University of North Alabama   Office of Institutional Research

Guiding Document for Internal and External Data Requests

Background

Many requests for information about the University of North Alabama come to us from external entities, including federal and state government, grant agencies, consortia, higher education organizations, publishers of admissions guidebooks, researchers, parents, alumni, members of the public, news media, etc. We recognize our responsibility to provide accurate information to those who need it. One of the important roles envisioned for the Office of Institutional Research was to serve as a clearinghouse of official information about the institution. The goal of this function was to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the information that we provide, using commonly accepted definitions and guidelines for reporting.

This role has led to some practical concerns. Should the Office of Institutional Research (OIR) be responsible for *every* piece of information that flows off the campus? If not, under what circumstances should it not? There is a need for a clear guideline that can be shared with the campus community. That guideline depends on the needs and concerns of the University. Closely tied to this issue is when the OIR office should respond to an **internal request** for data directly (e.g. from faculty, students, or staff) versus when that response should come from another office on campus.

This document attempts to outline the areas and extent of Institutional Research involvement in responding to internal and external requests for information about the University of North Alabama, and to provide a guideline. "General Principles" are followed by very important "Exceptions." Finally, a page of examples is provided at the end of this document to help clarify. While many situations will be clear-cut, others won't. In those cases, the guidelines can be a starting point for discussions about the best way of accomplishing the goal of providing appropriate and meaningful information that is accurate to those who need it.

While reporting is often done through the Institutional Research Office, it should be remembered that the OIR office seldom "owns" the data that it uses. While all data on campus is theoretically open to OIR, the OIR officer must take special care to use it correctly and wisely. There will necessarily be frequent consultations with the data owners. Therefore, the OIR officer must depend on the expertise, guidance, cooperation, and good will of the owners of the data in each area.

Please visit our webpage for University dashboards that contain official enrollment, majors, degrees awarded, and CHP information: www.una.edu/research.
All requestors should utilize the data request form found at the following link:
https://www.una.edu/research/data-request-form.html.

External Requests

General Principle

All **external requests for official or public data,** including to media and news outlets, should go *through* IR, with specific exceptions noted below. Whether the IR office completes the request itself or coordinates the request with another office will be based on the expertise of the IR staff in the topic area, access to relevant University of North Alabama data, and expertise in working with the particular University of North Alabama data.

What is data? "Data" refers to numerical summaries of aspects of our institution, for example, number of students enrolled, retention/graduation rates, number of degrees awarded, credit hour production, etc. Examples of information that would generally not be considered data are directory information about staff or faculty, or narrative descriptions of programs, policies, or facilities.

What are official or public data? Figures are considered official or public if they are mandated by state or federal guidelines (e.g. the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE); the national Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS); are collected routinely by recognized higher education agencies or consortia (e.g. AAUP, CSRDE, US News, Moody's, ACT, NCES, NCAA, Peterson's, College Board, etc.); provided for grant application or renewal purposes; will be presented to the University of North Alabama's administration or Board of Trustees; requested of discipline specific accreditation agencies, as well as the Southern Association for Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS-COC); or will appear in publications that are widely available (e.g. admissions guidebooks).

Exceptions

With the exception of ACHE and IPEDS reporting, mandated routine reporting *specific* to an individual area should be conducted by that area. (The responsible official in that area should, however, consult with OIR whenever figures outside of that area (e.g. student demographic data, enrollments, CHP, degrees awarded, retention, etc.) are required for a form.) Examples of reporting that should by conducted not by IR, but by the appropriate office include: athletics reporting, crime reporting, tax forms, human resource work utilization reporting, etc. In general, straightforward office-to-agency reports should go through the appropriate office. If the information requested on a form may be of general interest or may be made public, it would be helpful if a copy were provided to OIR. When information may be used in various other ways, the IR office should be involved.

An open records request, while fulfilled by OIR if approved, must be submitted to the Office of the General Counsel. The link to the form is provided here: https://www.una.edu/general-counsel/open-records-request.html
If approved, OIR will then work with the requestor on providing the requested data.

Who Gathers the Data?

Whether a particular external request should be done in OIR versus sent to another office for completion will be based on the OIR officer's knowledge of the area, access to the data, and knowledge of the data. For example, currently all state and federal reporting are *coordinated* through OIR. This does not mean that the OIR officer completes every form. A number of forms are sent to other officials on campus for their response and returned to OIR for forwarding to the requesting agency. On these forms, it is generally the official who completes the form who signs off on it. Examples of this are the IPEDS-Finance Form and the IPEDS Library Form.

Internal Requests

These issues lead to the question of who should respond when an *internal* requestor needs information. For example, when the OIR officer and the Registrar have equal access, expertise, and facility to respond to a particular data request who should do it?

General Principle

OIR should conduct research and analysis in support of planning and decision-making critical to the University. If the requestor needs student information (student demographic data, student data trends, contact lists, GPA information, degrees awarded, etc.) it should be requested from OIR. Please note, a student who has selected the confidentiality indicator will not be included on contact lists.

Argos reporting is used often for internal purposes, but a unit or academic department, aside from OIR, should not be sharing this data external to the institution for any request (accreditation, consortium, government agency, grant provider, etc.). If you utilize Argos reporting in your unit for internal purposes, please reach out to OIR to ensure that your report is accurate and provides you with the information needed. Many Argos reports were written years ago and may not be utilizing the most current data fields/values.

Examples

Official data: OIR should usually assemble data that should be based on "*official*" figures. (Example: Degrees awarded in the sciences for use in a grant proposal.)
Information across areas: OIR should conduct most analyses that involve **combining data across areas.** (Example: Relating retention and graduation rates to SAT scores and financial aid received.)
Public data: OIR should usually assemble data that will appear publicly and therefore ought to be consistent with "official" figures. (Example: Fact Sheet, total enrollments that appear in Admissions publications.)
Internal data: Departments with access to Argos can run their own reports for internal purposes. However, please reach out to OIR to ensure your report(s) contains the most current data fields/values, as codes are updated and added routinely.

Conclusion

These guidelines are meant to clarify the role of the Office of Institutional Research in reporting University of North Alabama information. With this new guideline implementation, these guidelines may evolve somewhat over time. However, they should serve as a good starting point. We are fortunate to work in an institution that highly values collegiality. Guidelines such as this are not meant to replace or even reduce the valuable discussion that takes place here, but to help us all to make sure that we are handling requests for information as effectively as possible.

Examples of Information Requests and Recommended Action

Request: An editor at the *Times Daily* calls to ask for our current enrollments.
Recommended Action: The call should be directed to University Media & Public Relations. The University Media & Public Relations office should contact OIR for "official" enrollment figures.
Reason: This is an external request for data from the news media, so University Media & Public Relations should handle it. Since the figure will be made public, it should be based on our official data, which IR is responsible for providing.

Request: A department chair would like to know about the enrollments in a particular introductory course in her department over the past decade, in order to plan for the next few years.
Recommended Action: Since this will be used for internal purposes only, if the Administrative Assistant or Department Chair has access to Argos reporting they can run a report to provide them with this information. However, given that many Argos reports have not been updated as data has changed over time the accuracy of the Argos report needs to be verified with OIR. If the department does not have access to Argos, the requestor should contact OIR for this information.
Reason: This is an internal request for simple summary data. However, OIR works from census files which will give a more consistent picture over time.

Request: A publisher of a new guidebook aimed at students with learning disabilities sends a survey to the Deans' office. The responses to the survey will be used to describe the University of North Alabama in the guidebook.
Recommended Action: The Deans' office should forward the survey to OIR. OIR will review the survey to be sure they are collecting the information in a meaningful way, and consult with the Deans' office, Admissions, VPAA's office, and Disability Support Services to determine whether UNA should participate in the survey. If so, OIR should complete the survey using official data, with the assistance of other offices as needed.
Reason: These data will appear publicly in a guidebook, and so should reflect official figures, and be reviewed for consistency with information provided for other guidebooks.

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Request: The US Department of Education requests the reporting of crime statistics.

Recommended Action: The survey should go to the Director of Public Safety, who should confer with OIR for any enrollment, demographic information, etc. that may be requested. A copy of the completed survey should be sent to OIR.

Reason: This is an office-to-agency report that requests data for which the OIR office has no access or expertise. *A copy should go to OIR* since these data are publicly available and it's easy to conceive of it being used in ways other than intended by the collecting agency. (For example, a college ranking publication may decide to add crime rate to the factors considered.)

Request: Someone from another college calls to see if our applications for admission are up or down as of a certain point in time.

Recommended Action: The requestor should contact OIR for this information, as we are the official point for year over year preliminary data needs.

Reason: OIR has worked with the Office of Admissions, as well as the Office of Graduate Admissions on developing official dashboards for application data, year over year.