



The Small College Guide to Fractional Institutional Research

How to strengthen institutional research, institutional effectiveness, reporting, and analytics without building a large full-time department.

Designed for small and resource-constrained colleges and universities that need reliable institutional intelligence, but need a flexible staffing model.

Insight. Clarity. Purpose.

Why Small Colleges Need Institutional Intelligence

Every college needs trustworthy information. Presidents and cabinets need to understand enrollment, retention, student success, finances, academic performance, accreditation evidence, and institutional outcomes. Regulators and accreditors expect accurate reporting. Boards expect clear measures of progress.

But a small institution may not need - or may not be able to sustain - a large institutional research and institutional effectiveness office. The result is often a critical function spread across several already-busy employees, dependent on spreadsheets, or concentrated in one position that is difficult to recruit and retain.

Fractional institutional research offers another model: experienced IR, IE, analytics, and reporting capacity that can be scaled to the institution's actual needs.

The goal is not simply more reports

The goal is an institutional intelligence capability: reliable data, consistent definitions, repeatable processes, useful analysis, and decision-ready information that helps leaders understand what is happening, why it matters, and what to do next.

Seven Signs Your Institution May Need Fractional IR/IE

- **One person is wearing too many hats.** Institutional research, assessment, accreditation, strategic planning, compliance, and analytics are all assigned to the same role - or divided among people whose primary jobs are elsewhere.
- **Key reports depend on spreadsheets and manual work.** Recurring reports require extensive copying, reconciling, or reformatting each cycle.
- **Leadership receives different answers to the same question.** Enrollment, retention, headcount, or other metrics vary depending on who runs the report.
- **Your IR/IE position is vacant or difficult to fill.** Important work cannot wait months for a successful recruitment.
- **Accreditation or regulatory deadlines create recurring crises.** Evidence is gathered reactively instead of through sustainable processes.
- **You have data but limited decision support.** Systems contain information, yet leaders still struggle to get concise, timely answers.
- **You need specialized expertise, but not necessarily 40 hours every week.** The institution needs senior capability without another full-time administrative commitment.

What a Fractional Institutional Intelligence Office Can Do

Function	Examples of Support
Institutional Research	IPEDS and external reporting support; enrollment and retention analysis; peer and trend analysis; ad hoc research; data definitions.
Institutional Effectiveness	Strategic-plan metrics; assessment processes; evidence organization; continuous-improvement reporting; accreditation support.
Executive & Board Analytics	Executive dashboards; KPI scorecards; board reporting; concise decision-support analysis.
Business Intelligence	Power BI dashboards; automated recurring reports; reporting repositories; data-model and reporting design.
Data Strategy & Governance	Metric definitions; data quality; reporting ownership; governance practices; analytics roadmaps.
Capacity & Continuity	Interim IR/IE coverage; support during vacancies; project surges; documentation and knowledge transfer.

Fractional vs. Full-Time: Ask the Right Question

The decision should not be based only on salary. A full-time position can be the right answer when the institution has enough sustained work, needs daily on-campus presence, or requires a permanent leader with broad internal management responsibilities.

A fractional model can be especially attractive when the institution needs senior expertise, continuity, and deliverables but the workload fluctuates or does not justify a full-time specialist.

Consider	Full-Time Model	Fractional Model
Capacity	Dedicated employee	Scales to agreed scope and workload
Recruitment	Requires search, hiring, onboarding	Can add experienced capacity quickly
Expertise	Depends on one hire	Can focus engagement on specialized IR/IE/BI needs
Cost structure	Salary plus benefits and employment overhead	Contracted professional-services expense
Continuity	May be affected by turnover	Can document processes and support transitions
Best fit	Large, sustained internal workload	Small teams, vacancies, projects, or variable demand

A Practical Starting Model

Fractional IR does not have to begin with a large engagement. A college can start with a focused assessment and expand only where the need is clear.

- **Step 1 - Assess.** Identify recurring reports, compliance obligations, decision-support needs, data sources, pain points, and upcoming deadlines.
- **Step 2 - Stabilize.** Protect critical reporting, document processes, reconcile definitions, and address immediate gaps.
- **Step 3 - Build.** Create repeatable reporting, dashboards, governance practices, and an institutional reporting calendar.
- **Step 4 - Empower.** Train internal staff, provide documentation, and give leaders tools they can use confidently.
- **Step 5 - Scale.** Adjust fractional support as the institution's internal capacity and priorities change.

Questions to Ask Before Choosing a Partner

- Does the consultant understand higher education - not just generic business analytics?
- Can the partner work across IR, IE, executive reporting, data governance, and BI rather than creating another silo?

- Will the work be documented so the institution retains knowledge?
- Can the engagement flex around accreditation cycles, vacancies, reporting deadlines, and special projects?
- Does the partner focus on usable outcomes for presidents, provosts, cabinets, boards, and campus teams?
- Can the partner work collaboratively with IT, Academic Affairs, Enrollment, Finance, Student Affairs, and other data owners?

A 30-Day Institutional Intelligence Checkup

Use these questions with your cabinet or data team. Several 'no' answers may indicate that additional IR/IE capacity would create immediate value.

- Can we produce our most important enrollment, retention, and completion metrics quickly and consistently?
- Do leaders agree on the definitions behind our key institutional metrics?
- Are recurring regulatory and accreditation reports documented and reproducible?
- Do we have an institutional reporting calendar with clear ownership?
- Can the president, cabinet, and board access concise decision-ready information?
- Are critical reports automated where practical?
- Can we trace important numbers back to authoritative source systems?
- Do we have enough IR/IE capacity to handle both required reporting and strategic analysis?
- Could someone else reproduce our critical processes if a key employee left tomorrow?
- Are we using institutional data to drive action - not merely to satisfy reporting requirements?

About Lampstand Analytics

Lampstand Analytics provides fractional institutional research, institutional effectiveness, business intelligence, reporting, and data strategy services for colleges and universities that need experienced institutional intelligence without the full-time overhead.

With approximately 30 years of experience across business intelligence, analytics, technology, and higher education, Lampstand focuses on practical solutions leaders can actually use - from recurring institutional reporting and accreditation evidence to executive dashboards, data governance, and analytics strategy.

Is your institution carrying an IR/IE workload that has outgrown its current staffing model?	Start a conversation with Lampstand Analytics. hello@lampstandanalytics.com lampstandanalytics.com
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This guide is intended as a planning resource. Regulatory, accreditation, and reporting requirements vary by institution and jurisdiction.