

POLICY BRIEF

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Congress Should Lift the Ban on Student Level Data in HEA Reauthorization

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Comprehensive and accurate higher education data are critical to solving many challenges for students and families, policymakers, and institutions of higher education.
2. A change in law is necessary to fix the problem of incomplete information on employment outcomes and incomplete persistence and graduation rates.

THE PROBLEM

One of the biggest problems within higher education is the lack of comprehensive, accurate data on student outcomes at each college and university in the U.S. We simply do not know enough. As a result, students and families are left in the dark as they make the critical decision of which college or university is the right fit; policymakers struggle to appropriately hold accountable institutions receiving taxpayer dollars; and institutions lack the information they need to assess their performance and improve.

Institutional attempts to collect employment information through alumni surveys are no substitute for federal student-level data as surveys often suffer from self-selection bias and low response rates.

WHY IS A CHANGE IN LAW NECESSARY?

An amendment to ban a federal unit record system was added to the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008. As a result, the federal government cannot collect and report the information students and families need on outcomes at colleges and universities. Those who supported the ban expressed concerns with privacy and security of data as well as the potential for federal overreach. However, those apprehensions can be addressed through proper safeguards and should



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not be an excuse for denying students and families better information and blocking transparency.

WHAT INFORMATION IS MOST NEEDED?

Employment and accurate graduation rates are key areas of interest. There is no question that boosting employment prospects is a top reason why many students enroll and potentially invest tens of thousands of dollars in their education. In fact, in a national survey of freshmen, the top reason for going to college was to “get a better job.”

Lifting the ban on student-level data to permit for limited and relevant information collection would allow the federal government to provide aggregate information on employment outcomes of graduates of institutions, including salary. This data could show both short and long-term results. Importantly, the data could be broken down by academic program to account for significant differences among various disciplines. This could allow students and families to set realistic expectations of possible future earnings and appropriately minimize borrowing.

While the U.S. Department of Education’s revamped College Scorecard provides salary information, it is one aggregate figure at the institutional level and is not broken out by academic program and confusingly includes outcomes for graduates, dropouts, and those still enrolled. This obscures the large variations in salaries across programs and the benefits of earning a degree. Additionally, the data is incomplete as it only includes those who take out federal student loans.

Student-level data are also needed to provide accurate persistence and graduation rates for postsecondary students.

Because of the prohibition against student-level data, the widely reported federal graduation rate only includes students who start and finish at their first institution and attend full-time. The federal government is unable to reliably and consistently report the outcomes of students after they transfer and has only recently added minimal reporting for part-time students, despite the fact that nearly 55 percent of those who earn a bachelor’s degree attend more than one institution and over 60 percent of students at community colleges attend part-time. How can students select the institutions most successfully serving students without knowing accurate graduation rates?

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The [Student Achievement Measure \(SAM\)](#) is a successful initiative of the higher education community to provide more comprehensive information on student progress and completion. SAM provides a powerful model of the type of information that would be available if the ban were lifted. However, SAM is voluntary and does not capture outcomes for all institutions that a federal student-level data system would. It is therefore not the official data included in the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' college comparison resource, or other public and private transparency tools.

ABOUT APLU

APLU is a research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening and advancing the work of public universities in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. With a membership of 236 public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations, APLU's agenda is built on the three pillars of increasing degree completion and academic success, advancing scientific research, and expanding engagement. Annually, APLU member campuses enroll 4.7 million undergraduates and 1.2 million graduate students, award 1.2 million degrees, employ 1.4 million faculty and staff, and conduct \$42.7 billion in university-based research.

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Over 600 colleges and universities voluntarily track the progress and success of 600,000 more students than the official federal rate through the [Student Achievement Measure](#). SAM is a powerful illustration of the type of information possible with student level data.



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