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ABSTRACT

At Prince George's Community College (PGCC) in Largo, Maryland, a number of environmental and revenue changes in the 1980's resulted in complex political issues for the college. Changes in the county's black population (from 14% in 1970 to 51% in 1990) meant that the faculty's composition no longer reflected the diversity of the student population. Tuition fees at PGCC from 1985 to 1992 continued to surpass the state average, reaching 12% higher than the next most expensive Maryland state two-year college in 1992. Questions from legislators and the county concerning minority hiring policies and the high tuition fees abounded. In 1991, a state law was passed requiring PGCC, and only PGCC, to provide a detailed costs analysis report annually to the General Assembly. In January 1991, PGCC's office of institutional research initiated a study of comparative county aid to community colleges in Maryland. The study revealed that between fiscal years (FY's) 1987-90, Prince George's County failed to provide the state mandated 28% of PGCC's annual revenues, providing less aid per student than its four peer counties in the study. Between FY's 1986-90, Prince George's County allocated 1.2% or less of its budget to PGCC, representing half of that provided by peer counties to their community colleges. In 1991, results of the study were presented to the County Executive and published in the college's Master Plan (1992). As a result of the study, the charge of high tuition was diffused, and a planned cut in the county's contribution was averted. A series of suggestions for achieving similar successes through the use of institutional research and data tables from the county aid study are included. (PAA)

Assessing County Support for Maryland Community Colleges: An Institutional Research Success Story

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Overview

Institutional research success stories provide new understandings of important issues, lead to changes in campus policies, contribute to improving instruction or student success, save money or raise revenue, or otherwise have a major impact on an institution. Mired down in mandated reporting or responding to the latest ad hoc data request, researchers enjoy too few of these successes. This paper describes a modest library research project—the most sophisticated statistical technique used was simple division—that arguably was the office's most influential ever. It was credited with partially defusing a delicate political situation and preventing a substantial cut in college revenue. The paper concludes with a discussion of why this project was a success, and suggests several strategies for increasing the incidence of such success stories.

Background

Maryland community colleges receive financial support from both the state and their local jurisdiction, as well as revenue from student charges and other income from operations and investments. The relative shares of state, county, and student contributions to college revenues were stipulated in Title 16, Education Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland, as follows: the state was to provide 50 percent, the counties 28 percent, and the students 22 percent of current expenses. The law allowed that the counties not be prohibited from paying more than 28 percent, and the boards of trustees not be prohibited from requiring students to pay more than 22 percent. This has been the case. Statewide, in fiscal year 1991 the 16 locally-governed community colleges received 39 percent of their revenue from local aid, 27 percent from the state, 31 percent from student tuition and fees, and the remaining 3 percent from other sources. (If state paid benefits—$26 million contributed to Social Security, TIAA/CREF, and state retirement plans—are included, the percentages change to 37 percent local, 33 percent state, 28 percent students, and 2 percent other.) The proportion of local aid varied considerably across jurisdictions. In FY91, the local aid share ranged from a low of 29 percent at Prince George's Community College to a high of 50 percent at Dundalk Community College.

The Prince George's Case

Prince George's County is a largely suburban county adjacent to the eastern border of Washington, D.C. With nearly 730,000 residents, the County has a population larger than six states. Driven mostly by in-migration from the District and out-migration to neighboring Maryland counties, the county's black population increased from 14 percent in 1970 to 51 percent in 1990. Enrollment at the community college reflected this change, with student profiles each year a mirror image of the county population. However, with only modest growth in full-time employment over this period, the college's workforce remained predominantly white. This was especially true of the tenured faculty; with almost no growth in positions and little turnover, the full-time faculty was 14 percent minority in 1990 – compared to a student body that was 56 percent minority.

Despite the legal guideline stipulating that county aid should provide 28 percent of community college operating budgets, Prince George's County failed to do so during the 1980s. County aid during this period averaged 26 percent of PGCC's budget. Rather than have its overall budget constrained by the county's contribution, the college reached an informal understanding with the county which allowed budgets to grow and the county share to remain below the guideline. At the end of the decade, a "gentlemen's agreement" was reached whereby the County Executive privately pledged to gradually increase county support so that it would meet the 28 percent standard by fiscal year 1992.

The Political Context

The recession in the early 1990s produced a severe fiscal crisis in Maryland. State revenue shortfalls, combined with mandated medicaid and welfare expenditures, implied large cuts in state aid to higher education and to local jurisdictions. County governments were facing similar fiscal difficulties. It was obvious that college budgets were vulnerable. In addition, the community colleges lacked a unified voice in Annapolis. The governor had announced that the State Board for Community Colleges (SBCC) would be abolished, effective June 30, 1992. SBCC, while a government agency, had served as a presence if not an advocate for community colleges in the state capital. With its demise forthcoming, SBCC lost its effectiveness – and most of its staff, as employees left as soon as alternative jobs were found.

In addition to the financial pressures, other factors contributed to a delicate political situation for PGCC. Prince George's County's rapidly changing demographics made race a component of many local political issues, and the community college was not immune. In 1988, a state legislator threatened to hold up $1.2 million in state aid to PGCC pending his subcommittee's review of the college's affirmative action efforts. Later that spring, the college was asked to testify about its minority procurement policy at a County Council meeting. A 1991 law changing the state funding formula for community colleges included an amendment requiring PGCC – and only PGCC – to provide a detailed cost analysis report annually to the General Assembly. Asked why the college was singled out, a state senator replied that in his opinion the college did not adequately reflect or serve the County's fifty percent African-American population. In response to state aid cuts and subsequent tuition increases, the president of the college's Union of Black Scholars commented, "We are taking this personally because this is a direct hit at our people. If they are not in school, they will be on the street." Several of these issues were played out on the front page of the local newspaper.

The Charge: High Tuition

In 1991, these dissatisfactions coalesced around one issue: PGCC's tuition. Since 1990, the college's tuition had been the highest among Maryland community colleges. Its announced tuition and required fees for FY92 were 12 percent higher than the next most expensive institution. As one state senator put it in a letter to the chairman of the college's Board of Trustees, "Prince George's Community College is almost $20 a credit hour higher than Catonsville! Why?"

While not always the highest, PGCC's student charges were historically above the average for all Maryland community colleges:

Tuition and Required Fees per Credit Hour

Fiscal Year	PGCC	Md CC Average
1992	$58.00	$44.51
1991	53.00	41.10
1990	50.00	38.42
1989	40.00	34.00
1988	40.00	32.00
1987	35.00	29.76
1986	33.00	27.88
1985	30.00	26.18

Table 1

While cognizant that the college's tuition was relatively high, the Board had passed each increase either unanimously or with only one or two no votes. As a group they were, and remained, convinced that the college was operating in a cost-efficient manner and that the increases were needed to maintain the quality of instruction at the institution.

An Institutional Research Initiative

In January 1991, PGCC's director of institutional research and analysis initiated a study of comparative county aid to community colleges in Maryland. This was a proactive effort by the research office; indeed, no one on campus was aware of it until the analysis was completed. This unusual approach reflected the political situation both inside and outside the college, which also influenced the research design. The aid provided by Prince George's County to PGCC would be compared to in-state, suburban community colleges of similar size. This ensured that the peer group would not differ in governance structure, state funding, or other fundamental ways. Only official, public data sources would be used. Aid would be calculated in all obvious ways – as a percent of county expenditures, as a percent of college budgets, in terms of aid per FTE student. Ten years of data would be analyzed. The final report would include displays of computations as well as trends, and include complete appendices of the compiled data. The intent was to present an unassailable product.

The study's design, work, and dissemination were influenced by internal as well as external politics. It was hoped that the study findings might enlighten college employees, if not reduce their anxiety about the budget and political attacks on the college. Historically, participation in governmental relations and county budget negotiations at PGCC had been restricted to the president, his executive assistant, and the vice president for finance. Institutional research had some supporting involvement, providing environmental scanning for strategic planning and enrollment projections for budget development, and was thus somewhat more knowledgeable than most. But the inside strategy meetings were closely guarded and unrequested input not encouraged. Finally, the research office was aware that securing adequate funding for the college was a presidential and Board responsibility, and thus findings demonstrating consistently low funding compared to neighboring jurisdictions had to be handled with particular care.

Analysis of County Contributions to Community Colleges

In this section, highlights of the analysis are presented. Several ways of assessing the relative contribution of county aid to Maryland community colleges were examined. Four peer counties of Prince George's were selected for the analysis based on size, location, and suburban character: Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Howard, and Montgomery. For comparisons among colleges, of the three in Baltimore County, Catonsville and Essex were included but Dundalk, due to its smaller size, was not. Howard Community College, though smaller than the others, was included in the analysis due to its suburban setting and location in the Baltimore-Washington corridor. None of the six colleges studied received supplemental state funding based on Maryland's unusual wealth factor grants.

Dollar Amount of Aid

Baltimore County provided the most community college aid in fiscal year 1991, contributing a total of $31,913,650 to its three community college campuses. Montgomery County was a close second, providing $31,367,118. Prince George's County contributed $10,032,466 to PGCC, an 11 percent increase from the year before. Howard County provided the largest percent increase, providing nearly $7 million, up 22 percent from FY90. Local aid in FY90 and FY91 to the six colleges under investigation was as follows:

Dollar Amount of Local Aid, FY90-91

College	FY90 Aid	FY91 Aid	1990-91 Change
Montgomery	$28,792,144	$31,367,118	8.9%
Catonsville	13,274,015	14,247,749	7.3%
Essex	10,976,746	11,450,579	4.3%
Anne Arundel	9,674,590	10,547,970	9.0%
Prince George's	9,036,789	10,032,466	11.0%
Howard	5,725,450	6,986,000	22.0%

Table 2

County Share of College Operating Budgets

Statewide, county aid provided 39 percent of community college unrestricted revenues in FY91. The table below shows local aid shares of college budgets for the FY87-91 period:

County Aid Percentage of College Operating Budgets, FY87-91

College	FY87	FY88	FY89	FY90	FY91
Montgomery	45%	47%	47%	46%	47%
Howard	37	40	42	41	46
Essex	44	45	46	41	42
Catonsville	42	42	43	39	39
Anne Arundel	42	42	40	37	38
Prince George's	25	27	27	27	29

Table 3

Despite a guideline stipulated in Maryland law that counties were to provide 28 percent of college revenues, Prince George's County failed to do so over the FY87-90 period. PGCC's peers have had much greater shares of their budgets contributed by their counties. The decline in local aid shares in FY90 reflected an 18 percent increase in state formula aid that year.

County Aid per FTE Student

How much aid do counties provide per student? While aid is not allocated on this basis, calculation of county aid per full-time-equivalent student provided a different way of assessing local support of community colleges:

County Aid per Full-time-equivalent Student, FY87-91

College	FY87	FY88	FY89	FY90	FY91
Montgomery	$2,141	$2,322	$2,316	$2,321	$2,494
Howard	1,357	1,564	1,758	1,811	2,117
Essex	1,377	1,415	1,566	1,417	1,434
Catonsville	1,384	1,368	1,425	1,365	1,358
Anne Arundel	1,270	1,300	1,234	1,131	1,191
Prince George's	784	821	838	947	1,051

Table 4

Throughout the FY87-91 period, Prince George's County provided substantially less aid per student than its peer counties. While these ratios reflect changes in enrollment as well as aid levels – Anne Arundel, for example, experienced a 36 percent increase in enrollment over FY87-91 – it is clear that PGCC has operated with considerably less local aid per student than its peers. Aid provided by Howard County increased faster than enrollment growth at Howard Community College, so HCC enjoyed rising levels of local aid per student over the period.

Share of County Budgets Contributed to Community Colleges

Perhaps the most direct way to assess relative county support for community colleges is to calculate the percentage of the counties' general fund expenditures contributed to the college boards of trustees. The Maryland Department of Fiscal Services presents the necessary data in their annual *Local Government Finances in Maryland* publication. For example, in FY90 Prince George's County allocated $9.1 million to PGCC out of total general fund expenditures of $792.6 million, or 1.1 percent of its budget. Similar data for FY86-90 for Prince George's and its peer counties are shown in the following table:

Percentage of County General Fund Expenditures Contributed to Local Community Colleges

County	FY86	FY87	FY88	FY89	FY90
Baltimore	3.2	3.4	3.5	3.7	3.5
Montgomery	2.3	2.6	2.7	2.8	2.5
Anne Arundel	2.6	2.5	2.5	2.4	2.2
Howard	2.0	1.9	2.1	2.3	2.2
Prince George's	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.1

Table 5

As the above table documents, Prince George's County has allocated 1.2 percent or less of its budget to PGCC, while peer counties have contributed on average twice as large a share of their budgets to their community colleges. Community college funding in Prince George's County appears to be a relatively low priority. Table 6, on the next page, shows the percentage of county budgets expended for various functions in fiscal year 1990.

Share of Total County Expenditures from All Revenue Sources

An additional way of assessing county support based on expenditure data was an examination of the share of total county expenditures of revenue from all sources, including restricted fund federal and state grants. Local politicians often cite these larger figures which include intergovernmental revenues. In the case of Prince George's, perhaps the low level of county general fund contributions reflected disproportionately larger revenues contributed from other sources. If the college was receiving adequate funding from other sources, the county might feel justified in continuing its low contributions. In FY90, Prince George's County expended a total of $1,487,645,351. Of this amount, $36,998,802 went to the community college. By this method, PGCC received 2.5 percent of total Prince George's County expenditures for

General Fund Expenditures, Percentage Allocations to Selected Functions, FY90

Function	Prince George's	Anne Arundel	Baltimore	Howard	Montgomery
Board of Education	37.1%	43.0%	39.7%	47.2%	46.4%
Public safety	17.4	20.1	16.8	14.2	14.0
General government	12.0	13.1	5.8	10.2	6.5
Debt service	6.7	9.5	6.3	7.9	9.3
Public works	6.1	5.8	9.7	7.9	8.7
Recreation/parks	5.7	1.7	1.6	2.3	5.1
Health	1.8	2.2	3.7	1.5	1.4
Libraries	1.7	1.7	2.2	2.0	1.8
Social services	1.3	0.4	1.0	2.1	2.8
Community college	1.1	2.2	3.5	2.2	2.5
Budget (millions)	**$793**	**$444**	**$828**	**$256**	**$1,175**

Table 6

fiscal year 1990. Similar calculations for the County and its peers for FY86-90 produce the following:

Percentage of Total County Expenditures Expended for Local Community Colleges

County	FY86	FY87	FY88	FY89	FY90
Baltimore	6.5	7.4	7.5	7.3	7.1
Anne Arundel	4.2	4.3	4.1	4.0	4.3
Montgomery	4.3	4.5	4.6	4.5	4.3
Howard	3.9	3.8	3.8	5.4	4.2
Prince George's	3.0	3.0	2.7	2.6	2.5

Table 7

Inclusion of expenditures of restricted fund revenues did not change the central finding of the analysis: Prince George's County expended a substantially smaller share of its revenues on its community college than its peer counties expended on their community colleges.

Dissemination of the Analysis

The initial version of the above analysis was first shared in a confidential written report to the president in early February 1991. At the request of the president, it was shared with the president's cabinet the next day. The following week, the findings were shared with the Board of Trustees at a closed dinner meeting; the Board then asked that the same presentation be made at their public meeting which followed. The Board also asked that a similar analysis be made of state funding. Compared to county aid and student charges, state aid contributions were found to be relatively similar across peer colleges and relatively stable over the study period. Variation in county aid explained more of the variation in budget and tuition levels than state aid differences.

Following its disclosure at the open Board meeting, the analysis was shared with several campus divisions at the request of PGCC administrators who wanted their employees to gain a better understanding of the county's support for the college. By the end of February, the findings were well known on campus. However, immediate dissemination off campus was not authorized, reflecting the sensitive nature of ongoing budget discussions, continuing uncertainty as to eventual state cuts to the college and the county, and concern that release of the information might be perceived as confrontational. The first off-campus release of the information was a mention of the existence of the analysis in a reply to a letter from a state senator concerning our tuition level. No data was shared, only the central finding that the county's support was historically low compared to its neighboring peers. Although some administrators argued for full publication of the data in the college's major public relations print piece aimed at county and state policymakers (the college's *Master Plan*), the president decided against this. Instead, he authorized one sentence under the document's planning assumptions section: "Prince George's County will continue to provide a lower level of community college support than nearby peer jurisdictions."

The law requiring the college to provide a special cost analysis report to the state legislature provided a rationale for full public release of the county aid analysis. Using this legislative attack on the college to its advantage, the college included the entire comparative county aid analysis in the report submitted to Annapolis at the end of August, 1991. Once this decision had been made, the Board of Trustees asked for a meeting with the County Executive so the complete information could be presented to him in person. In September the director of institutional research made a formal presentation to the County Executive and his staff in the Executive's conference room in the county office building. The tone was informational, not confrontational, and set in the context of the state reporting requirement. After this meeting, the college decided to share the findings widely. Three tables of comparative data were included in the 1992 edition of the college's *Master Plan*. The development office was authorized to use the information where appropriate in its fundraising efforts.

An Institutional Research Success Story

Dissemination of the comparative county funding analysis succeeded in defusing the high tuition charge, by deflecting most criticism away from the college and to the historically low level of county suport. Legislators and students came to understand that differences in student charges reflected differences in county aid. County budget staff privately acknowledged

that a planned cut in the county's contribution to the college was averted because of the persuasive case made by the college that the county had consistently underfunded it in the past.

What lessons can institutional researchers learn from this example? The following suggestions come to mind as a result of this case study:

1. **Stay attuned to the external and internal environments.** You need to know the decisions facing top management, and the contexts in which the decisions are to be made. Pay particular attention to the politics inside your institution as well as relations with external actors. Be alert for opportunities, and recognize that the timing of your contribution may be crucial to its success.

2. **Be proactive – take the initiative.** Once you identify an opportunity where research findings might be especially pertinent and influential, go forward. While you must be sensitive to protocol and personalities, if you are confident in your research and its potential contribution, pursue it to completion and ensure its findings reach the appropriate people.

3. **Consider library research.** There's more to institutional research than running SPSS and doing surveys. Be open to different approaches and seek out new data sources. A specific recommendation: get to know what's available in the legislative services library in your state capital.

4. **Keep data analyses simple.** This is Middaugh's "fourth commandment" (Michael F. Middaugh, *A Handbook for Newcomers to Institutional Research*, NEAIR IRIS No. 2, p. 23) and this case study demonstrates the value of its advice. Particularly when dealing with external audiences, simple analyses comprehensible to non-specialists are advantageous. Obviously, you must use techniques appropriate to the task. But choosing a sound method that is also easy to present to your target audience can increase the effectiveness of your research.

5. **Turn reporting burdens to your advantage.** External reporting is usually the part of the job least enjoyed by institutional researchers, with good reason. But as the leverage provided by the required cost report in this case study demonstrates, occasionally you can change a compliance exercise into a positive experience for your institution.

6. **Get lucky.** Sometimes the data tell the story by themselves. While data ambiguity typically provides room for alternative interpretations, sometimes you uncover information that is clearcut and especially pertinent to the issue of the day. You won't get this lucky often unless you are regularly tilling virgin ground.