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Working Group on Progression and Completion Measures

Draft Recommendations

May 27, 2011

Note: The charter of the U.S. Department of Education’s Committee on Measures of Student Success (Committee) provides for working groups to assist the Committee in carrying out its duties. The working groups are responsible for developing materials to be provided to the entire Committee for full deliberation and discussion during its meetings. This draft document has been prepared by a Committee working group. This document does not represent the final recommendations of the Committee. The information and opinions included are the products of working group discussions and do not necessarily represent the views of the entire Committee or the policies of the U.S. Department of Education.

Tasks:

The working group on progression and completion measures was given the directive to:

- Prioritize major issues related to progression and completion measures
- Identify areas for potential recommendations

At the CMSS meeting on February 9–10, 2011, a draft “Issues” paper was developed and presented by the working group to the full Committee. The paper outlined a number of areas for discussion and potential recommendations, and laid out the domain of the current federal collection instruments.

This draft “Recommendations” paper draws from that CMSS meeting and attempts to put forward some concrete recommendations for the full Committee to consider.

Working Group Members:

- Patrick Perry, lead
- Wayne Burton
- Margarita Benitez

Framework of Recommendations:

While the CMSS charter does not explicitly prohibit it, these recommendations are primarily centered on changes that can be made without changing existing regulations. Such proposed changes could be made administratively through the normal IPEDS change cycle and without creating new regulations or laws.

It should be noted that the working group does aspire to create a more ideal reporting framework. Such a framework would encompass many more data tracking points than what is currently in the reporting

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domain. However, we do recognize that such an ideal system would likely create much more burden and potentially be too long of a form to be feasible. One potential solution to this, that of creating a national unit record data system, does hold the theoretical potential to solve many of these issues, but we recognize the current infeasibility of this. Other potential changes would also require legislative/regulatory changes, and if we were making recommendations on changing law/regulations, the entire domain of *Student Right to Know* (SRTK) graduation rate reporting would need to be more fully examined, and it is likely a different and more extensive set of modifications would be recommended.

For these reasons, the set of recommendations produced here are limited to what we believe are feasible changes to existing data collection instruments that should not need legislative/regulatory intervention.

Recommendation 1: Use the IPEDS Graduation Rates 200 (GR200) Survey as a vehicle for expanded and reframed outcomes reporting for two-year institutions. Given that the existing IPEDS Graduation Rates Survey (GRS) is fairly well specified in SRTK regulations/law, modifying it is unlikely in its current form. Until such time as GRS-calculated graduation rates are modified, no expansion of the existing GRS form should occur.

However, the recently enacted GR200 collection does have the potential to act as a collection instrument for any newly-created framework. We suggest that potential changes to reporting be focused here, as its very nature (expanded tracking for a GRS cohort) lends itself to improved reporting for two-year institutions.

Recommendation 2: Satisfy the need to create accountability metrics (grad rates, time to degree) for Federal financial aid (Pell, other) by expanding the data collection in the National Student Loan Data System (NSLDS). While there is clearly a need to satisfy this requirement, the addition of the Pell/Finaid rates requirement to IPEDS will add a dimension to the reporting that will begin to make cell sizes even smaller, and will detract from other additions to the GR200 that are proposed. Additionally, almost all of the data necessary to satisfy the Pell requirements are already in the NSLDS data collection, so adding what needs to be added to that existing unit record system (instead of IPEDS) would produce the least amount of institutional burden to campuses.

What is needed is a delineation in the NSLDS dataset of whether a student completed vs. withdrew (right now, the dataset does not make a distinction between the two), and if completed, would need a completion date appended to the file. Since completions and completion dates are data points readily available to all campuses, adding these to the NSLDS dataset would be very simple and likely not cause much work for campuses. With these changes, both graduation rates and time to degree can be easily calculated for the Pell/Finaid cohorts within the domain of the NSLDS dataset.

Recommendation 3: Include part-time, degree-seeking cohorts in the GR200 tracking domain. We recommend that the GR200 delineate a part-time, degree-seeking cohort; inclusion into the cohort would be for students that attempted 6 or more credits, degree-applicable or transferrable units at first

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census date in their first Fall term, and were identified by the institution as degree-seeking (clarification of this is below).

We also recommend that a threshold on the percentage of a college's first-time Fall cohort that is part-time be set for inclusion/exclusion to reporting this cohort; this is designed to reduce reporting burden for institutions that have few part-time students. (Suggestion: in the 15-30% range?)

Recommendation 4: Provide additional clarity to the definition of "degree-seeking." We recommend that "degree-seeking" status be identified based on a students' collective course-taking patterns over the entire history of their enrollment. It is very difficult to positively identify a student as degree-seeking or not based solely on their attempted coursework in their first starting Fall term of enrollment; this is even further problematic with a part-time cohort where "degree-seeking" could only be assessed with as few as 6 units attempted.

Specifically, a student should be considered degree-seeking if they ever, during their entire academic history at the reporting institution:

- Receive any type of federal financial aid, regardless of what courses they took at any time; or any State or locally-based financial aid whose requirement for eligibility is that the student be enrolled in a degree, certificate, or transfer-seeking program; or
- Ever attempted, at any point in their entire academic history, any degree-applicable, transferrable, or remedial math or English course (not including ESL); or
- Ever attempted any course that is identified as being in an advanced vocational, occupational, or apprenticeship sequence that leads directly to a credit degree or certificate; or
- Was identified by the local institution as being clearly enrolled in a program or sequence that leads to a degree, certificate, or transfer to a four-year institution (such as being officially enrolled in or having declared to be in a particular program or major after having received matriculation or advisement services.)

Recommendation 5: Strengthen the reporting of transfer-out students for institutions that have transfer as a part of their mission. We recommend that the Department strengthen the reporting of transfer-out students currently required in GRS for institutions that have transfer as a part of their core mission by widely disseminating technical guidance that provides institutions more precise definitions and methods for reporting such students. For example, the Department could issue guidance regarding:

- A standard definition of what counts as "substantial preparation" for transfer to another institution.
- A standard definition of what constitutes a transfer student for reporting purposes, such as, for example:
 - The student must not have been concurrently enrolled at another institution during the student's first term in higher education.
 - The student must have completed a minimum of one full-term at the reporting institution.

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- The transfer must have occurred within the tracking period or the first term immediately following the end of the tracking period of normal time to completion (NTC).
- Only the first transfer after leaving the reporting institution shall be reported; all subsequent transfer activity shall not be used to determine the outcome of the student being tracked.
- A student that enrolls concurrently at both the reporting institution and another institution after the first term of enrollment, and at some point within the tracking period or in the first term following the end of the tracking period, and meeting the same threshold requirements for being eligible to be counted as a transfer, may be counted as a transfer.
- Simple verification of first-term enrollment at another institution (electronic or otherwise) is sufficient to count the student as a transfer; the student need not have earned any particular enrollment outcomes at the receiving institution to be counted as a successful transfer.

Recommendation 6: Create a (potentially non-mandatory) reporting element that combines the following outcomes: “lateral transfers to 2-year or <2-year institutions” and “still enrolled at your institution in the term immediately after the tracking period.” If a student in the tracking cohort is shown to have not earned a [degree/certificate/transfer to a 4-year institution/transfer prepared outcome], and is verified to still be either enrolled at your institution in the first term following the end of the tracking period or was verified as having transferred to another 2-year or <2 year institution within or immediately following the tracking period, this outcome may be reported in the reporting form.

These outcomes, for two-year institutions, are neither successful outcomes nor non-completers, but represent either continued student progression towards a successful outcome or student mobility. These outcomes should not be inherently declared as unsuccessful, and should be an allowable reporting item; two-year institutions should be particularly motivated to track these populations. These outcomes, however, should not be considered exclusions to the cohort.

Recommendation 7: Allow for an independent and discrete reporting of outcomes for awards and transfers; do not report using a hierarchy. Current GRS methodologies follow a prescribed reporting hierarchy that favors the degree/certificate outcomes over the transfer outcomes; for many two-year institutions, these outcomes are of equivalent value. Additionally, many students earn a degree/certificate and also transfer to a 4-year institution; this type of student behavior should be encouraged. By allowing each to be reported independently, true graduation and transfer rates can be created and disclosed.

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Recommendation 8: Create an “any degree/certificate/transfer-prepared/transfer to a 4-year institution outcome” reporting category that unduplicates the count/rate of these higher-order outcomes for 2-year institutions. To avoid public confusion about adding graduation and transfer rates together (which would be methodologically incorrect as there would be outcomes duplication occurring), we recommend creating a single count/rate of students that earn ANY of the high-order outcomes of degree/certificate/transfer-prepared/transfer to a 4-year institution within or in the first term immediately following the tracking period.

We suggest this “hybrid” higher-order outcomes rate be referred to as “Student Progress and Achievement Rate.”

Recommendation 9: Identify remedial/non-remedial cohorts. We recommend that the cohorts in the GR200 be separated into two distinct groups:

- student enrolled at any point in their academic history in any remedial math or English course (excluding ESL); or
- student did not enroll, at any point in their academic history, in any remedial math or English course.

It is suggested that identification of remedial/nonremedial cohorts have two potential reporting forms:

Option A: Full delineation of remedial cohorts. In Option A, the GR200 would have four distinct cohort reporting delineations:

1. Full-Time, Non-remedial (by gender crossed by ethnicity)
2. Part-Time, Non-remedial (by gender crossed by ethnicity)-required only if institution meets threshold of reporting for part-time cohorts
3. Full-Time, Remedial (by gender crossed by ethnicity)
4. Part-Time, Remedial (by gender crossed by ethnicity)-required only if institution meets threshold of reporting for part-time cohorts

Under this method, actual grad/transfer/progress/lateral-still enrolled rates would be calculated based on a students’ remediation status. It is surmised that these subsequent rates would be very illustrious of the distinct progression patterns and demographic crosstabs that make up remedial and non-remedial cohorts in two-year institutions (we actually believe this would be a very informative reporting framework for four-year institutions, as well.) However, one potential downside of this approach would be potentially small cell sizes.

OR

Option B: Report existing cohorts and provide what percentage of the cohort was considered remedial/non-remedial. In Option B, the GR200 would have two reporting delineations, with one reporting question for each:

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1. Full-Time (by gender crossed by ethnicity)
 - a. How many/what percentage of this cohort was identified as or attempted a remedial math or English (excluding ESL) course in their entire academic history?
2. Part-Time (by gender crossed by ethnicity)
 - a. How many/what percentage of this cohort was identified as or attempted a remedial math or English (excluding ESL) course in their entire academic history?

Under this method, the reporting institution provides, for the FT/PT cohorts, the calculated percentage of degree-seeking students that were remedial. While distinct outcome rates for these would not be calculated under this option (thus minimizing burden and the opportunity for small cell-sizes), informative indices of academic preparedness could be easily calculated for each reporting institution; this would provide a very key index of performance variability for the entire IPEDS domain.

Recommendation 10: Delineate tracking period for part-time cohorts. Given that GR200 is an instrument that tracks student outcomes at a 200% normal time to completion point (200% NTC), and given that inclusion into the part-time cohort is that of a minimum threshold of six units attempted in the first primary tracking term, recalculate NTC for this 6-unit minimum cohort and apply this to the tracking period for the part-time cohort only. For students in the PT cohort seeking a typical 60-unit two-year award, a 6-units per primary term progression rate equates to a ten-term (five years) NTC. Therefore, 200% NTC for this cohort is 20 primary terms, or ten years.

While tracking any cohort for a full ten years seems inherently lengthy, it is not uncommon for two-year institutions to have a nontrivial percentage of student outcomes earned by students that have persisted between five and ten years. Additionally, it has been empirically shown that the ethnic/demographic makeup of students that earn their outcomes in these lengthy timeframes has significantly more representation from students of underrepresented ethnicities and students of a nontraditional age upon entry. Showing these outcomes is of significant importance to examining achievement gaps that exist between demographic subpopulations.

Recommendation 11: Collect headcount by zip code in the IPEDS Fall Enrollment Survey. Currently, the IPEDS Fall Enrollment (EF) survey requests institutional student headcount by State. While of some value, furthering this reporting to headcounts by primary zip code of residence (whether personal or parental, this is a piece of data already easily available to each institution) would enable a significantly more detailed set of indices that would provide measures of performance variability for the entire IPEDS domain.

Specifically, participation rates by zip code could be calculated for every part of the nation, and would show disparities that exist among geographic sectors of the population. Socioeconomic indices could be created from census data and applied to institutions that would further our understanding of the effect of socioeconomic/geographic forces that affect both participation and outcomes at each institution type. This is a small change that can yield a great leap forward in our knowledge of higher education.