



Mapping the Postsecondary Data Domain: Problems and Possibilities

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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.

TABLE 1

What do we need to know about our higher education system and how available are the data?

What questions need answers?	Which measures will answer these questions?
<p>ACCESS: WHICH STUDENTS ATTEND WHICH COLLEGES?</p> <p>Consumers need to know the demographic profile of the student body.</p> <p>Policymakers need to know which institutions provide sufficient access to a diverse array of students.</p> <p>Institutions need to know which students they are serving to increase access as well as target support to key populations.</p>	<p>PERCENTAGE OF FIRST-TIME STUDENTS AND PERCENTAGE OF UNDERGRADUATES BY:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enrollment Status (first-time, transfer) Attendance Pattern (full-time, part-time) Degree-Seeking Status Income or Financial Aid Category Race/Ethnicity Gender Age Major or Program of Study Military Status or Military Benefits Receipt Level of Academic Preparation
<p>COMPLETION: HOW MANY—AND WHICH—STUDENTS SUCCEED IN COLLEGE?</p> <p>Consumers need to know their chances of timely completion, as well as meeting key benchmarks of success along the way.</p> <p>Policymakers need to know how successful institutions are with student populations of public interest and how many credentials institutions contribute to the economy.</p> <p>Institutions need to know which students are progressing through their courses of study (and how well) to target instruction and support.</p>	<p>PROGRESSION MEASURES: DISAGGREGATED AT LEAST BY THE FIRST FIVE, BUT IDEALLY BY ALL ACCESS MEASURES ABOVE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gateway Course Completion Rate (disaggregated by remedial status) Retention Rate Satisfactory Academic Progress Credits to Credential Time to Credential <p>COMPLETION MEASURES: DISAGGREGATED AT LEAST BY THE FIRST FIVE, BUT IDEALLY BY ALL ACCESS MEASURES ABOVE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completion Rate Transfer Rate Continued Enrollment Rate Degrees and Certificates Awarded
<p>COST: HOW MUCH DO STUDENTS INVEST IN COLLEGE?</p> <p>Consumers need to know how much they will pay and borrow to attend an institution.</p> <p>Policymakers need to know the cost and debt burden that students must carry to access and succeed in college, which reflects on how institutions invest public dollars.</p> <p>Institutions need to monitor the impact of cost and debt on access and completion for students.</p>	<p>COST AND DEBT MEASURES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tuition and Fees Cost of Attendance Net Price by Income Cumulative Debt (disaggregated by loan type, income or financial aid category, and completion status, and ideally race/ethnicity; also accompanied by the percentage who borrow)
<p>OUTCOMES: HOW DO STUDENTS FARE AFTER COLLEGE?</p> <p>Consumers need to understand the economic return on their credential to inform borrowing and enrollment decisions.</p> <p>Policymakers need to know which institutions prepare students to repay their loans and succeed in the workforce to protect consumers and the public investment.</p> <p>Institutions need to calibrate course and program offerings as well as support programs based on student outcomes.</p>	<p>WORKFORCE SUCCESS MEASURES: DISAGGREGATED AT LEAST BY COMPLETION STATUS AND INCOME OR FINANCIAL AID CATEGORY (WHILE IN COLLEGE) AND IDEALLY RACE/ETHNICITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment Rate Post-College Earnings Default Rate Repayment Rate Debt-to-Earnings Ratio Graduate School Enrollment Rate Learning Outcomes

Available in national data set

Available with minor to moderate modifications recommended

Available with major modifications recommended

Not available in national data set



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