Breaking Out of the IR Box: One Office’s Entrepreneurial Expedition into the Market Research World

Michelle Appel, Angela Hamlin, Kyland Howard and Jessica Shedd

University of Maryland
The Context

- Budget pressures
  - Unit needs skills that can be “outsourced” efficiently
  - Tight IR resources
  - Need for innovative revenue streams
- Culture of evidence – data driven decision making
- Desire to expand academic programming in innovative or entrepreneurial ways
- Continuing Education unit approached IR acknowledging office’s expertise
IR as Market Research Contractor

- Summer projects – “down” time
- Short, limited scope
- IR brings:
  - Expertise in research design and data analysis
  - Unbiased external review
- Project in area outside of IR responsibility – fee for service arrangement
Possible Project Types

- Focus Groups
- Labor Market Analysis
- Competitive Market Analysis
  - Identification of competitor institutions/programs
  - Enrollment trends
  - Environmental scan
- Survey – design, implementation, analysis
Possible Research Questions

- Are there enough potential students to support a distance program in a particular major?
- Is there a market for an off-campus program in a given area?
- What competitive advantage might the university have when marketing a distance degree in a given major?
- Is there a market for a new graduate program in a given area?
The “How To” Nuts and Bolts

- Create a clear plan of work with well defined scope
- Develop budget and track expenses including personnel hours
  - Estimate hours and then add buffer
  - When possible cost out segments – charge per small unit
- Frequent feedback – keep communication lines open
- Make efficient use of staff and students
  - use low cost personnel (including students) when possible
  - fill “down” time with billable hours to offset costs the office would already incur
The Ups and Downs

On the plus side…

- Additional financial support for IR budget
- Maximum use of staff at “down” time
- Interesting, engaging
- Rewarding to complete short term project
- Meet a new audience – work with those not normally IR consumers

But watch out for…

- Timelines that will impinge on core office function.
- Poorly defined topics or lack of focus.
- Projects in which you cannot control the timeline or work flow.
- Highly political projects with preconceived answers.