

## Standardize reporting definitions with Data Cookbook

By Joan Hope

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 defines terms its own way for many reports, said Baron Wolf, institutional research specialist. For example, there are multiple ways to define FTE, he said.

“Every time someone asks for data, someone is making a decision about how they’re pulling the data,” said Brian Parish, president of IData.

The Data Cookbook, a new product from IData, can help you solve this problem. The online tool allows you to create both functional and technical definitions for terms that can be shared across departments. You can even build report formats into the system and store reports for future use. And when you share reports with others on campus, such as deans or provosts who may not have a deep understanding of the data or much time to figure it out, you can refer them 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

### Online tool solves problems

Baron Wolf, who was involved in beta testing for the Data Cookbook, liked what he saw. As institutional research specialist at the 16-college Kentucky Community and Technical College System, he understands the problems created when a term is defined in different ways depending on who creates a report.

“It would help everyone get on the same page,” he said about the Cookbook. Common definitions among the colleges would make reports more useful within the system. Plus, the tool would help remind officials of the definitions required for use in IPEDS and other standard reports, he said.

Currently, Wolf uses a dictionary he created. He prints out definitions and keeps them in a binder on his desk. 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.

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**

When you create a report, you can work with IT to determine both the functional and technical definitions, Parish said. As reporting responsibilities grow, IR and IT staff members need to collaborate, and this tool can help get the conversations going, he added. You 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 for you to start from scratch.

You can also write your own definitions and store them. Since the Cookbook will need to be available to many people on campus, there needs to be one data steward responsible for approving definitions before they are added to the Cookbook, Parish said. If campus officials write the definitions as they come up in reports, you'll 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 set parameters to 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.

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