EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Student Clearinghouse as an Integral Part of the National Postsecondary Data Infrastructure

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In this paper we describe in detail the existing content, value, uses and costs of the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) system as a component of the national postsecondary data infrastructure. We also describe some limitations to its use related to the data's ownership and the agreements that govern its use. Unlike many other papers in this series, this paper recommends an incremental approach rather than a new data collection system or a change in policy, regulation, or legislation. The data and the infrastructure we recommend already exist. We suggest four paths to making better use of this comprehensive national resource to meet the needs of policy, accountability, research, and consumer information audiences.

Introduction

NSC is a self-sustaining, independent nonprofit organization, built as a voluntary data ecosystem that provides administrative services directly to colleges and universities, as well as data verification, exchange, research, compliance, and analytic services to entities in nearly all reaches of the education community. It has evolved over the past 23 years to serve a large majority of higher education institutions and to perform many of the functions of a national student-level data system, as well as many other functions that likely would not be performed by a public system. It currently covers all types of students, in all types of institutions, in all states. NSC supports not only the efficient exchange of information among entities engaged in education and student services but also the research uses of the data, ranging from tracking and measuring student access and success outcomes to benchmarking institutional performance. The organization is able to do so with industry-leading data security and privacy protections, along with complete FERPA compliance.

NSC's greatest strength as a data collection—institutions provide their data voluntarily and at no cost—is also the source of its weakness as a tool for accountability. The institutions own their NSC data, are free to withhold it, and must consent to any public release of information using the data that identifies them by name. Unlike a governmental agency, NSC cannot enforce levels of participation or unilaterally disclose what is ultimately privately held data. However, we believe that it is possible for policymakers to work with the higher education community to achieve desired levels of transparency that would benefit all stakeholders. They can do so by building on existing successful models such as the Student Achievement Measure (SAM) and by providing direct benefits to institutions in exchange for their participation.

Technical Enhancements Needed to Strengthen NSC's Contribution to the National Postsecondary Data Infrastructure

The NSC data collection, quality, interoperability, and uses are robust and well documented (see www.studentclearinghouse.org for details). What it lacks is more participation from small institutions, a small number of key data elements (such as details of financial aid and subsequent employment), and a certain amount of data coverage within existing elements (such as student race and ethnicity as well as credits earned). These are incremental enhancements that could be added easily (in the case of new data elements) or are already in process (in the case of coverage). A more strategic, transformative need is to improve the accessibility of the data, specifically by developing a public access data facility to provide researchers and policymakers with rapid access to aggregated, anonymized results. There is currently no facility to provide self-service access to aggregate NSC data beyond the established reports that are published and distributed free of charge by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (these include annual high school benchmarks for postsecondary access and progression, current term enrollments, annual retention, persistence and completion rates, as well as regular reports on student mobility and degrees awarded). There are also opportunities to further enhance the interoperability of NSC with state longitudinal data systems. These systems are currently able to link their high school graduates with subsequent postsecondary enrollments and progress, but they would realize far more powerful results and benefits by leveraging NSC's ability to integrate more comprehensive data directly from school transcripts.

Resources Needed to Improve NSC's Role in the National Postsecondary Data Infrastructure

The data improvements to NSC can be accomplished through the development and broad acceptance of national standards for how to define, measure and track outcomes that institutions value. This will increase the value of the benchmarking and reporting that NSC provides to institutions, encouraging

more colleges and universities to provide more of the data elements that drive the reports. Initiatives are already under way to achieve this goal, namely the metrics framework developed by the Gates Foundation and the Institute for Higher Education Policy. A parallel path to increasing the incentives for institutions to participate would be to strengthen the existing public-private partnership that has created the national postsecondary data ecosystem we have today, in which NSC serves as a private, non-profit intermediary facilitating the regulatory data exchange between institutions and the Department of Education (ED). By working explicitly with institutional associations, accreditors, states and other stakeholders, the ED could develop additional data reporting requirements to meet national needs, with the reassurance that the NSC reporting option would ensure timely and accurate data while minimizing the burden on institutions. Finally, a public access data facility could be developed, in the model of PowerStats, with modest external funding and a time horizon of one year.

Recommended Options for Strengthening NSC as Part of the National Postsecondary Data Infrastructure

As mentioned above, we discuss four options for further strengthening the National Student Clearinghouse to better support the nation's data infrastructure needs. They consist partly of continuing the growth and development strategies that have guided NSC to this point and partly of the technical and coverage enhancements noted above. We recommend the following options to enhance NSC's capacity, reach, and effectiveness:

▶ Encourage and expand existing incentives, mechanisms and opportunities for voluntary transparency on the part of institutions. This means developing metrics and outcomes that offer value by benchmarking institutional improvement and student success.
▶ Build stronger public-private partnerships among institutions, ED, and NSC to provide enhancements to public data such as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) with minimal increase in institutional burden.
▶ Develop a public access data facility that would bring PowerStats-like functionality to NSC data.
▶ Extend existing linkages between NSC data and local and state data systems.

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