

# A Blueprint for Better Information:

## Recommendations for a Federal Postsecondary Student-Level Data Network

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Research shows that investing in a college education pays dividends for both students and society.<sup>1</sup> But, persistent gaps in college access, success, and attainment prove that not everyone shares the same benefits. Outcomes vary within and across institutions, yet we often don't know which programs at which institutions provide a return on investment, and for which students. The data that students, institutions, and policymakers currently use for decision-making are disconnected, duplicative, and incomplete. To better serve students, the higher education system needs a data infrastructure that reduces complexity while measuring the outcomes of all students—especially those who have been traditionally underserved.

This brief builds on the 2016 paper series *Envisioning the National Postsecondary Infrastructure in the 21st Century*<sup>2</sup> by exploring a federal student-level data network (SLDN) through both technical and policy lenses.<sup>3</sup> We know policymakers are interested in creating a workable SLDN, as evidenced by the introduction of the bipartisan College Transparency Act of 2017 (CTA) and previous iterations of the Student Right to Know Before You Go Act.<sup>4</sup> This paper, therefore, reinforces the case for building an SLDN while describing the technical, operational, and governance requirements needed to successfully and securely design and implement such a system.<sup>5</sup> Figure ES1, below, shows our key policy recommendations for an SLDN in three primary categories: **Operations & Capacity**, **Data Governance**, and **Privacy & Security**.

The creation of a federal SLDN would transform the higher education system. If higher education stakeholders had access to connected and complete data, and used it thoughtfully, more students would have a true opportunity to succeed in college. Policymakers could make more informed decisions about federal and

state investments in higher education. Institutions could benchmark performance and create programs that benefit students. Students and families could choose a best-fit college. And researchers could provide a data-driven foundation for these stakeholders. High-quality data is an essential, yet often overlooked, component of most policy areas.

However, the federal government did not design its systems to collect data to answer all of the questions pertinent to today's student population. For example, the most commonly used graduation rate only measures the percentage of first-time, full-time students who complete their degree or credential at their first institution within six years, leaving out part-time and transfer students. As a result, this rate reflects only about 47 percent of today's students entering college.<sup>6</sup> The federal government collects data at different levels (e.g., institution-level, student-level, loan-level), and its data systems cannot currently connect to each other to provide a clear picture of the complex and varied pathways students take to, and through, higher education—pathways that we now know are highly complex. Given rising college costs, increased interest about return on investment for families and the government, and a lack of clear information about 21st century students' outcomes, we must take action to improve our national data infrastructure and put useful information into the hands of decision makers.

Students, policymakers, and institutions need a limited, core set of consistent, institution- and program- level metrics that serve specific policy, consumer information, and institutional improvement purposes. This brief provides the necessary guidance to design and implement a secure data system that protects student privacy, while equipping key stakeholders with the information they need to make equitable, student success-focused decisions.

**Figure ES1: Key Policy Recommendations for a Federal Student-Level Data Network (SLDN)**

RECOMMENDATIONS	
<b>Operations and Capacity</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Authorize creation of a federal SLDN.</li> <li>▶ Leverage existing federal and institutional data to count all students and all outcomes.</li> <li>▶ Replace components of existing data collections with a federal SLDN.</li> <li>▶ Shift staffing and data system resources from Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to the SLDN.</li> </ul>
<b>Data Governance</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Include key stakeholders on the data governance team to inform data integrity, management, and privacy.</li> <li>▶ Coordinate on the development and use of unique identifiers to align data across collections.</li> <li>▶ Adapt best practices from existing data sharing efforts.</li> </ul>
<b>Privacy and Security</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Follow data minimization principles to limit data included in the system to only the necessary elements, retain data only as long as needed, and restrict its use to educational purposes.</li> <li>▶ Host the system in a statistical agency and require adherence to strict privacy and security laws and standards, including conducting routine audits, using encryption technology, and following relevant standards and practices from the National Institute for Standards and Technology, the Fair Information Practice Principles, and other leading protocols.</li> <li>▶ Implement clear role-based access protocols.</li> </ul>

1 Ma, J., Pender, M., & Welch, M. (2016). Education Pays 2016. The College Board. Retrieved from: <https://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/education-pays-2016-full-report.pdf>  
 2 Institute for Higher Education Policy. *Envisioning the national postsecondary infrastructure in the 21st century*. Retrieved from Institute for Higher Education Policy website: <http://www.ihep.org/postsecdata/mapping-data-landscape/national-postsecondary-data-infrastructure>  
 3 A federal student-level data network (SLDN) aggregates student-level data reported by institutions and federal agencies to create aggregate metrics for decision-making and policy-making.  
 4 Roberson, A.J., & Voight, M. (2017). *Better data on the horizon: An analysis of evolving student-level data legislation*. Retrieved from Institute for Higher Education Policy website: <http://www.ihep.org/postsecdata/resources/better-data-horizon-analysis-evolving-student-level-data-legislation-0>  
 5 College Transparency Act of 2017, H.R. 2434, 115th Congress (2017-2018). Retrieved from: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/2434/text>  
 6 IHEP analysis of IPEDS 2015 data.