
Today's News

Monday, June 27, 2005

<http://chronicle.com/daily/2005/06/2005062708n.htm>**Opinion: A Unit-Record System of Collecting Student Data Would Broaden Accountability in Nontraditional Times**By [CONSTANTINE W. CURRIS](#) and [PAUL E. LINGENFELTER](#)

It's time to face facts about higher-education accountability.

It's time to leave behind outmoded mind-sets and measures that speak to yesterday's questions about "traditional" college students. It's time to develop data strategies that address tomorrow's issues -- promoting access and success for new kinds of students and effectively widening the nation's human-capital pipeline. The nation's future depends on it.

That is why the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) support a national data/accountability strategy with three primary objectives:

- Improved accountability for student success for all students.
- Enhanced consumer information available to prospective students and other stakeholders.
- Meaningful evaluation of federal student financial-aid programs.

AASCU and SHEEO believe that this can most effectively be accomplished through the development of a federal student unit-record data system using the existing technological and regulatory infrastructure of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

We know that all institutions will benefit from valid data that accurately explain the good work they are doing and pinpoint areas for improvement. The current system is in a "time warp" from the 1950s, comparing institutions on the basis of full-time freshmen who have sufficient resources to stay in college full time until they graduate.

The system discriminates against institutions that have large numbers of part-time students, community-college transfers, and students who have to drop out for a year or so, whether to save enough money to resume studies or even to help a family survive. Those colleges and universities should not be portrayed as "failing" or as inferior to other institutions who rarely serve students in need.

In short, the nation needs an accountability system to measure the realities of the 21st century, not a system describing higher education 50 years ago. Federal policy makers are proposing additional reporting requirements on institutions, but their efforts miss the point. Successfully serving students most at risk of being left behind and demonstrating appropriate stewardship of taxpayer resources require not simply more reporting, but better reporting -- strong accountability systems built on relevant indicators.

The facts: "Nontraditional" students are the norm on many of today's college campuses. According to NCES, just over 40 percent of postsecondary students today attend part time, compared with less than one-third a generation ago. Similarly, the proportion of students 25 and older has jumped from just over one-quarter in 1970 to nearly 40 percent today. Moreover, nearly 40 percent of students now attend more than one

institution in their college career. All in all, we live in nontraditional times when obtaining a "four year" degree in four years is the exception rather than the rule.

More facts: The nation's accountability efforts are locked into simplistic and obsolete measures of institutional success, such as the six-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time students -- the "traditional" college-going population. That measure fails to recognize changing enrollment and completion patterns, excluding part-time students and missing the many successful completions through transfer.

If institutions are to better educate their students and to be held truly accountable, they need better information -- information that is beyond the scope of current measures. Additionally, if students, institutions, and the federal government are to make the best use of limited resources, they need comprehensive, useful data on net-price and other financial indicators.

Unfortunately, new federal accountability measures proposed in the College Access and Opportunity Act of 2005 ([HR 609](#)) do nothing to improve student-outcomes data. Instead, the bill, introduced by Reps. John A. Boehner and Howard P. McKeon, focuses on issues such as college costs. The current proposal for a College Affordability Index, while a marked improvement over its predecessor, would bury campuses in federal bureaucracy with little added value for them or their students.

So where do we go from here? A federal student unit-record data system is the most effective and efficient way to get crucial information about student success and financial aid. It would:

- Permit the comprehensive reporting of enrollment, persistence, transfer, and completion for all students.
- Allow calculation of net prices for specific groups of students, resulting in useful information for consumers and policy makers.
- Enable evaluation of federal student financial-aid programs through linkage of student-outcomes data with federal program data.

Such a database would enable practical research into the conditions that support success for different kinds of students. By capturing more outcomes for more students, it would increase understanding of institutional performance and support institutional-improvement efforts.

Contrary to many accounts, especially those of opponents, a unit-record system would not represent a massive new burden for campuses or a massive risk for students. Institutions would submit identified student-level data (most of which is already collected), and NCES would link records across data sources. Once student-level calculations were done, information would be aggregated at the campus or program level -- without student identification.

That aggregate-level information would be released for consumer, accountability, and research purposes, with absolutely no release of individual data (except in narrowly defined instances related to national security). NCES has an unblemished record of safeguarding privacy in its survey work. Moreover, 39 states already operate student unit-record data systems and can attest to the value of these systems for public policy-making and accountability purposes.

AASCU and SHEEO agree with Congressmen Boehner ([The Chronicle](#), June 1) that American colleges and universities need to be more transparent to parents, students, and taxpayers. Transparency, however, needs to extend to our data on student success. A national strategy for data collection based on a federal student unit-record database would move us, closer and faster, to the answers needed for better policy and better results for our students.

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