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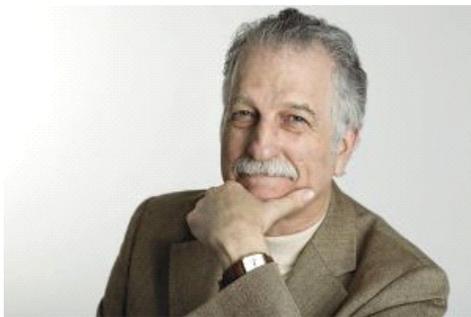
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ARTICLE TOOLS

September 17, 2012

Enrollment Expert Leaves Center but Stays Excited About Its Data



Amy Goldenberg

Don Hossler

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Don Hossler, 63, has returned to teaching and doing research full time at Indiana University at Bloomington this fall semester after serving for two and a half years as founding executive director of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. The center analyzes enrollment data provided by participating institutions. Among the reports he helped write are one that revealed that a third of all students transferred at least once before earning degrees, and one showing that many students reverse-transferred from four-year to two-year institutions. At Bloomington, Mr. Hossler is a professor of educational leadership and policy studies; he continues to advise the research center as a senior consultant. Here's his story, as told to Ruth Hammond.

For somebody who spent his entire career basically on issues relating to postsecondary enrollment, going to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center—with all the enrollment data available to it—was nirvana.

There's no question that I found it a little difficult to juggle both my roles: managing the center for 70 percent of my time, and teaching one to two classes a year and working with doctoral students, took its toll on my personal life. I was in the air almost weekly flying either to the clearinghouse's Herndon, Va., headquarters or another location. Instead of one appointment split between two organizations, it often felt like one and a half appointments.

That's neither organization's fault. As much as anything, it says something about the way I'm wired. I'm kind of a workaholic to begin with. So for both entities, I tried to make sure I was going above and beyond. I had no personal life. I find I am especially enjoying the opportunity that I have now to have a cup of coffee with my wife of nearly 42 years every morning and "just talk."

At the center, I was increasingly struck by the timeliness and richness of data provided to the clearinghouse and the extent to which it can illuminate postsecondary-enrollment trends, as well as complement the Department of Education's Iped data in ways that are almost unimaginable.

By November 2012, for instance, the clearinghouse will have a pretty good sense of everybody that's enrolled in postsecondary education in the United States as of that fall. We have real-time information on who is going to college, where they were going to college, and whether they were persisting, as well as whether they were transferring and where they were transferring to. All these data shed light on the health and vitality of the postsecondary system in the United States.

Most of the time researchers have to worry about sampling. When you have access to approximately 97-percent coverage of all public and private enrollment records at degree-granting institutions in the United States (as well as 94-percent overall coverage, including for-

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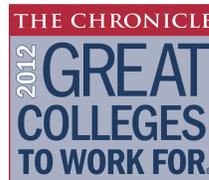
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profits), as we do at the clearinghouse, you don't have to worry so much about sampling. You can just tell the story as it is in real time.

Now that I'm back at Bloomington, my life is a little saner, and I feel reinvigorated in terms of doing new research. More often now, state policy makers are basing their state funding formulas on enrollment-related outcomes at institutions. I've become very interested in the incentive structures that are created by those funding formulas and, to some extent, how states may mis-specify the problems that really need addressing because state policy makers lack a complete picture of what's really going on with enrollment patterns. For instance, they may not know how many students who leave community colleges without degrees continue on the pathway to postsecondary completion.

Working at the clearinghouse has also made me much more aware of what's going on with statewide longitudinal-data systems, or SLDS. In the next four or five years, states will have their own picture of what's happening with enrollments. They are going to know if a particular four-year institution has a problematic retention-and-graduation rate for transfer students, and they're going to start asking questions about that.

In this new world, the genie is going to be out of the bottle a little more, and it won't be so much under the control of institutions to present a picture of themselves that always puts them in the best light.

In my classroom now, those are the things that I'm talking about and that I'm planning to integrate into my future research activities.

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