent to an administrative group that included individuals from academic and administrative units that would “do something” to improve the campus climate for diversity. The second group’s objective would be to provide a reality check on the measures produced by the first group. That is, they would provide feedback regarding the likelihood that the programs and activities currently focusing on improving the campus climate for diversity would result in positive changes in the measures developed by the first group.

Through an iterative series of meetings, the groups worked their way through the general indicators and then down to a set of specific measures. Staff from the IMIR office participated in both sets of meetings to help integrate the process and to provide information regarding the current and potential availability of the data to develop pertinent measures. The process
resulted in the articulation of eight broad performance objectives, each of which was supported by three to five concrete measures (the complete set can be seen at http://iport.iupui.edu/performance/perf_diversity.htm).

**Data Collection.** The information needed for the diversity performance indicators derived from a range of sources. For expediency’s sake, the first iteration included measures that were already available in a centrally collected form (for example, institutional databases and campuswide surveys of students, faculty, and staff).

**Data Reporting and Feedback.** The available measures were assembled for review by the Chancellor’s Diversity Cabinet. Cabinet members were asked to rate each indicator using the following scale:

- **Green:** Either at an acceptable level or clearly heading in the right direction and not requiring any immediate change in course of action. Continuing support should be provided to sustain momentum in these areas.
- **Yellow:** Not at an acceptable level; either improving, but not as quickly as desired, or declining slightly. Strategies and approaches should be reviewed and appropriate adjustments taken to reach an acceptable level or desired rate of improvement.
- **Red:** The current status or direction of change is unacceptable. Immediate, high-priority actions should be taken to address this area.

Initial ratings were collected through an electronic survey. The results were tabulated and served as a starting point in a face-to-face meeting for developing consensus on the judgments. Little or no discussion was solicited over the few items for which there was unanimous (or close to unanimous) initial ratings. For indicators that had substantial variation in judgments, advocates for each rating presented their logic and, after a modest period of discussion, another vote was taken. For two indicators, further information was requested before final votes were taken. Ultimately, each indicator received at least a three-quarter majority vote for its final rating. The final ratings were included in the campus performance indicator Web site (referenced above), as well as in the chancellor’s annual State of Diversity address (see, for example, http://www.iupui.edu/administration/chancellorsnews/state_of_diversity_04.pdf).

**Development of Action Plans.** The agenda for the first post-rating meeting of the Chancellor’s Diversity Cabinet focused on the development of action plans for addressing the results of the rating process. The resultant plan had three general components:

1. A set of actions to address the one “red” evaluation—retention and graduation of a diverse student body.
2. A review of activities in place to foster progress of the other indicator areas to identify any gaps.
3. A plan for obtaining more pertinent data to improve the measures associated with some of the indicators.

**Action.** In response to the high priority given to the retention-graduation indicator, the cabinet commissioned the IMIR office to develop a report focusing on retention and graduation rate gaps at the school and major program level. Resources were provided to ensure that the report was conducted in a timely manner so that the results were available to the deans of the academic schools in the middle of the spring semester. The report (available at http://www.imir.iupui.edu/infore/mi/Spring03/SGRR03.asp) received considerable attention and was followed by requests for local presentation at several schools, as well as follow-up information requests to probe into certain findings. In addition, several measures included in the report will now be monitored annually as part of the indicator report.

A second action was the convening of the inaugural IUPUI Excellence in Diversity Conference, during which the indicators were used as a launching point for focusing program-specific efforts on the broader campus goals. A third line of action involved the convening of a working group to review and revise the items related to campus climate for diversity included in the campuswide surveys of students, faculty, and staff.

**Assessment.** The Chancellor's Diversity Cabinet continues to monitor implementation of actions taken in response to the first iteration of the diversity-indicator process. The diversity indicators have been updated and reviewed each year since their inception and priorities for the current year have been adjusted to reflect any changes.

Whereas the first example (the New Student Orientation Program) focused on a specific program, this example relates to a higher-level set of processes. As such, it provides insight into how the action research process can affect the domain of executive management. Within this domain, the connections between action and research are more diffuse and less direct. As a result, the action research process becomes more akin to a brokering process for facilitating organizational development and transformation (as noted by Jackson, 2003).

**Possible Barriers to the Action Research Approach**

Action research requires the researchers to act as facilitators and become more intimately involved in program and unit processes as they seek a greater understanding of the subject of evaluation. At the same time, program staff need to develop a research orientation as they participate actively in making decisions about research questions, methodology, instrumentation, analysis, and deployment. As they assume these roles, both parties may experience role stress in the forms of role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload.
Role ambiguity results when individuals do not have clear information regarding their job expectations and when there is lack of clarity concerning job tasks, role function, and rewards (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman, 1970). Role conflict results when simultaneous roles require conflicting actions. For example, a researcher may feel her role in designing and reporting on a valid instrument to measure program outcomes may be in direct conflict with the motivation of a program administrator to deliver good news to the campus community about the program’s outcomes. Role overload occurs when there is a perception that too many tasks are required and there is insufficient time to fulfill job requirements. In addition to having to fulfill daily job demands, during the action research process, program administrators and institutional researchers may be given supplemental responsibilities. For example, program administrators may be asked to help design assessment instruments and researchers may have to attend unit or program administration meetings during the multiple stages of the action research model.

Adverse reactions among action research participants to ambiguous responsibilities, increased work demands, and role conflicts can serve as barriers to implementing effective action research strategies as participants experience stress and feel less committed to the tasks associated with active participation. Thus, the successful implementation of action research necessitates that decisive steps be taken to help minimize the potential occurrence of these adverse reactions.

Seo (2003) describes three barriers that can inhibit the action research approach and thereby limit learning and change: emotional barriers, political obstacles, and managerial control imperatives. Seo argues that it is critical to focus on removing emotional barriers to achieve change in underlying values and assumptions, which is essential to effect change. Political coalitions can become barriers to translating individual and group learning into organizational-level learning and change unless the individual actors “both understand the underlying political dynamics within the organization and have adequate strategies to overcome them” (Seo, 2003, p. 12). Seo also argues that learning may not contribute to fundamental behavioral and organizational change because the larger socioeconomic system shapes organizational functioning and may exert enormous pressure and control over managers.

**Overcoming Barriers to Implementing the Action Research Approach**

To implement the action research method effectively, decisive efforts must be exerted to overcome these barriers to participants’ learning and programmatic change. Role ambiguity may be minimized by beginning the process with clear descriptions of role expectations, duties, and potential rewards. In addition, establishing an atmosphere of trust and ongoing open
communication can decrease participants’ feelings of uncertainty. An open communication strategy, coupled with clear and consistent task guidelines, can reduce feelings of role conflict. In order to reduce feelings of role overload, it is important that participants be informed up front about the demands so they can begin to plan for the level of commitment essential for a successful process. It may also be helpful to provide participants with a cost-benefit analysis regarding the action research model, describing that such an effort may require more time, energy, and commitment, but that it may ultimately result in fundamental and sustained program improvements and even long-term fiscal benefits.

Seo (2003) recommends three ways to overcome each of his proposed barriers: “up-building” positive affect, leveraging opposing forces, and bringing external legitimacy to the organization. In up-building positive affect, Seo advocates for starting with a relatively superficial win-win approach prior to engaging in the more probing efforts to uncover and change problematic assumptions and beliefs. Overcoming political obstacles requires the participants to understand and use political dynamics in their discussions and actions. Seo also suggests that external consultants can be used to overcome managerial control imperatives by illuminating external reality and providing a legitimate impetus for new directions.

Applying Action Research to Higher Education Reform

In addition to the continuous pressure to improve academic programs in an effort to respond to the accountability demands of external and internal stakeholders, there is also a momentum to launch changes in higher education settings that are more wide ranging. On the basis of a strategic planning process undertaken with participants from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), Schneider and Shoenberg (1998) contend that higher education is in an era of transformative change. These authors report that college and university leaders are committed to making fundamental changes in an effort to improve teaching and learning. External demands are creating a situation in which institutions must implement critical changes to remain competitive and effective providers of educational services. Institutions that are able to implement fundamental change successfully will thrive and survive in the next decade, but such change often comes at a price. When change is introduced into a system, staff members, faculty, and students may feel that their stable and predictable world is being replaced with one that is unpredictable and uncertain.

Past research has shown that changing work environments can result in employees experiencing increased levels of uncertainty and role ambiguity (see, for example, Ashford, 1988; Bennett, Lehman, and Forst, 1999; Saifer, 1996). According to Morris (1992), the limited human capacity to accept change may constrain organizational responses to environmental
demands and thus may impede the success of organizational transitions. In fact, successful program and institutional change necessitates the acceptance of proposed interventions as well as the maintenance of sustained support for the changes (Carr, 1997; Lewin, 1952).

Many of the proposed strategies for promoting support for change focus on involving employees in the change process. Kotter and Schlesinger (1992) suggest that involving key stakeholders in the change process and encouraging input are likely to foster commitment to proposed changes. The participatory nature of action research makes it a valuable method for successfully implementing change in a variety of educational settings.

According to Schuh and Upcraft (2001), one of the primary criteria for accreditation in higher education is the ability to demonstrate that assessment results have been used continuously to improve institutional effectiveness. They report that accreditation depends on the institution’s capacity to raise critical questions about program efficacy, identify appropriate answers, and improve processes in the light of assessment findings. The action research model is a useful tool for promoting the collaboration, dialogue, and collective analysis required among faculty, administration, and governing boards for achieving high standards of educational excellence.

**Conclusions and Implications**

Action research offers an alternative to traditional applied research or information-support models that currently guide institutional research. The cyclical and participatory processes associated with action research are effective mechanisms for facilitating fundamental organizational change and for linking program evaluation results with ongoing improvements.

The action research model changes the relationship between researcher and program administrator, introducing a higher level of collaboration, with both parties taking on responsibilities for each other’s work more than they might in a more traditional model. The relationship may be uncomfortable for researchers who seek to remain removed from the roles and responsibilities of the administrator. Similarly, it may be uncomfortable for the program administrator who does not want to be bothered with the technical and methodological details of research. This level of discomfort is directly related to resistance to change, which is what action research is all about. Potential barriers to implementing effective action research—such as role ambiguity, role conflict, and political barriers—can be overcome if recognized and intentionally managed.

The action research paradigm has a variety of practical implications, as it provides a useful framework for planning and implementing successful participatory program evaluations. Effective change-management programs and, on a broader scope, institutional transformations necessitate key stakeholder participation and support. The interaction, dialogue, and collective
critical inquiry fostered via the action research process is likely to result in genuine commitment and support for essential academic program and institutional changes.

References


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