Beyond the Rainbow

Megan Geckler '01 commemorates a community with a colorful creation
If You Build Good Systems, the Answers Will Come ... Right?
Why the ‘Field of Dreams’ approach to data doesn’t work

BY BRAD C. PHILLIPS AND JORDAN E. HOROWITZ

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with this paradigm is the belief that data, in and of itself, is enough to change behavior. This thinking does not take into account human nature. According to Heath and Heath, statistics alone are not good enough. Numbers, tables, and charts in and of themselves are not enough to inform and influence. Rather, it is the story behind the numbers that has the ability to impact educators.

Relying on data alone to impact community colleges is the Field of Dreams approach—faith that if you have enough of the right data, problems will solve themselves—but many colleges are signing on. The number of companies touting their latest data visualization software and analytics tools has expanded considerably. However, just because a new software can do something doesn’t mean that it is the right something, and colleges are learning this hard lesson. We often hear from colleagues whose colleges have purchased these packages, admonitions to be cautious and make sure to keep your receipts in case your college needs to return the purchase.

Let us be clear—we are not saying these tools are bad. What we are saying is that these tools are not the panacea for effective data use. That’s because these tools ignore the fact that human beings need to interface with information: just increasing access to information or being able to slice and dice and order data in a variety of ways only gets you part of the way there.

Excerpted from Creating a Data-Informed Culture in Community Colleges: A New Model for Educators (Harvard Education Press), 2017. Reprinted with permission of the authors and publisher.

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