

Many Paths, One Field

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Take a moment and close your eyes. Picture your last professional event where the majority of attendees were from institutional research/ institutional effectiveness (IR/IE). What question do you hear over and over again as attendees meet for the first time?

How did you end up in this field?

IR/IE professionals come from a variety of backgrounds and career paths, creating a rich tapestry of knowledge and experience that enable them to make valuable contributions to education and student success. Understanding these professional journeys helps us better understand what draws people into IR/IE and provides insights for both novice and experienced IR/IE professionals.

Over a 10-day period in April, 2024, 51 members of the North Carolina IR/IE community responded to a short survey that asked about their career and educational background. The survey contained multiple choice and free response items. Respondents included professionals from 2-year, 4-year, public, and private institutions of higher education. What did the survey reveal?

- IR/IE folks are highly educated. Over 90% of respondents have completed graduate work; in fact, nearly 40% have obtained a doctorate or other terminal degree.
- The top majors include education, educational leadership, business, psychology, math/statistics, and public policy.
- Most IR/IE professionals started their career in a different field. Only 16% reported starting their career in an IR/IE setting. More than 20% are in their third (or higher) career.
- Popular prior careers included teaching and student affairs.

Respondents were asked to share their stories; the following statements are representative of their experiences.

How we heard about our jobs

- I didn't even know there was an IR office until I was asked to direct it!
- College offered / encouraged me to apply for a position
- I stumbled into the role / field
- My dad saw a job posting in the local newspaper

What we love about our jobs

- Fascinated by accreditation and compliance
- Still remain engaged in conducting social science research, but applied to higher education
- Collecting and analyzing data to solve problems and to help students succeed
- Working with experts to understand and translate needs -- a lot of customer service, project management, and cross-department collaboration
- Meet someone or learn something new every day

How we feel about our jobs

- I'm proud of the work I do and the work my institution does
- I make a big impact on campus leaders who want to better understand the institution and how it can improve
- Pushes me and challenges me to think outside of the box
- Rewarding profession with highly supportive colleagues across the country

Other thoughts

- My anthropology background gave me a strong base to start from because I knew about survey design, ethnographic research methods, and demography
- Wonderful people who are dedicated to their calling and their values
- I consider myself a "lifer" in IR

How did I end up in IR/IE? After completing a master's in forensic science, I worked as a DNA and crime scene analyst until a repetitive use injury forced me to change careers. I moved into education as a high school science teacher, where I taught primarily chemistry (and forensic science for fun). Eventually, I started teaching part-time for the local community college. I didn't know what IR was until I started my doctoral program – a member of my cohort worked in the IR/IE office of the local community college and suggested I move into the field. I'm so glad I took her advice!

Professionals arrive to IR/IE from many different directions, so what do we have in common? I think one of the survey respondents said it best when they wrote:

If you like

- a) solving puzzles for key higher ed stakeholders,
- b) learning HE business processes as well as student, faculty & staff lifecycles, and
- c) analyzing data and torturing it with questions until it confesses,

IR/IE may be a good fit for you.

Kelly was a Senior Research Analyst at Central Piedmont Community College prior to early retirement in 2022. She continues to be an active member of the IR/IE community through her work with Achieving the Dream and colleges/universities. Her professional goal is educational success and economic/social mobility for all students, staff, and faculty.