Mapping the Postsecondary Data Domain: Problems and Possibilities

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March 2014

A REPORT BY
Institute for Higher Education Policy

SUPPORTED BY
The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
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This paper is a product of the Reimagining Aid Design and Delivery (RADD) Simplification and Transparency Consortium, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Under this consortium, seven organizations joined together to explore ways to simplify the college admissions and financial aid process to make it simpler and more transparent. This paper represents the Institute for Higher Education Policy’s (IHEP’s) research and recommendations. While collaborations with the consortium informed this paper, an organization’s participation in the consortium does not necessarily signal full endorsement of this content. Consortium partners include: Center for Law and Social Policy, the College Board, Institute for Higher Education Policy, National College Access Network, New America, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, and Young Invincibles.

Acknowledgements

This report is the product of hard work and thoughtful contributions from a number of individuals and organizations. We would like to thank the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) staff who helped in this effort, including Michelle Asha Cooper, president; Melissa Moreland, research analyst; and Eunkyoung Park, former research analyst. We also thank Tia T. Gordon at TTG+PARTNERS for her communication efforts, Paula Amann for her editorial expertise, and Matthew Reed and Jessica Thompson from The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS) for their thoughtful feedback on the report’s content. We especially thank the Reimagining Aid Design and Delivery (RADD) Simplification and Transparency members, all of whom have been strong partners throughout this project. Finally, we are grateful for the Gates Foundation’s support of the RADD project and, in particular, this research on postsecondary data. Although many have contributed their thoughts and feedback throughout the production of this report, the research and recommendations presented here are those of the authors alone.
Executive Summary

In a time of rising college costs and stagnating rates of completion, America’s students, policymakers, and colleges and universities need better information about our postsecondary education system. While their data needs do differ, each of these constituencies needs to be able to answer critical questions:

• Which students have access to which colleges?
• How many—and which—students complete college?
• How much does college cost, and how do students pay?
• What outcomes do students experience after college in the workplace and society?

These might seem like straightforward questions to which we already have the answers. Yet, a careful mapping of federal data systems against these questions shows that while we have a solid base of understanding in some areas, we fall far short in others. In an attempt to fill these gaps, a series of voluntary data initiatives have arisen in recent years. These initiatives do not include all institutions or even all states, but they do signal an emerging consensus on the importance of answering the key questions outlined in this paper. Projects like Complete College America, Achieving the Dream, and Access to Success collect voluntary data from states, institutions, or systems on access and success measures. Other efforts like College Measures, the Project on Student Debt, and the Workforce Data Quality Campaign aim to improve and report cost, debt, and workforce results data.

Despite sometimes disparate decisions on definitions and technicalities, growing agreement on the critical questions and some core measures offers an opportunity to unify postsecondary data more broadly than is possible through voluntary initiatives. While the federal government could rework the underlying structure of existing postsecondary data systems, this paper examines current systems like the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and the National Student Loan Data System (NSLDS) and proposes improvements to fill gaps in knowledge about postsecondary institutions and programs. Still others in the field are exploring alternative options such as state or regional approaches.

The core measures (see TABLE 1) and proposed improvements described in this paper will be useful for all constituencies: Students and families as they make college decisions, policymakers as they make funding and policy decisions, and institutions as they work to continuously improve the ways in which they serve students. Each group also could benefit from supplemental measures suited to their particular needs. This paper provides a framework for understanding those needs, evaluating how well existing data meet them, and recommending practical solutions that would greatly improve the existing data infrastructure.
Why Do We Need Better Postsecondary Data?

The higher education community seems to have reached consensus: Now more than ever, students need better information to help them make more informed postsecondary decisions. Too many of today’s college students are paying far too much at institutions that offer them far too few chances for success, an outcome neither students nor the country can afford.

Recent years have seen the rollout of the White House’s College Scorecard, the U.S. Department of Education’s Financial Aid Shopping Sheet, and a number of websites—among them College Measures, College Results Online, and College Reality Check—aimed at helping students choose institutions that offer them a better return on their college investment. Today, federal and state policymakers are developing rating and funding systems intended to more directly influence institutions to ease costs and improve outcomes for students. Amid these and other efforts, demand has grown for more and better data to answer important questions about the value of a college education.

Yet, our current data systems were not designed with today’s needs in mind. In fact, significant gaps in the data on which we currently depend leave important questions unanswered:

- How many part-time, adult, military, remedial, and Pell grant students are successfully completing their degrees?
- Are students who do not graduate transferring to another school or dropping out altogether?
- How much are students learning in college, and how are they contributing to society after college?
- Are students leaving school with loan debt, and are they paying back their loans, especially students who do not complete?
- What types of jobs are students getting after college? Are they going to graduate school?
What Do We Mean by Postsecondary Data?

Fundamentally, most people mean “information” when talking about “data.” However, without a clear framework, postsecondary data conversations can devolve quickly into debates about numerators, denominators, definitions, and cohorts—sometimes losing focus on the purpose.

Clearly, these technical conversations are critical, as data availability, definitions, and quality all shape effective data use, but these must not occur in a vacuum from a broader discussion about the goals we aim to achieve with better data. This paper offers a structure for organizing postsecondary data along several dimensions to map the existing data domain and to chart a course toward getting the information needed to improve higher education using existing data systems (see FIGURE 1).

First, before diving into the details, we need to articulate what QUESTIONS need answering with improved data. These questions may differ depending on the audience: Consumers¹ trying to make better, more affordable choices about where to go to college; institutions trying to improve student outcomes; or policymakers trying to protect the public investment. To be sure, this is not a static nor straightforward process as the higher education enterprise does and should evolve over time to meet the changing needs of students. After identifying the relevant questions for today’s students, we then must identify MEASURES that can answer those questions, and at this point, definitions and technicalities become highly relevant. This paper draws on existing postsecondary data initiatives, as well as conversations with higher education data, research, and policy experts to outline the core questions for students, policymakers, and institutions, and then proposes measures to answer those questions.

To populate the measures, we must rely on the collection and submission of data housed in DATABASES—either existing or new. The existing national postsecondary databases were built for different purposes at different times, making it challenging to adapt them to today’s needs. For example, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) was designed to provide a national composite of the nation’s postsecondary system with reporting required for compliance to maintain Title

¹ Throughout this paper, the word “consumer” refers to students and in some cases, families. This interchangeable use of the words “consumer” and “student” should not be interpreted to mean that college is purely a consumer good, bestowing only private benefits on graduates. Rather, higher education creates thoughtful citizens who contribute to society as innovators, thinkers, artists, employees, parents, volunteers, taxpayers, and much, much more.
What Do We Mean by Data?

**FIGURE 1**

**QUESTIONS**
- Consumer
- Accountability
- Improvement

**DATA**
- Elements/Variables
- Measures/Metrics

**DATABASES**
- IPEDS
  - Student Unit Record Systems
    (Federal, National, State, Institutional)

**INTERFACES**
- Tools and counseling for consumers
- Accessible data sets and dashboards for policymakers
- Manipulable data sets for institutions

IV eligibility. The National Student Loan Data System (NSLDS) primarily serves as a transactional tool for student loans (see BOX 1), although research and policy analysis also are approved uses. This paper outlines how existing national data sets can be amended, added to, or linked together to answer the core postsecondary questions identified herein. Alternately, a new student-level database could be conceived and constructed to generate the data postsecondary education demands (see New America’s forthcoming paper on a student unit record system); others in the community are considering state or regional approaches.

Finally, data must be communicated clearly through user-friendly, context-sensitive INTERFACES that truly convert data into information that can drive change. Regardless of the quality of these interfaces, especially for consumers, they must be accompanied by counselors, mentors, teachers, or other experts who can help students interpret and use the information. Data alone do not change student behavior; people do.

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3 20 USC 1092b(b).

Higher education depends on a limited number of large-scale and national postsecondary data collection efforts to provide foundational information about the system. The most comprehensive national sources of postsecondary data today are the federally mandated Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and the National Student Loan Data System (NSLDS), along with a third-party organization, the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). In addition to these three primary data sets, several less comprehensive data sources—such as state longitudinal data systems, many of which do not include private nonprofit or for-profit institutions; voluntary data initiatives like Complete College America; and the National Center for Education Statistics’ (NCES’) nationally representative sample studies—provide their own glimpse into the postsecondary system.

Each of the three primary data systems was created for a unique purpose. IPEDS was authorized in 1992 to use a number of existing surveys to provide a national portrait of all types of institutions in the postsecondary system; institutions must report data to IPEDS in order to retain eligibility for the Title IV program. The creation of NSLDS was mandated in 1986 to respond to an environment of waste, fraud and abuse in the student aid system, while also minimizing administrative burden. NSC is a private nonprofit organization launched in 1993 with the initial goal of streamlining student loan administration, but which now contains a wealth of student-level information and serves a variety of purposes, but charges a fee and has no mandate to share institution-level information publicly.

Because of the varied—and sometimes very specific—goals of each of these systems, users face challenges and limitations when trying to repurpose the data for broader consumer information, policymaking, or institutional improvement. For instance, in the case of IPEDS, concern over student athlete outcomes in the late 1980s led to the creation of the Graduation Rate Survey and the inclusion of only first-time, full-time students in the graduation rate cohort. While this definitional decision made sense for student athletes, it is far less useful for the broader student population, especially given the makeup of today’s student population. Also, because different institutional identifiers are used in IPEDS and NSLDS (and other Federal Student Aid (FSA) data), merging information across data systems can be challenging and complicated.

Each of these data systems contributes to our understanding of the postsecondary system. Furthermore, the voluntary initiatives have moved the data conversation forward, converging key stakeholders around several core measures and metrics that are lacking in the national data sets. However, when recently surveyed about progress in measuring outcomes for post-traditional students, institutions cited “lack of consensus on key definitions and metrics” and “insufficient coordination among industry stakeholders” as two challenges facing the community. Given the emerging consensus around measures, paired with seeming confusion around definitions and nuances and the need for streamlining of collections, the federal government can play a unifying role in these data debates.

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8 Data Quality Campaign, Data for Action survey.
9 NCES’ postsecondary sample studies include the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS), and Baccalaureate and Beyond (B&B).
What Do Students, Policymakers, and Institutions Need to Know?

The million-dollar question facing all higher education constituencies involves the concept of “value.” Which colleges produce value or return on investment for students, as measured by inputs, outputs, and cost? While terms like “value” and “return on investment” tend to evoke economic and workforce concepts, measures of learning and social good can be incorporated as “outputs” as well, providing a more holistic perspective on college value. This question of value—which institutions provide it to which students in what quantities—permeates postsecondary discussions today and touches all actors in the system, including students, policymakers, and colleges and universities.

For students, the evidence is clear: On average, college graduates have higher earnings and are less likely to face unemployment than those without a postsecondary credential.10 Were student graduation, debt, and employment outcomes relatively similar across all institutions, then students might not require better data to inform decision-making. Yet, graduation rates and student debt do vary tremendously across institutions.11 And while comprehensive information on employment outcomes is unavailable, data on states participating in College Measures12 and on gainful employment programs13 indicate that labor market outcomes also vary considerably by institution and program.

To select a college and course of study most likely to set students up for success, they need clear information about college access, outcomes, and cost.14 In fact, research shows that high-achieving, low-income students who receive information on college costs and financial aid options are more likely to take steps toward attending college, particularly institutions with strong outcomes.15 Similarly, when low-income parents receive information about college outcomes, they act on it, allowing graduation rates to trump even location when identifying colleges to encourage their children to attend.16 (For more information on students’ particular data needs, see BOX 2.)

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Consumer information is a critical piece of our nation’s postsecondary data infrastructure, informing one of the biggest decisions of students’ lives. In addition, consumer information can act as a form of soft accountability, allowing some students to “vote with their feet” in the direction of institutions that serve them well. However, soft accountability is just that: Soft. While other consumer information efforts, such as public campaigns about the adverse health consequences of smoking, have substantially changed behavior—albeit slowly,\textsuperscript{17} college choices are fundamentally different. In the higher education context, many students—particularly adults, members of the military, and low-income, first-generation students—face very limited choices in where to go to college. Even with access to perfect information some of these students will remain place-bound, searching for colleges near their home and family, or at least within their state, where they qualify for in-state tuition.\textsuperscript{18} Real accountability and improvement requires action by policymakers and institutions.

And such accountability is warranted. Taxpayers invest billions of dollars in higher education through student financial aid, research and development, institutional tax exemptions, state and local spending and investment in Title III and V institutions and programs. To safeguard this substantial investment and protect students from subpar institutions, policymakers need better information on institutional costs, student prices, and student outcomes—information that is more detailed and more nuanced than that used to inform students. For example, students need to know how much they must pay for college, but they do not need to know the total amount of Pell grant dollars or state appropriations received by their institutions. Nonetheless, those data on public investments are crucial for policymakers trying to determine how best to distribute scarce resources. (For more information on policymakers’ specific data needs, see BOX 3.)

Clearly, students and policymakers need access to critical information to guide thoughtful choices and policymaking. But in the end, both students and policymakers will have only indirect impacts on institutional performance. Some students may avoid institutions with poor outcomes, but such choices are not realistic for all students given location and cost constraints, as mentioned. In terms of policymaking, most accountability systems issue harsh sanctions only for the worst-of-the-worst performers, allowing some subpar or mediocre institutions and programs to continue operating without substantial consequences.\textsuperscript{19}

For all institutions, though, continual improvement is critical—and thoughtful data use can inform and drive those efforts directly. Serving students and serving them well is arguably the core function of institutions of higher learning. But too many institutions are struggling to increase student success on their campuses. Better and more deliberate use of data can help


\textsuperscript{19} President Obama’s proposed rating systems may offer more broad-based accountability for institutions at all levels of performance, depending on the design of the system and its penalties or incentives.
In addition to the core measures, students also need information about what experiences and supports colleges offer, including student services, opportunities to expand their learning, and venues to contribute to their communities and the greater society. In its College Access & Opportunity Guide, the Center for Student Opportunity advises students to ask a range of questions including the following:

- Do all entering students have assigned academic advisors?
- To what extent does the school help students deal with their academic and social needs?
- What percentage of students do community service?
- What percentage of students study in other countries?
- What percentage of students gain internship or co-op experience before graduating?

While these questions will help students build an understanding of each campus environment, many students—particularly those receiving less guidance in the college search process—may not think to ask them. As a proactive step to inform students, institutions should provide clear information about the availability and student use of student support services, career services, experiential learning, and civic and community engagement. Minimally, institutions should break down data on student use of services by socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity, so as to ensure broad access to these programs and opportunities. All of this information should be easily accessible on websites and in marketing materials, as part of the mix of data available to students during the college search process.

BOX 3. Additional Data for Policymakers

In this era of budget cuts and fiscal austerity, policymakers need to spend each public dollar wisely. To make thoughtful and productive decisions about where and how to invest funds from the public coffer, federal and state policymakers need better information on how institutions and states spend their own dollars, how public funds currently are distributed, and how these investments can best promote access and completion, especially among underserved populations. For instance:

Targeting of State and Institutional Aid: While the federal Pell grant program targets students with the greatest need, states and institutions too often undermine this investment by spending their aid dollars on students who do not need the financial support. Existing data are not yet fine-grained enough to understand individual state and institutional aid practices. To make these data available, the net price by income component of the Student Financial Aid survey could disaggregate average grant aid by source to allow policymakers to examine which students the state and institution supports, and by how much. To make these data as useful as possible, the net price data would need to incorporate non-Title IV recipients.

**Current Federal Investment:** Institution-level information is available on federal grant, loan, and work-study expenditures through the Federal Student Aid Data Center (http://studentaid. ed.gov/data-center). However, while national trends show that 35 percent of tax credit expenditures benefit families making more than $75,000 annually, more detailed data are not available by state and institution. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) likely could generate this more detailed information, disaggregated by student/family income, using the institution name and address included on the 1098-T—the tax form institutions must complete to allow students to claim education tax benefits. This process could be streamlined if the IRS added an IPEDS UnitID field to the filer portion of the 1098-T.

**Investments to Promote Access and Completion:** Measures of state investment per completion can be calculated using existing data sources, but other measures of investment per completion may be useful as well. These data on investments could be useful in quantifying the impact of public investment, but also should be interpreted with care and not used to measure program effectiveness inappropriately. For example, the population of students receiving Pell grants differs from the population of students receiving tax benefits in a number of ways, including the number and type of obstacles to success they face. As such, if dollars per completion proved to be lower for tax benefits than for Pell grants, that finding would not indicate that tax benefits are more efficient.

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22 See technical report for other proposed changes to the net price data in IPEDS.
25 The State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) reports annually on state higher education appropriations. These data could be combined with IPEDS completion data to calculate investment per completion.
campus leaders identify roadblocks and change institutional policies to pave the way for greater levels of student success. In fact, many institutional researchers and campus leaders already are leading the way by using fine-grained, campus-level data to inform institutional policy and program development.\textsuperscript{27} To develop effective institution- and department-level policies, colleges and universities need more specific, fine-grained data on student progression than are necessary for policymakers or students, including:

- Successful credit accumulation by semester or year
- Year-to-year (or semester-to-semester) persistence
- Developmental course sequence completion rates
- Gateway course completion rates, disaggregated by developmental education needs
- Courses with high drop, failure, or withdrawal rates\textsuperscript{28}

While each of these constituencies—students, policymakers, and institutions—do have their own unique data needs (see all boxes), there does appear to be a core set of questions about postsecondary education that applies to all of these actors, proving useful to these primary constituencies, as well as the media and other public interest groups. A review of the current data landscape, from voluntary national initiatives such as Complete College America and Access to Success\textsuperscript{30} to state dashboards and the federal College Scorecard, shows an emerging consensus around the general questions as well as signs of agreement on the measures to answer them.


\textsuperscript{30}IHEP reviewed a variety of voluntary initiatives, including Access to Success, Achieving the Dream, College Measures, Completion by Design, National Community College Benchmark Project, Predictive Analytics Reporting Framework, Student Accountability Measure, Transparency By Design, Voluntary Framework for Accountability, and Voluntary System of Accountability.
What are the Core Postsecondary Questions and Measures—and are the Data Available?

In the recent discourse about measuring value or return on investment in higher education, core questions have emerged around access, completion, cost, and outcomes. In recent years, voluntary initiatives attempting to answer these four questions have proliferated, often collecting and reporting information not publicly available in national data sets.

Yet, while the definitions differ across these initiatives, the measures themselves are quite similar. TABLE 1 maps the core set of questions to a common set of measures representing the essential information around which the field is beginning to converge in terms of what consumers, policymakers, and institutions need to know. The color coding provides a snapshot of the data’s current status in publicly accessible national data sets. Data availability for each of these areas varies widely, from being fully available in national data sets to being available but needing varying degrees of modification to not being available at all (see TABLE 1). Data points on access, for example, are either readily available in national data sets such as IPEDS or could be refined fairly easily to answer core questions adequately. Data in other areas—such as progression and outcomes—are less readily available, but could be obtained or modified to meet today’s informational needs. For more details on the precise limitations of existing measures and specific recommendations for improvement, see this paper’s accompanying technical report.

ACCESS: Which students are attending which colleges?
The makeup of the student body provides critical context to consumers who want to know the demographic profile of the college; policymakers who need to understand which institutions are serving which populations; and institutions, as they set access goals and measure progress toward them. Not only does this demographic information on college enrollments allow interested parties to gauge status and progress on access-related metrics, but it also helps them understand who does or does not succeed at an institution.

As shown in TABLE 1, national data sets, specifically IPEDS, provide a strong base of information about college access, reporting sufficient data on enrollments by race/ethnicity and
gender. Other key enrollment measures—such as enrollment status, attendance pattern, degree-seeking status, income or financial aid category, age, and military status or military benefits receipt—are available, but in need of minor or moderate improvements. For example, a number of these enrollment variables are available in the IPEDS Fall Enrollment Survey, but not the 12-Month Enrollment Survey, which is more inclusive of 21st-century-college students—many of whom do not begin college in the traditional fall semester. Data on enrollment by program of study poses larger challenges, requiring additional analysis and reporting by institutions.

Information on academic preparation is not adequately available in national data sets. IPEDS includes only SAT/ACT scores, which are not relevant at many community colleges and other open-access institutions. However, dozens of states and hundreds of public institutions participating in initiatives such as Achieving the Dream, Complete College America, and the Voluntary Framework of Accountability are reporting which students are placing into and/or receiving remedial education and completing gateway coursework, demonstrating potential feasibility for a national collection of this key indicator through IPEDS.

Given the current state of access data, several minor or moderate changes—and some more substantive revisions—could allow IPEDS to offer a clear picture of which students have access to which institutions.

**COMPLETION: How many—and which—students succeed in college?**

When making a college decision, students need to know their chances of success at a particular institution to ensure their investment of time, money, and effort produces value in terms of a credential or productive transfer. At the same time, policymakers require data on what proportion of students complete,
What do we need to know about our higher education system and how available are the data?

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<th>What questions need answers?</th>
<th>Which measures will answer these questions</th>
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Available in national data set • Available with minor to moderate modifications recommended • Available with major modifications recommended • Not available in national data set
transfer, or are still enrolled—along with the total number of credentials awarded—to inform decisions about resource allocation and accountability. Institutions, in their continual efforts to improve, cannot do so without knowing their current level of performance with the students they serve. Further, it is critical to disaggregate completion data by key demographic characteristics, since all too often, low-income students and students of color face lower chances of college success than their classmates.31

Completion data are available in IPEDS and widely used, but they suffer from a series of oft-lamented—yet highly fixable—limitations (see TABLE 1). Existing graduation rates require moderate modifications to reflect the realities of today’s college-goers, who do not all enter as first-time, full-time students. Minor or moderate modifications also could produce better information on transfer rates that would measure student movement from community colleges to four-year institutions. The new outcome measures, scheduled to be added to IPEDS in the 2015–16 collection cycle, will provide additional information on part-time and transfer students. But, as we discuss in more detail in our technical report, these new measures do not align with the existing Graduation Rate Survey (GRS), and as a result, will not produce the data necessary to answer the following questions:

- How many students transfer from a community college to a four-year institution?
- What are the graduation rates for bachelor’s seeking-students who enter institutions as transfers?
- What proportion of first-time, part-time community college students graduate within two, three, four, or five years?

Aligning the two surveys would not only result in more usable data, but also reduce burden on institutions by streamlining the collection and reporting process. Progression measures—which can provide crucial insights into student momentum, offering earlier indicators of student success than backward-looking completion measures—would require more effort to be made available in a useful way. While the current IPEDS retention rates could be improved with minor to moderate effort, data do not yet exist at the national level on other key measures, including gateway course completion rates, Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) rates, and credits or time to credential. These data could be incorporated into IPEDS to signal their importance and provide useful information to consumers and policymakers. With the exception of SAP, each of these progression measures are currently being reported by participants in voluntary national initiatives, and a number of states have begun to utilize these measures in their performance-based funding systems.33

It would be ideal if the progression and completion measures were available disaggregated by all of the enrollment measures identified above, but as long as institution-level IPEDS surveys remain the primary data collection mechanism for higher education, it likely would be too burdensome to collect all of those permutations. Minimally, IPEDS should begin collecting information on the success of students by income or financial aid category, since a number of institutions are already doing so through voluntary collections, including to U.S. News and World Report, and are legally required to disclosure this information upon request.34

COST: How much do students invest in college, especially through debt?

At a time when college tuition and fees are increasing faster than inflation, family income, and health care costs,35 data on college costs are critical to informing student decisions, public investment, and institutional policies. Students need clear information about how much college will cost—not just their first year, but their entire time at an institution—and how much they should expect to borrow. Policymakers in the federal government, states, and institutions need to know how much students and their families actually pay and borrow to attend college, and to understand the impact of growing cost and debt on college access and completion. Debt data are important in the aggregate, but even more instructive when disaggregated, especially by whether or not students complete the degrees they sought.

IPEDS already includes a substantial amount of information on college prices, and NSLDS includes data on cumulative debt loads. Tuition and fees and cost of attendance data accurately summarize sticker prices for first-time, full-time students, and


net price adds further value by representing out-of-pocket costs for students. Through minor and moderate modifications, IPEDS could expand pricing information to include continuing and transfer students. After all, college is at least a two- or four-year investment for the majority of students, so families need access to more than one year of data. IPEDS also could improve net price data by incorporating non-aided students, a change that would require no more data collection from institutions, but would more accurately represent what students must pay for college.

The inclusion of cumulative debt in the College Scorecard using NSLDS was a positive step, but the figures include both completers and non-completers, producing confusing results for prospective students. An institution with high-dropout rates and high costs can show a similar debt number as a low-cost institution with high graduation rates simply because students are enrolled in the high-cost institution for a shorter period of time. Integrating cumulative debt data into IPEDS and disaggregating it by completion status in particular, rather than relying on the limitations in NSLDS, would require more substantial, yet doable, changes.

OUTCOMES: How do students fare after college?
On the whole, the evidence is clear that college produces a sound return on investment—not only in terms of income, but also improved social mobility, health outcomes, civic involvement, and employment benefits such as health insurance. However, available data show that at least completion and employment outcomes vary by institution and program, as noted previously. It is impractical to expect students and their families to make informed financial decisions about how much to pay and how much to borrow for college without some basic information on post-college employment, short- and long-term earnings, and loan repayment. Similarly, these types of data can help policymakers identify institutions and programs that are preparing students well for the workforce and for loan repayment, and sanction those setting students up for financial difficulties. Institutions can use these data to tweak program content, adjust job counseling policies, or rethink connections with industry to benefit their students in the long run.

Our current system makes data on outcomes less readily available than access, completion, and cost data. For decades, the federal government has calculated and reported cohort default rates, which could be improved to meet today’s data needs with only minor modifications. Earnings and repayment data, on the other hand, are less readily available and have only been calculated at the federal level as part of gainful employment regulations. As a result, collecting data on employment rates, post-college earnings, repayment rates, and debt-to-earnings ratios would require more substantial changes, either through new reporting by the U.S. Department of Education or expanding linkages with non-education federal data sets. Such linkages are possible and are detailed in this paper’s technical report and in the Center for Law and Social Policy’s forthcoming paper on workforce results data. Data on learning outcomes and other positive public outcomes of higher education are not yet widely available, but as research strengthens understanding of these data, they also will prove critical for all constituencies (see BOX 5).

 BOX 5. Questions abound about learning outcomes, but answers lag

Another critical component of college value is how much students learn at a particular institution. While graduation rates are a basic measure of quality, and employment outcomes approximate what students gain in the labor market from a program of study, learning outcomes may offer a truer measure of college quality. The purpose of college, after all, is to impart learning to students, so they can succeed in the workforce and society. A variety of efforts and tools, including the Degree Qualifications Profile, the Voluntary System of Accountability, and the Collegiate Learning Assessment are attempting to measure learning in practical ways. This area is ripe for research, and as these efforts continue to develop, measures of student learning should be incorporated into publicly available data sets to inform consumers, policymakers, and institutions.
How Can We Better Use Postsecondary Data?

This paper, along with the accompanying technical report, attempt to bring clarity to calls for better data. However, “better data” can be a nebulous term that, on its own, fails to explain what information is lacking in our postsecondary system. In fact, some may argue that consumers, in particular, face too much data when trying to make college decisions.

The truth is, better data does not necessarily mean more data (though in some cases, as outlined in this paper, it does), but rather more useful data collected, compiled, and presented in a usable way.

The push for better collection and presentation of consumer information in higher education is not new. A number of federal initiatives—including the College Scorecard, Financial Aid Shopping Sheet, net price calculators, College Navigator, NSLDS Student Access portal, FAFSA IRS Data Retrieval Tool, IRS Get Transcript, FAFSA API, and the proposed Postsecondary Institution Rating System—have recently attempted to convert data and information into consumer-friendly tools and products to simplify the college application and financial aid process. Initial research on the net price calculators, College Scorecard, and Shopping Sheet indicates that to be effective, these tools must be easy to find and easy to use, define terms in plain language, present customized information wherever possible, use a streamlined design that is visually engaging, and make information relevant to students.

Perhaps the most critical component of consumer tools is getting them into the hands of students. Even the best tool is useless if students do not know it exists. The Education Department must continue to explore outreach strategies—including counselor education, partnerships with college access programs and organizations, and coordination with states and other federal agencies—to ensure these tools are actually reaching students. In the same vein, we recommend that Congress mandate that all institutions use the Shopping Sheet to allow it to achieve its intended purpose of providing apples-to-apples comparisons across all colleges.


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Beyond distributing well-designed consumer tools, federally funded programs aimed at supporting students and institutions might also incorporate data requirements and data-use tools into their design to inform policymakers and program staff. The current reporting requirements for most federally funded grant programs are fairly basic and compliance oriented, but could be enhanced, especially by aligning them with the core measures identified in this paper. The U.S. Department of Education (or other relevant agency) could strengthen these requirements, make them as consistent as possible across programs, and compile the data in user-friendly tools that lend themselves toward data use rather than simple compliance. Programs could use these tools to evaluate and improve their performance. Programs to consider for enhanced reporting and data use include the following:

- GEAR UP
- TRIO programs
- Title III and Title V programs
- College Access Challenge Grants
- Race to the Top for higher education (proposed)
- First in the World competition
- Department of Labor’s Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) program
- Department of Defense and Veteran’s Affairs education programs

Finally, the Department of Education should consider the types of tools and support that institutions need to make more deliberate use of the data they are required to report to national data sets—as well as the wealth of data available at the campus level—to drive improvement for their students. Developing interfaces that allow institutions to easily examine trends in their data over time and make comparisons with peer institutions could be done with existing IPEDS and NSLDS data. Initiatives and organizations like Achieving the Dream, the Education Delivery Institute, and the Center for Urban Education’s Equity Scorecard demonstrate effective models for working with institutions of higher education to apply data in practical ways. By incorporating data into routine processes on campus, institutional leaders can identify barriers to success for students, struggling programs, or administrative hurdles that they did not realize existed. As data uncover the nuances of campus policies and practices, administrators and faculty can adapt to offer students the best chances of success. For more on institutional use of data, (see BOX 4).
What is Next on the Postsecondary Data Frontier?

Our current postsecondary data systems provide enough data to paint a broad picture of institutional performance, but they do not offer the detailed information necessary to answer core questions facing students, policymakers, and colleges and universities. We can no longer afford to leave vital questions unanswered. Rather, all constituents need clear answers to questions like the following:

• Which students attend which colleges?
• How many and which students graduate and/or transfer?
• What level of debt do students accumulate, and are they able to repay it?
• How successful are students after they leave college?

Better data on the core metrics outlined in this paper—and clear communication, interpretation, and use of those data—can answer these questions and lead to better outcomes through more informed student choice, strategic policymaker investments, and deliberate institutional improvements. Moreover, these improvements are highly attainable, as signaled by the plethora of voluntary initiatives that have already taken on this task among subsets of states, systems, and institutions. Building on the momentum of those efforts, we now need a comprehensive, nationwide approach to postsecondary data—one that will provide critical answers for key constituents. To accomplish this, we can enhance our current databases with measures designed to answer pressing postsecondary questions for students, policymakers, and colleges and universities.