Institutional Advancement: Uncovering the Elephant in the Room (0293)

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Proposal

As subtle as an elephant in a room, Institutional Advancement (IA) is emerging in higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide. People often remark on the animal's individual physical traits, just as fundraising appeals, marketing campaigns and alumni events are often referenced in isolation, instead of part of a larger advancement strategy. IA is a cohesive, strategic approach to building relationships with key communities to increase support for the institution, through the practice of communications, alumni relations and development (fundraising).

While IA is a taken-for-granted feature of North American universities, IA is not as familiar a concept in Irish or European higher education. Moreover, IA specialist literature is not referenced or debated in wider higher education discourse. Studies that examine wide-scale change within HEIs discuss individual elements of IA practice. For instance, Clark (1998) refers to both fundraising and alumni relations, attributing this IA practice to that of an entrepreneurial university, implying that this activity is exceptional or unusual.

I contend that Institutional Advancement is emerging in HEIs worldwide. I turn to IA specialist literature to create a new paradigm to recognise the emergence of IA, illuminated through an Irish university case study. The research suggests that IA practice in an Irish university follows an international IA formula, despite the fact the higher education conditions in Ireland are different to North America. As Irish universities enter a period of transition (Coate and Mac Labhrainn 2009), I argue the emergence of IA at the Irish institution case study is a response to the higher

education climate, including the demands on student enrolment, the decrease in public funding and the dichotomy between State accountability and institutional autonomy.

The new IA paradigm, which I describe as the four 'I's, is comprised of four key characteristics of IA within an institution: *interdependence, integration, identification* and *inherence*. These characteristics assess the extent to which IA is emerging or is embedded within the institution. While the IA activity at the Irish university case study is fairly consistent with international practice, the activities are not to the breadth, scale or sophistication of American or UK institutions.

Interdependence focuses on the overlap between communications, alumni relations and development. These three components of IA are dependent on each other to cultivate and progress key relationships towards the aims of advancing the institution. Communications includes public affairs, media relations and marketing to build an institution's profile. Alumni relations build relationships with past students and graduates. Finally, development relates to philanthropy including annual giving and major donations from individuals or organisations. These three IA components work together towards common institutional goals that Tromble (1998) describes as a 'triad of harmony' (p.xviii). In the case study university, IA emerged as three separate organisational structures that continue to operate primarily as separate entities. This new IA presence also coincided with pressures from the higher education climate: to raise the profile of the institution nationally and internationally; to vie for new students and innovative developments; to increase the diversity of funding sources.

Rowland (1986) emphasises the *integration* of IA across all campus activities, academic departments and administrative services. Weerts (2007) argues

the advancement ethos is the responsibility of all internal sections of the university. IA is conveyed as an institution's self-interested concept—the university, to advance itself internally, acts externally to raise the profile of the institution and build relationships. At the Irish case study university, the leadership identified six key research areas for the University to build the institution's media profile along with selecting topics likely to be attractive to prospective donors. This shows the capacity and power of IA to recast the work of the academy to appeal to a wider audience for the benefit of the institution. The University also provides examples of brand identity, promotion and marketing across the institution, demonstrating a change of mindset and greater understanding of IA techniques.

In theory, all actors in an institution—from university leadership to students and alumni— *identify* with the university's advancement ideals, fostered by an internal communications strategy (Kozobarich 2000). This enables the university to present a united front when appealing externally for support. The brand identity created at the Irish case study university receives wide support from students, alumni and the community at large. However, the word 'alumni' is still not in the common parlance and the culture of philanthropy is still not universally understood or supported among management, staff, alumni or students.

Advancement is *inherent;* a university is in a continuous state of advancement (Muller 1986; Lippincott 2004). An internationally-renowned large university embeds the same basic IA practices as the small community-based university college. IA is described as a natural and instrinic part of an institution's work. Despite the lack of full identification with all IA practice, the Irish case study shows that the organisational structures of IA are embedded within the institution. Despite its newness in the Irish university case study, IA practice is diffused across

the University's strategic plan as the means to realise the institution's ambitious vision.

What is the wisdom gained from uncovering the IA elephant in the room? IA is not a common term, and the case study shows the initial stages of an IA growth and advancement ethos within the institution. The myopic view of seeing and critiquing the parts of the elephant is waning; the whole animal is slowly appearing out of higher education obscurity.

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