Wanted: Better Data for Better Student Outcomes

There is a growing recognition among the nation’s colleges and universities that having and using better data enables process and program improvements that facilitate better outcomes for their students, especially those who have faced hurdles getting into and through college: low-income and first-generation students, students of color, and adult learners.

- Thousands of institutions are participating in dozens of voluntary data-driven initiatives designed to more fully capture student progress and outcomes than are available in existing state and federal data collections. In 2016, the Institute for Higher Education Policy released a review of these efforts that revealed growing consensus around a key set of metrics.

- Colleges and universities that have committed to closing or have already closed their completion gaps, such as Georgia State University and Delaware State University, point to improved data gathering and analysis as the foundation of their efforts.

One of the biggest barriers to improved data gathering and utilization by colleges and universities is the cumbersome process of collecting key data and metrics and reporting them for voluntary and mandatory data collections. Currently, institutions must submit data – much of it similar – to multiple agencies and organizations, from federal and state governments to accrediting bodies to national initiatives. The result is a complicated web of data exchanges that entail a significant amount of duplicated effort.

This web of data exchanges taxes institutional and organizational resources, resulting in more time spent on data collection and reporting, rather than data analysis and application to student needs. It also means fewer resources and time spent on data utilization to help students, faculty, and campus leaders improve outcomes.

The Idea: A Postsecondary Data Partnership

Fortunately, there is an opportunity to simplify, streamline, and enhance data gathering and reporting using existing resources. At the national level, most institutions use the National Student Clearinghouse for student reporting, education verifications, and outcomes research, such as tracking student enrollments and degree completions, including students who transfer across institutions and states. By building on its current capacity, the Clearinghouse, which already serves more than 3,600 colleges and universities that enroll over 98 percent of all students, will serve as a hub collecting, verifying, and reporting data back to participating institutions and organizations. This will help colleges and universities more efficiently gain a fuller picture of student progress and outcomes, meet various reporting requirements, and focus more of their resources on using data to help students.

This effort, named the Postsecondary Data Partnership, has three phases:

- Phase 1 (2017): Build and implement an initial pilot with select participants from institutions and initiatives that partner with
the Bill & Melinda Gates and Lumina Foundations. Bring additional partner institutions on board once pilot proves successful.

- **Phase 2 (2018):** Expand the Partnership to institutions involved in other initiatives (or those not affiliated with an initiative), as well as build custom reporting options and a public interface.

- **Phase 3 (2019 and beyond):** Focus on further participation in and the sustainability of the Partnership, transitioning it away from direct foundation funding.

### Building the Partnership Pilot

The core elements of the Partnership Pilot already exist, which includes the Clearinghouse’s commitment and processes to maintain the integrity of student records. The Clearinghouse services are designed to facilitate compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, The Higher Education Act, and other applicable laws. Launching the Partnership Pilot will entail:

- a) adjusting institutional data submissions so that an expanded set of data can be sent to the Clearinghouse; and
- b) supplementing the Clearinghouse’s technical and staff capacity to process and package data and create reports. Support for these efforts is being provided by the Gates and Lumina Foundations.

Colleges and universities, especially those participating in one or more voluntary data initiatives, were invited to join a test phase of the Partnership Pilot in late 2017. Institutional participation was voluntary.

The Clearinghouse and its partners succeeded in the initial pilot and the Clearinghouse is now in the process of onboarding the additional partners within the Lumina and Gates Foundation network!

### How the Postsecondary Data Partnership Pilot Works

**Step 1:** Participating colleges and universities submit data to the Clearinghouse, including:

- Data they already send on a regular basis (e.g., enrollment, degree awards every 30-45 days)
- Data relevant to reporting requirements for initiatives in which they participate that are also part of the Partnership Pilot (e.g., student progression, disaggregates such as race/ethnicity)

Note: Only the Clearinghouse has access to personally identifiable information about students as part of the Postsecondary Data Partnership Pilot.

**Step 2:** The Clearinghouse processes and validates the data and generates summary reports about access, progression, and completion among others.

**Step 3:** The Clearinghouse sends summary reports and de-identified student-level data files to:

- Participating institutions (reflecting the full range of data submitted)
- Neither BMGF, Lumina, nor initiatives receive personally-identifiable information about students. They only receive aggregate institution-level data with the express permission of the colleges.

**Step 4:** The Clearinghouse sends summary reports to:

- Relevant organizations and agencies (reflecting data pertinent to specific reporting requirements and appropriately de-identified or aggregated, as necessary)

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1 Public interfaces will not be available as part of the first phase of the project (2017), but will be built into the second phase of the project (2018), as will post-college outcomes.
For More Information

If you would like additional information about the Partnership Pilot, please contact PDPService@studentclearinghouse.org.

For questions about the participation of the Gates Foundation or Lumina Foundation, please contact:

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