

HOW TO MEASURE WHAT MATTERS:

A Practical Guide to Assessing Postsecondary Value

SUMMARY

**Want to turn data into clear answers
about the value of a college education?**

This step-by-step guide will help researchers, policymakers, and practitioners use data to evaluate postsecondary value within a state, institution, or community. By operationalizing the Postsecondary Value Framework developed by the Postsecondary Value Commission, we provide an overview of the technical and analytic considerations needed to measure postsecondary value.



Why measure value?

Value assessments deepen understanding of higher education's economic benefits, support evidence-based policy and practice, and make student outcomes clearer.

Who should measure value?

Researchers—working at institutions, state systems and agencies, or as approved external partners—who can access and analyze student data and understand their institution's or state's strategic priorities are well positioned to design analyses and share findings with decision-makers. State and institutional leaders play an essential supporting role by aligning resources, encouraging secure cross-agency data sharing, and using data-informed insights to drive improvement for all students.

How can you measure value?

Here is our six-step process for measuring postsecondary value:



- STEP 1** — **Determine a research focus.** Review current priorities and gather information, then decide which value metrics, which students, and which subgroups to include in your analysis.
- STEP 2** — **Identify data and secure access.** Gather enrollment and completion records, post-college earnings, and student cost and financial-aid data. Close gaps through data-sharing agreements or publicly available sources.
- STEP 3** — **Define an earnings cohort.** Set the cohort's characteristics, time frame, and exclusions, then map the cohort and build an analytic file.
- STEP 4** — **Calculate economic value thresholds.** Download and clean American Community Survey data, then calculate the relevant Postsecondary Value Framework thresholds (T0-T3).
- STEP 5** — **Compare student earnings to thresholds.** Evaluate students' post-college earnings against each selected threshold.
- STEP 6** — **Interpret data and share findings.** Create data visualizations, identify key findings, and discuss your results with key decision-makers to inform policy and practice.

Measuring postsecondary value can turn open questions about what a college education is worth into concrete evidence that inspires leaders to act. Follow these six steps to assess whether higher education is delivering strong outcomes, identify where it falls short and for whom, and help ensure that every student experiences the value higher education promises.

Read the full step-by-step guide at www.ihep.org/valueguide