A Guide to Requesting Data from Institutional Research Offices

By Megan Zelinsky and Kelly Robertson | October 2022

Institutional research (IR) offices can support Advanced Technology Education (ATE) principal investigators, project staff, evaluators, and grant specialists in accessing data to document project activities and outcomes. These data are essential for ATE project evaluation and answering ATE Survey questions.[1] This guide answers common questions about establishing relationships and working with and requesting data from institutional research offices.

1. What is an institutional research office?

Many (but not all) two- and four-year colleges have institutional research offices. Depending on the institution, this office may go by a different name, such as Institutional Research and Effectiveness, Institutional Effectiveness, or Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. Institutional research offices provide student data (e.g., student enrollment or student demographic information) to federal and state authorities. They also fulfill other requests for student and program data that may be needed for strategic planning, accreditation, grant proposals and reports, or internal assessments or evaluations. In addition to providing data, institutional research offices can offer insight into research and evaluation design, implementation, and analysis.[2]

2. My institution does not have an institutional research office. How can I obtain data?

All institutions are required to report data to federal and state authorities. This might occur in other offices with labels such as assessment, accreditation, management information systems (MIS), registrar, information technology (IT), or enterprise solutions. Other potential sources of data include:

- *Instructors and faculty*: You can consult instructors participating in the ATE project or delivering project services. They may be willing to share student records or other information related to project activities.
- *Program administrators and academic advisors*: Contact the academic program chair or academic advisor participating in the ATE project to determine whether the type of data they collect may be helpful to project activities.

[1] The National Science Foundation requires ATE principal investigators to complete the ATE Survey each year to report on their projects' activities and achievements. Visit the ATE Survey Website to preview the survey questions and learn about the types of data you will be asked to provide.

[2] To learn more about what institutional research offices do, visit the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) website.

3. When should I start working with my institutional research office?

As soon as possible, contact an institutional research officer to confirm the type of data the project can track. It is ideal to contact the institutional research office when preparing your ATE proposal for submission. Understanding the data the institutional research office can provide will have implications for the proposal's evaluation and data management plans. If you did not make contact during the proposal process, contact them as soon as you are notified about the award. Identify a person within the office who can serve as the primary contact, and set up a meeting with them. Building a relationship with institutional research staff early in the grant process can help facilitate the ease and speed with which you can obtain data later. Waiting too long to contact the institutional research office may limit the type and amount of data that can be collected or reported.

If you take one thing away from this document,

contact the institutional research office as soon as possible!

4. What information needs to be communicated with my institutional research office at the first meeting?

Project staff, evaluators, and principal investigators should attend the first meeting with the institutional research office.

☐ **Primary contact person:** Determine who will be the primary contact, both at the institutional research office and from the project, when requesting data.

☐ **Reporting deadlines:** Tell the institutional research officer when major reports (e.g., NSF annual reports, evaluation reports, ATE Survey) are due and when you will request data.

☐ **Timeline for returning data requests:** Find out how long it will take the institutional research office to review and respond to your specific data request—some offices may require a few days, while others require several weeks.

☐ **How to submit a data request:** Determine the process for submitting a data request (e.g., via data request form, email, or meeting) and the details necessary to fulfill that request (e.g., program codes, student IDs, courses).

☐ **Availability of existing data:** Ask what information is already collected. Determine if all data points needed by the project are collected, and if not, whether it is possible to begin collecting new data for the project. If not already collected, ask whether baseline data (i.e., data on the current status or recent history) exist related to the outcomes the project hopes to impact.

☐ **Privacy rules:** Ask about and become familiar with the institution's rules and policies governing student data access and use.

5. What details do I need to include when requesting data from my institutional research office?

Be clear and detailed about the data you are requesting to fulfill reporting requirements. For example, to fulfill the ATE Survey reporting requirements, include the following items in your data request:

- ☐ **Context of the project and evaluation:** Sharing information about program activities, reporting requirements, and the evaluation plan can help institutional research staff provide needed data. (It is ideal to involve the institutional research office in the evaluation planning process.) If not done already, send a summary of grant or evaluation documents (e.g., one-page summary or proposal, logic model, evaluation plan, evaluation matrix, data collection plan) that identify the data needed and reporting requirements. If such documents do not exist, provide the project or research questions associated with the different data points you are requesting.

- ☐ **Needed data variables:** Clearly define data variables. Be as specific as possible. The grant and the institutional research office may define certain variables differently (e.g., completion rate, underserved, participant, financial need). For example, for the ATE Survey, you will need to know the number of students who have enrolled in academic programs supported by the ATE project. The ATE Survey defines enrollment by whether a student took a course in the identified academic program, but your institution may have a different definition of "program enrollment." Ensure that you provide the titles or codes for the courses you are requesting. If requesting data for the ATE Survey, provide the institutional research office a copy of the survey so they have an idea of the level of detail needed and the required report format.

- ☐ **Start and end date for data:** Be specific about the timeframe for which you want the data. For example, the timeline for data capture on the ATE Survey is January 1 through December 31. If you request data for a specific year, include the exact dates instead of vague terms like "for last year" or "2022." Additionally, different institutions run on different semesters or terms. Understand how the institution defines semesters or terms, and include those labels in the request.

- ☐ **Whether you need identifiable data or not:** Data requests that do not require identifiable information (i.e., student names, birth dates, or social security numbers) are significantly easier to access. Some offices refer to this data as "redacted" or "de-identified." State up front whether the request requires identifiable student data. If you are requesting identifiable information, be prepared to explain why deidentified data will not suffice and how you plan to keep the data secure.

- ☐ **Whether you need unduplicated counts:** If you are requesting student counts across multiple courses or programs, tell the research officer if you need an unduplicated student count. An unduplicated student count means that an individual who is in multiple courses would only be counted once in the total. If you ask for deidentified data, you will not be able to produce an unduplicated count after you receive the data.

- ☐ **Specific program codes:** Know the specific code for the academic program, courses, or grant. Using specific codes will save institutional research staff time and may help you receive accurate and complete data sooner.
- ☐ **A reasonable timeline:** Every institutional research office has different capacity levels and varying reporting demands throughout the year. This translates into different turnaround times across institutions. Turnaround times may also vary within institutional research offices depending on the type of data being requested, as certain types of data may take more time to pull than others. If you do not know how long the office needs to provide you with the requested data, reach out as soon as possible. Ideally, you will have started a relationship with institutional research staff at the proposal stage or beginning of the grant, so you will already be aware of how long the office needs to fulfill your request. Also, specify whether the request will be a one-time or reoccurring request.

Acknowledgments

We want to thank the individuals who provided detailed feedback on prior versions of this checklist: Lyssa Wilson Becho, Darla Cooper, Debbie Douma, Jason Jach, Michael Johnston, Faye Jones, Preethi Mony, Michael Lesiecki, and Lori Wingate. Thank you, Carolyn Williams-Noren, for copy editing.

This material is based on work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grants No. 1841783, 1840856, and 2227301. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.