

Critical Issues for the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking

The Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking's examination of Federal administrative and survey data provides an exceptional opportunity to address the management and use of data for measuring postsecondary education and workforce outcomes. The Commission's findings and impact could lead to more inclusive, aligned and market-relevant data systems to help educators, students, employers, workers and policymakers all make more informed decisions.

Data collected and held by the government could help to answer a range of important postsecondary education and workforce questions, such as:

- Which skilled positions are employers having a difficult time filling, and what institutions might they look to for recruitment?
- Are recent college graduates finding jobs and earning good wages?
- How much do students borrow, and can they repay these loans?
- What types of education and training pathways are helping people succeed in careers?
- How can workers know which short-term credentials would likely raise their earnings potential?
- What job search strategies are most effective, and for whom?

In some instances, surveys have been able to answer those questions over a limited time frame, but with great effort and expense. A growing number of state longitudinal data systems are linking administrative records to answer questions, but geographical coverage is limited. The Federal government already collects data through numerous administrative sources, in addition to conducting regular surveys. With improved coordination, these data could be systematically shared and linked to answer those and other critical questions for generations to come.

Issues for Action

Strides have been made in recent years, but much information remains separated between agencies because of technological, cultural, and legal barriers. We encourage the Commission to consider the following issues:

1.) Expand access to wage information

The Commission should examine how the Federal government can build on existing data collections and facilitate the linking of employment and earnings data across higher education and training programs.

Students and workers want to know which education and training programs will help improve their chances of having successful careers. Researchers need access to more detailed and comparable data on programs to analyze which pathways are working for students and workers. Agencies at all levels of government want to know the short- and long-term employment outcomes of those they have served.

Potential relevant data sources include the National Directory of New Hires and the Census Bureau, which contain Unemployment Insurance wage records submitted by states. The Internal Revenue Service and the Social Security Administration have individual tax records. In limited instances, agencies have found ways to use these data to show employment outcomes on programs, but the Federal government may be able to streamline and widen processes for access while protecting privacy and maintaining security.

2.) Improve information on postsecondary progress and outcomes

The Commission should examine ways that postsecondary student progress may be measured to effectively and efficiently answer important consumer and policy research questions.

Stakeholders do not have access to comparable information at the program level, and in many cases, only students receiving financial aid, attending first-time, full-time, or those pursuing two or four year degrees are counted – excluding non-degree credentials that are growing in number and importance. The Department of

Education's College Scorecard, IPEDS, and other resources reflect progress toward providing and linking data for analysis and consumer friendly interfaces, but the information remains scattered and incomplete. In particular, the implementation of a national student unit record system would allow for building a more complete picture with lower administrative burden.

3.) Provide more accessible labor market information for a variety of consumers

The Commission should include in its examination how labor market information (LMI) might be better integrated to provide more comprehensive and clear information.

Having access to LMI may strengthen a worker's ability to make decisions about employment and training, and help to improve the alignment of education and training programs with labor market demand. The Bureau of Labor Statistics, Census, and other statistical agencies might be able to more effectively collaborate and incorporate additional information from federal programs to enhance data about employment, worker characteristics, and the job market. If the Commission examines LMI, it should coordinate with the newly established Workforce Information Advisory Council (WIAC), which reports to the Secretary of Labor.

4.) Harmonize definitions and metrics across Federal laws

The Commission should explore how the Federal government could implement similar definitions and metrics to streamline reporting and improve opportunities for data linkages between programs.

Agencies and institutions often face the burden of having to report on program results using different definitions and measures, which increases staff time and cost. Using common definitions and metrics from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) for other programs as appropriate, such as those operating under the Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, could reduce administrative burden and make some outcomes more comparable.

5.) Clarify privacy and security protections

The Commission should account for best practices in privacy and security as it conducts its review.

Institutional practices and changing laws at various levels of government have often created confusion around what is possible and led to blockages in sharing and linking data, even when doing so is legal. Policies and procedures recommended by the Commission should be transparent, utilize evolving best practices for data security, and ensure that publicly available data are aggregated or otherwise stripped of all information that could be used to identify particular individuals or employers.

As the Commission conducts its examination, we encourage the elevation and promotion of high-quality data sources that can be used to inform human capital development policy. We hope the Commission will focus on maximizing the use of data to enhance decision-making and continually improve education and training services that allow all Americans to contribute to a 21st Century economy.

Organizations supporting these principles:

Advance CTE
Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE)
Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities (APLU)
Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)
Data Quality Campaign (DQC)

Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)
National Skills Coalition
New America
Workforce Data Quality Campaign (WDQC)
Young Invincibles