

Standardize reporting definitions with Data Cookbook

A recent Educause study shows that senior information technology directors and staff members are skeptical whether their institutions get maximum business value from institutional data or whether they effectively manage the varieties of data and digital content their institutions need.

If officials at your institution share those concerns, consider whether the Data Cookbook, a new product from IData, could help.

"The Data Cookbook is designed with the express goal of managing institutional data in the interest of getting the most business value," said Brian Parish, president of IData.

If two offices on your campus produced reports answering the same question, would the results be the same? It might depend on whether they chose the same definitions for the relevant terms.

Among the 16 colleges in the Kentucky Community and Technical College System, each college may produce reports in different ways, said Baron Wolf, institutional research specialist. For example, there are multiple ways to define FTE, he said.

The Data Cookbook, an online tool, allows users to create both functional and technical definitions for terms that can be shared across departments. Users can even build report formats into the system and store reports for future use.

And anyone reviewing reports can refer to the Data Cookbook, Parish said. Making the definitions available helps with the perception that the data is transparent, he added.

The Data Cookbook got its start when institutional research consultants for IData needed a way to store and share definitions and to help their clients at institutions increase communication between IR and IT units, Parish said. As the Cookbook grew, it became more helpful, and IData executives realized that campuses would benefit from the tool also.

Creating definitions

Users can start by consulting a common area of the Cookbook where officials at other institutions have shared their definitions. Those might work for you. For many state and federal reports, definitions are set, so there's no need to start from scratch.

Users can also write your own definitions and store them. Since the Cookbook will need to be available to many people on campus, data stewards should approve definitions before they are added to the

Online tool solves problems

Baron Wolf, who was involved in beta testing for the Data Cookbook, liked what he saw.

"It would help everyone get on the same page," said the institutional research specialist at the 16-college Kentucky Community and Technical College System. Common definitions among the colleges would make reports more useful within the system. Plus, the tool would help remind administrators and faculty members of the definitions required for use in IPEDS and other standard reports, he said.

Currently, Wolf uses a hard-copy dictionary. He prints out definitions and keeps them in a binder on his desk but admits it is not always up to date. The advantages of the Data Cookbook are that the information it contains is always current because the user doesn't have to remember to print out and file revised definitions, he said. And online access to the Cookbook simplifies communication about definitions, Wolf said. ■

Cookbook, Parish said.

If campus officials write the definitions as they come up in reports, they will create a complete dictionary in the course of doing the work, Parish said.

Once the definitions are written and approved, they comprise a searchable database.

Securing information

Institution officials can limit staff members' access to some information. For example, the technical definitions of terms, which are the pieces of code IT staff members use to program reports, are not meaningful to most users, Parish said.

Subscribing to the Cookbook

The Data Cookbook is offered on a subscription basis, Parish said. The information is hosted on an external database. To access it, institutions can purchase one of two types of annual subscriptions. A departmental subscription allows five users. An enterprise license allows unlimited access across the institution. Costs for enterprise licenses vary based on institution size.

Contact Baron Wolf at Baron.Wolf@kctcs.edu and Brian Parish at bparish@idatainc.com. To learn more about the Data Cookbook or view a demo, go to www.datacookbook.com. To review the key findings of the Educause report, Institutional Data Management in Higher Education, go to www.educause.edu/Resources/InstitutionalDataManagementinH/191754. ■