



Texas Small Colleges BULLETIN

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The Data Narrative: Making Results Relevant to a Greater Audience

Better educational outcomes are the result of using data wisely and being relentless about putting it in front of faculty, administrators, and staff. Sharing data in a meaningful way—a way that promotes positive change—can, however, be a challenge, especially when the dataset is large and the audience diverse. In our work with member colleges, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) has found that a data narrative approach—a data sharing method in which in-depth discussions center around just a few, simply stated data points—encourages deeper, more meaningful data-driven conversations.

A data narrative approach uses data to tell a story—a story that develops and takes shape as data are shared and discussed. The premise is to present groups with a series of simply stated, related data points, with each data point being shared one at a time. After each data point is revealed, groups spend time discussing what the data point *means* to them in terms of their own work at the college. As group members talk about the meaning behind the data, a storyline develops making the data more relevant and more relatable: *“The majority of our students work more than 20 hours a week and need help selecting a more manageable course load so that they can better balance work with school.”* Each data point is meant to build on the other, at times challenging members to take an honest look at their own roles in the college student experience. Instructions for conducting a data narrative exercise follow.

Data Narrative Exercise

Defining the focus

An in-depth review of your results is an essential step in preparing a data narrative exercise. Determining in which areas your college is meeting goals and in which areas improvements are necessary will help frame the discussion. Next, it is important to consider

your audience. Consider who will be attending the session, which areas of campus will be represented, and in what areas these individuals can potentially have the most positive impact. A thorough review of your results and consideration of your audience will help define the focus of the session.

Selecting key data points

The objective in selecting key data points to share is to keep the dataset focused. Select two or three data points that speak directly to the focus of the session. Each data point should build on the previous one, enabling the group to develop a clear understanding of the issues and to formulate meaning around the issue, making the discussion more salient and tangible.

If, for example, a strategic goal of the college is to move toward mandatory advising for all students, and your data show that less than half of your students use advising services, select data points that highlight advising specifically (e.g., items 13a1, 13a2, and 13a3 on the CCSSE instrument). If the session’s focus is term-to-term persistence and your data show



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that over half of your students indicate that caring for dependents is a likely reason they would choose to withdraw from college, look at related items such as frequency (13f1) satisfaction (13f2) and use (13f3) of child care services on campus. Considered individually, data points should be meaningful but be even more compelling when considered in conjunction with other relevant data.

Presenting the data

The data narrative exercise is designed to be conducted in small groups, followed by a facilitated discussion with the larger group. After the audience has been split into small groups, present the data to the groups. You can share data via PowerPoint, on paper, etc. The objective is to share each data point one at a time and allow discussion after each data point is revealed.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

The CCCSE staff look forward to seeing you at the

2011 TAIR Conference
February 15-18, 2011 in Austin, TX.

More upcoming conferences and events in 2011:

Texas Small Colleges Mini-Workshop
Conference Call
March 8, via phone

American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Convention
April 9-12, New Orleans, LA

Association for Institutional Research (AIR) National Forum
May 21-25, Toronto, Ontario

National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) Conference
May 29-June 1, Austin, TX

CCCSE Workshop
(held in conjunction with NISOD)
May 31, Austin, TX

An example dataset is presented below*:

First data point: *“Sixty-eight percent of our students indicate that obtaining an associate degree is a primary goal for attending the college”*

Groups should discuss the implications of this data point. What does it mean? What questions does it raise?

Second data point: *“Seventy-four percent of our students consider Academic Advising/Planning to be ‘Very’ important.”*

Groups should discuss how this data point informs the first one. What additional questions does this data point raise?

Third data point: *“Forty-three percent of our students report ‘Never’ using Academic Advising/Planning services.”*

Groups should discuss how this data point informs the first two. Does this data point change your perspective on the issue? What are the implications now?

*Data presented above are hypothetical. Use college-specific or CCSSE Cohort data when conducting the data narrative exercise.

The large group discussion

After small groups have had time to discuss the data and formulate a clearer understanding of the issues, each group should share their thoughts—their version of the “story.” The objective is to meld each group’s story into a larger discussion on the topic. Some stories may align while others may challenge the group to take an even closer look at the issue.

The data narrative exercise is designed to encourage discussion among diverse audiences about specific issues of focus for the college. This tool, while designed for sharing results with a larger group, can be adapted for data sharing among specific areas of campus—within academic departments, student services units, student groups, etc. Selecting key data points will take time; however, if done purposefully, the data narrative exercise can yield powerful discussions that can lead to the development of actionable improvement strategies.

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