ANSWERING THE CALL:
Institutions and States Lead the Way Toward Better Measures of Postsecondary Performance

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2016
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In an era of escalating costs and uncertain outcomes, it is imperative that prospective students, policymakers, and the public have answers to commonsense questions about whether and which colleges and programs offer a quality education at an affordable price. At present, we still lack answers to critical questions, including:

- How many “post-traditional” students—the low-income, first-generation, adult, transfer, and part-time students who make up the new majority on today’s campuses—attend college? Do they reach graduation and how long does it take them?
- Are students making sufficient progress toward timely completion, particularly students who enter with less academic preparation or fewer financial resources?
- Do the students who don’t graduate transfer to other colleges and earn credentials, or do they drop out completely?
- How much debt are students accumulating from the college(s) they attend—and can they repay their loans?
- Are students gaining employment in their chosen field after attending college, and how much do they earn?
- How much are students learning from their college experience, and how are they using their knowledge and skills to contribute to their communities?

The metrics published today often only include “traditional” students and ignore the new normal in higher education: “post-traditional” students attending college—or colleges—in new ways en route to their credentials. Colleges and universities, and the data systems that support them, must adjust to and reflect the experiences and outcomes of all students, not just the outdated “traditional” student profile. It’s time for a system reboot. And we need only look to leading institutions and states for the operating manual.

Over the past decade, thousands of colleges serving tens of millions of students in all 50 states have participated in data-driven reform initiatives—from Achieving the Dream (ATD) to Completion by Design (CBD) to Complete College America (CCA). In response to the information that campus and system leaders need to support improvement in their communities not being readily or publicly available in existing data sets, these initiatives created and collected new and more robust measures of student access, progress, and outcomes.

In this paper, we share what the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has learned from vanguard institutions and states about how to improve and use postsecondary data to increase student outcomes. Our aim is twofold. First, the field has demonstrated the validity and value of these metrics over time and we intend to use them to evaluate the impact of the foundation’s own investments toward increasing the attainment of career-relevant credentials and closing attainment gaps.

Second, informed by evidence demonstrating the significant progress that select institutions and states have made through the use of improved data, the foundation will work with partners and policymakers to support the widespread adoption and use of these metrics. Improving the quality and relevance of postsecondary data across the field can better inform higher education practice and policy decisions that, in turn, can boost college access and success across the country. Institutions and states that are already taking advantage of the potential of better data not only show us that doing so is possible, but that it is essential.
The foundation has partnered with the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) to develop a metrics framework that represents how leading institutions and states are measuring their performance. The framework is the product of an extensive landscape and literature review, as well as consultation with a diverse array of experts in the field. The framework offers a set of metrics that are currently in use by major initiatives to measure institutional performance related to student access, progression, completion, cost, and post-college outcomes. The framework also highlights metrics in use that examine institutional performance in relation to resources (efficiency) and with respect to diverse populations (equity). These metrics are certainly not the only data that should be collected or used to inform decision-making in higher education but do represent a baseline that has garnered consensus across institutions, organizations, and states.

IHEP will release a paper in the coming months with detailed recommendations for definitions of the metrics in the framework, adopting shared definitions from the field where there is consensus while identifying where and why there are still divergent viewpoints. IHEP will also continue the conversation about postsecondary data and systems through the Postsecondary Data Collaborative, a coalition of nearly three dozen organizations seeking to improve data quality, transparency, and use.

The framework is driven by several core design principles, which were also informed by work in the field:

- **Count all students and institutions:** Most initiatives began collecting data because they could not follow the postsecondary experiences and outcomes of many of today’s students using existing data sets like the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). From expanding enrollment counts to cover students who do not enter college during the traditional fall term to reporting completion rates for students who do not start as first-time, full-time freshmen to disaggregating data to ensure equitable access and success for diverse populations, the framework reflects this progress in the field.

- **Count all outcomes:** Many initiatives also collect and report a more robust set of student outcomes than existing data sets, from pre-completion progression measures such as credit accumulation to success metrics that measure transfer and completion at students’ initial and subsequent institutions to post-college outcomes including learning, earnings, and employment. Although strong indicators of post-college outcomes are still under refinement, they are included in the framework to signal the increasing importance of measuring whether students are earning credentials of value, improving their economic and life chances in relation to the increasing costs.

- **Costs count:** While many of the initiatives did not directly address costs—to the student, the institution, or the public—cost metrics are included in the framework. This is in recognition of the growing pressure on colleges to more efficiently allocate resources to improve student outcomes as part of the attainment agenda in an era of scarce public resources and intense public concern about college affordability and debt.
## A Field-Driven Metrics Framework

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<th>Completion</th>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Post-College Outcomes</th>
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<td>Credit Completion Ratio</td>
<td>Transfer Rate</td>
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<td>Gateway Course Completion</td>
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<th>Cost for Credits Not Completed</th>
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### Key Student Characteristics
- Enrollment Status
- Attendance Intensity
- Credential-seeking Status
- Program of Study
- Academic Preparation
- Economic Status
- Race/Ethnicity
- Age
- Gender
- First-generation Status

### Key Institutional Characteristics
- Sector
- Level
- Credential/Program Mix
- Size
- Resources
- Selectivity
- Diversity
- Minority-serving Institution (MSI) Status
- Post-traditional Populations
- Modality
Several factors underscore why the time has come for a shared higher education metrics framework. First, a decade of investments by the foundation and other funders has yielded broad agreement on a core set of metrics for gauging performance that institutions and states are willing and able to collect, report, and use. Second, there is increasing evidence that better data contribute to better outcomes for students, illustrated by case studies of leading institutions and states. Third, there is a growing desire to increase the efficiency and consistency of data collections, particularly at a time when more students are attending multiple institutions that may cross state lines.

At the same time, existing state and national data systems do not currently provide clear or comprehensive enough information to answer the questions addressed by the framework. As such, the foundation is committed to supporting efforts to strengthen state and national postsecondary data systems to enable consistent collection and reporting of a key set of performance metrics for all students in all institutions across the country. Toward that end, a group of state, regional, and national organizations is currently working together to develop a "blueprint" for improving the national postsecondary data infrastructure by strengthening institutional, state, and national systems and reinforcing the necessary linkages between them to create secure and useful information feedback loops. A series of papers with recommendations are forthcoming from the working group later this year.

Our goal is a national data strategy that clearly articulates the purposes, use cases, and users of each system; supports the connections between them to increase coverage and quality while reducing duplication and burden; and ensures data privacy and security. The work ahead is not without challenges, but the lessons learned from leading institutions and states in a decade of efforts to better measure performance and progress provide a strong foundation from which to advance and accelerate needed improvements in postsecondary data and systems. Better data alone will not guarantee better student outcomes, but a lack of better data will guarantee that our efforts to improve those outcomes will fall short of their potential.

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