How the office that serves as the 'one source of truth' can help tell your unit's story

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Those interested in understanding the University of Arizona's institutional culture and values might find what they're looking for in a warehouse.

But not an actual, physical warehouse.

The Enterprise Data Warehouse, managed by University Analytics and Institutional Research, is a vast database of information about the University's demographics, enrollment, research, financials and more. It's essentially a digital collection of numbers about the University that live on secure servers, and it grows every day.

But to Rayneet Chadha, those numbers stored in the Enterprise Data Warehouse could be key ingredients in any number of compelling stories that could be told about the University.

Chadha is the University's chief data officer and the associate vice president for UAIR. He's positioned his team of more than 50 analysts, data scientists and support staff as not only the source for institutional data, but also the go-to resource where colleagues can learn what that data says about the University, and how they can use it to advance their units' missions.

"That's my biggest goal. I want to get to a point where people are not thinking about data as a need or a check box," Chadha said. "They're looking at it to learn more about the place where they work or go to school."

The 'gateway' to institutional data

A two-time graduate of the College of Engineering, with a bachelor's degree in computer and electrical engineering and a master's in engineering management, Chadha worked as a student employee in several offices across campus as an undergraduate, mostly working in information technology.

He graduated and joined the University full time in 2009, working for the office that preceded UAIR. Chadha was working as a program manager when the office took its current form in July 2014, and then assumed leadership of the office in 2019. UAIR is part of University Information Technology Services.

UAIR's bread and butter is collecting and maintaining data that many employees find and use every day through UAccess Analytics. This includes student and employee demographics, institutional financial data, data about sponsored research projects and more. The data is automatically uploaded to the Enterprise Data Warehouse every night except Saturdays.

Much of UAIR's data is publicly available and accessible via its Interactive Fact Book, where users can get a comprehensive look – in numbers, tables, bar graphs, pie charts, maps – at the University's people, finances, research and more. Users can apply filters to get a clearer picture of what they're searching for, such as enrollment at a particular University location or admissions numbers for a specific set of students.

Getting the fact book to its current form – a dynamic, interactive website, and not just a webpage where users could download spreadsheets – had long been near the top of Chadha's agenda. The renovation began in 2017 and initially rolled out in 2018; it's been updated with new features in the years since.

"Initially, I took it on personally to improve it," Chadha said. "After that, I said, 'Let's not stop the momentum.' We're always trying to move the needle, set the standard on this front."

Chadha said he especially takes pride in the fact book's diversity section, which is unique compared with similar tools at other institutions. Users can view data for something as general as the ethnicities represented at the University, including at individual colleges, as well as very specific data, such as retention and graduation data for women studying science, technology, engineering and math disciplines.

This data, Chadha added, is provided with a special focus on privacy: If a certain ethnicity or community includes fewer than 10 people in a given college or unit, the fact book does not give a precise number, but indicates that the number is fewer than 10.

"I think about the fact book as a gateway into institutional data for people who have no background or idea what the University of Arizona is," he said. "With everything that our school is doing on a diversity and inclusion level, we want to make sure that we represent it."

What's better than data? Answers.
Having all that data and being able to find it in the fact book is one thing – and still very central to what UAIR does.

But helping the University use all its data to answer big questions and make better decisions takes an entirely different mindset, Chadha said. It also requires a more hands-on approach with requests for data that campus colleagues can’t necessarily find in the fact book.

Those requests often start with a data request form submitted through the UAIR website. Providing the numbers without much discussion is usually possible, Chadha said, but he and his team prefer to go deeper, to get a better understanding of what the end goal is for the data being requested.

“A lot of times what happens is someone comes looking for an answer for one question, but we raise these other questions, and they say, ’Oh, I need to look at all these different aspects before I can get to my answer,’” Chadha said. “Our goal is, when you come asking for data from us, that you are prepared to answer all – or at least most – related questions that are going to come out of your answer as well. Because data is one of those things that people always have more questions about.”

“The No. 1 thing,” he added, “is having one source of truth.”

Teaching the campus community how best to use that one source of truth is also a key part of UAIR’s mission. To that end, Chadha and his team have developed a series of resources targeted at teaching data literacy, training colleagues on how to use UAccess Analytics, helping users understand methodologies for reporting race and ethnicity and more. A collection of these resources, including written guides and video tutorials, is publicly available on the UAIR website.

The office also holds regular events, such as its Data Exploration Series and lunch-and-learns, that cover specific timely topics, such as fiscal year-end data, data on student degrees, exploring and using new features in UAccess Analytics and more. For those who can’t attend live, videos from the events are archived on the UAIR website.

The campus community can also request one-on-one office hours with Chadha’s team to drill down on specific topics.

“One of our biggest priorities is providing answers and insights, but we don't have unlimited resources either. So, we have to make sure that our campus community uses the data in the best possible way,” Chadha said. "You can give a wrong number and that could have a long-lasting strategic impact if that number is used to do something.”

'Ve're doing something right'

As Chadha looks back at what he and his team have built at UAIR, and where he sees the team going in the next several years, he said there’s no reason the University can’t be the go-to model in higher education for data analytics and institutional reporting.

All signs indicate, to him, that they're on the right track.

“The biggest success story for me is that, in the past two years, I’ve had almost 10 schools reach out to try and copy our model, in terms of how we work, our Interactive Fact Book and our work within and outside the institution,” Chadha said. “That's the best acknowledgement that we're doing something right.”

Are you interested in a certain set of University data, or do you have questions about how data can help tell your unit's story or achieve a goal? The UAIR team can be reached at uair@arizona.edu or 520-621-3030. Colleagues can also schedule virtual one-on-one office hours or make a request for data via the UAIR website.

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