EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Assessing and Improving State Postsecondary Data Systems

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POSTSEC DATA

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Introduction

State Postsecondary Student Unit Record Systems (PSURS) analyze student progress and outcomes at the state level. These long-standing data systems have traditionally presented higher education data in a state context for decision-making and analysis. State policymakers often have questions for their postsecondary coordinating and governing boards (which manage PSURS) that are not easily answered by institutional and federal datasets. Specifically, state-level information about the effect of policies—such as remedial and developmental education reforms—in-state transfer policies, and outcomes-based funding initiatives all require state-level unit record data to address policy effects. Uses of state PSURS is broad and varies considerably among the states, but states use these systems to identify problems, support policy implementation, and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

Since these systems were developed, demand for accurate and comprehensive student data has increased and the questions asked of these data have grown more complex. The focus of states has shifted from primarily looking at enrollment indicators to tracking student progress and success throughout their postsecondary educations and into the workforce. Overall, state PSURS should be understood as the primary mechanism for generating state postsecondary metrics and as an integral piece of the postsecondary data infrastructure.

Role of PSURS in the National Postsecondary Data Ecosystem

State PSURS function among a complex environment of institution, state, and federal data systems. Forty-seven states received federal funds between 2007 and 2016 through the National Center for Education Statistics State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) Grant Program. Grant funds were distributed to the state K–12 agency, and the grants encouraged collaboration and linking datasets between K–12, postsecondary agencies, and the workforce.

Additionally, many states have developed—as part of a P-20W council or initiative—data sharing agreements and memoranda of understanding between state agencies, which coordinate activities between early childhood, primary, secondary, postsecondary, and workforce agencies. Sometimes, this work is part of the SLDS grant; other times, it is done independently. The interaction between long-standing state PSURS, SLDS-funded systems, and P-20W initiatives makes the postsecondary state data environment complex and varied from state to state.

Institutions in a state submit key data elements to the PSURS agency. Some of these agencies relieve institutional burden by using their state PSURS to submit data to national reporting efforts, such as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System or Complete College America. Institutions are one of several key audiences for reporting from PSURS, reflecting a common flow of information between institution, state and federal education agencies, and stakeholders.

Major Issues

Although state PSURS are often able to adapt quickly to the needs of state policymakers—through gathering new data elements and analyzing new topics—gaps in data coverage, concerns about privacy, and a lack of resources are major issues for many states' PSURS.

Only 18 states surveyed by State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) collected information from private, not-for-profit institutions. Even in these 18 states, coverage of independent institutions is often limited to those that participate in financial aid programs or to institutions that volunteer to submit data to the state postsecondary agency. There is also considerable variation among the states in the types of data collected by PSURS for reporting. Despite these gaps, these systems provide important value to policymakers who have varying education priorities.

Additionally, some states are being confronted with legislation or potential legislation—stemming from concerns about student privacy—that prevents longitudinal unit record research. Such legislation typically prevents agencies from using personally identifiable information (PII) to link datasets. Although the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) provides strict guidelines for when and how PII can be shared, some state policymakers express concern about linking datasets for longitudinal analysis. By articulating the benefits of longitudinal research and discussing how PII is kept secure, agencies might be able to assure concerned audiences that this kind of research is safe and of tangible benefit.

Despite considerable investments made in postsecondary unit record data, some respondents to SHEEO's survey cited as considerable barriers to effective use of these systems a lack of funding and an inability to retain quality staff who can ana-

lyze data. In order to build a strong case for essential funding, states that use these unit record systems to advocate for policies or to discover critical facts about student behavior should share these findings, credit their staff's work, and communicate the need for quality data. States that use their unit record data for research and policy analysis make a stronger case for expansion of data elements and staff capacity.

Technical Enhancements Needed to Improve PSURS

A key measure reported by PSURS in many states is student labor market outcomes. Access to this information about graduates varies among the states. Often, unemployment insurance records are used to determine wage outcomes of graduates. However, data elements collected by other federal agencies would allow for more complete understanding. Most wage records matches in states exclude federal and self-employed workers as well as students who move to a different state. Cross-state data initiatives, such as the Multistate Longitudinal Data Exchange, are making progress in tracking student outcomes across state lines. Providing a linkage between PSURS and more comprehensive federal records, such Internal Revenue Service (IRS) records, as well as encouraging more cross-state collaboration could improve the quality of reporting on student workforce outcomes.

Some data administrators of state PSURS have shared with SHEEO that they could not incorporate Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) data into their unit records systems or the state SLDS. Demand for comprehensive financial aid research is increasing among state policymakers in an era of constrained budgets and resources. Improved clarity on whether states can connect PSURS and FAFSA data would increase the ability of states to conduct meaningful research on student financial aid. We encourage the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to articulate this to data administrators.

Resources Needed to Improve PSURS

Federal grants have been instrumental in expanding the capabilities and uses of postsecondary data. The underlying commitment of the SLDS program is to see states creating longitudinal databases that allow them to better understand student progress across all components of the education pipeline. Yet, the grants currently focus on what the systems look like rather than what they can do. Federal funding of state data systems should continue; however, evaluation of these federal grants should focus also on the outcomes produced by these systems instead of only on their design and deployment. The average state has received $13 million in SLDS funding since 2005, and some states, but not all, have provided state funding to maintain these systems after federal grants expire.

The best way to ensure sustained funding of PSURS is to effectively communicate the results of policy research that drew on these systems. The more policymakers and the public see the value in longitudinal student analysis, the more likely these systems are to thrive in this data-driven culture.

Policy Recommendations
For States:

Invest in state PSURS, and adopt best practices from other state-level unit Record Systems.
Given state PSURS' ability to quickly respond to unique, statewide policy needs for improving student outcomes, states should view these data systems as essential tools. State PSURS' ability to collect data elements not available in federal datasets and to present information on a statewide basis—often while linking with data from other sectors—means that states are uniquely positioned to provide critical analysis of postsecondary students and the impact of higher education policies.

A number of national organizations regularly convene data experts and practitioners in conferences and meetings designed to improve data capacity and use. Best practices and key examples of new analyses should serve as a model for other, developing data systems.

Involve the state PSURS in the postsecondary agency's strategic plan for higher education.
Strategic plans constitute the key mechanism for higher education agencies to articulate their priorities and goals for the state. Progress on key metrics for higher education—most commonly enrollment, completions, and workforce outcomes—is a way for public stakeholders to consistently see the PSURS being put to strategic use.

Continue to expand the use of state PSURS and communicate their value.
Critical questions about college costs, student debt, remedial education, and workforce outcomes, among others, will continue to be asked of state PSURS; yet, the capabilities of these systems to answer these questions vary. When state PSURS successfully generate information on new topics of import, their success should serve as a model for other states to emulate.

Proactively address privacy and security concerns.
States that develop and communicate safeguards to student privacy are better equipped to fend off legislation that will prevent longitudinal research. FERPA protections already ensure that states must not release PII. However, additional outreach to policymakers and processes to ensure data security protect against unnecessary restrictions that prevent meaningful educational research.

For Federal Policymakers:

Continue to fund state data systems while shifting the focus of federal grants to outcomes rather than infrastructure.
Lack of resources and retaining capable staff remain challenges for many administrators of state data systems, but federal grants have been instrumental in expanding the capabilities and uses of postsecondary data. By evaluating grants based on the outcomes the system will produce (i.e., the uses of the information to advance appropriate policy development and actual student success), instead of the structure, the federal government can enable meaningful longitudinal research while ensuring that the results of this research are put to use.

Allow state PSURS access to federal datasets to improve matching.
Data quality would be improved if linkages between postsecondary and workforce datasets were made with the more comprehensive IRS and Social Security Administration data elements. Additionally, linkages between state PSURS and the National Student Loan Data System would allow a more comprehensive study of the impact of federal financial aid.

Federal datasets should better enable state-level analysis.
Many federal tools, including the new College Scorecard, don't provide state-level analysis. While current federal data systems effectively allow for comparison of institutions, ED has an opportunity to better present the data it currently collects in state contexts, using a common methodology for both easier access to and more consistent quality of the information.

Use lessons from recent state PSURS improvements if developing a federal unit record system.
A federal student unit record system would present a variety of advantages to researchers and policymakers at the institutional, state, and federal levels. However, the presence of such a system would not negate the need for states to pursue their own strategic priorities. State PSURS are diverse and varied across the nation in part because each state has differing needs for them. As state policymakers pursue higher education goals that will inevitably vary across states, these PSURS are well positioned to adapt and allow research of new educational questions. SHEEO's past two surveys of state PSURS show clearly that they have changed and adapted to new policy needs in the past decade. We urge ED to consult states in the development of any federal system. This would allow ED to build on the decades of state work spent expanding the capabilities of unit record data.

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