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### **Quest for Good Graduation Data Will Be Key to Next Higher Education Act**

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Washington

As the limits of federal data on college completion have become more apparent, policy makers are seeking better means to gauge students' success, especially as Congress prepares in 2013 for the next reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

In that climate, a private research organization with good data can command a bipartisan audience on Capitol Hill. With a [big report on college completion](#) hot off the presses, the National Student Clearinghouse held a briefing here on Thursday with senior advisers to the House and Senate education committees.

The clearinghouse, which collects data from 3,300 colleges and universities, presented some of its main findings: that the national completion rate is 54 percent, that among part-time students it lags significantly, and that substantial proportions of students transfer before graduating. The organization's figures are widely considered the most accurate national tallies, as the federal government's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, known as IpedS, counts only first-time, full-time students who stay at the same institution.

Policies shouldn't be based on incomplete information, Doug Shapiro, executive director of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, told the group here. Nor should institutional accountability measures or performance-based budget allocations, he said. "Let's make sure that those incentives embrace all pathways to success."

Amy Raaf Jones, senior adviser to the Republican-led House Committee on Education and the Workforce, acknowledged the shortcomings of the IpedS system, which came into being as a result of the Student Right-to-Know Act of 1990, a consumer-information law requiring colleges to report their graduation rates. The system is now "severely outdated," she said.

Collecting sensible, meaningful information on higher-education outcomes, said Ms. Jones, is critical to Congress right now. A recent hearing on existing data was just the beginning of that push, she said. "The data question is going to be a huge one coming up in reauthorization." The Higher Education Act, which governs the federal student-loan system and many other programs, was last renewed, for five years, in 2008.

It's a moment of transition, said Spiros Protopsaltis, senior education-policy adviser to the Democratic-led Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. "We are clearly in need of major improvements in the system," he said. "We need to figure out a way to collect better data."

#### **The Best Data**

Last April the Department of Education announced that it would soon [include part-time and transfer students](#) in its graduation-rate tallies, but those changes are likely to take a long time to carry out. Of course, many higher-education researchers would like to track all students through a federal unit-record system, but opponents have blocked such a project, citing privacy concerns. Some states have longitudinal systems under way, but they don't count students who transfer across state lines.

For now, at least, the National Student Clearinghouse is filling in those gaps, said both Mr. Protopsaltis and Ms. Jones. A clearer picture of what's going on, he said, can help policy makers identify problems, design solutions, and better inform students and families.

"We definitely look forward to working with the National Student Clearinghouse going forward," said Ms. Jones, "to help us better inform policy."

The Department of Veterans Affairs has also approached the clearinghouse, for help in tracking students who are military veterans.

Still, the organization has its limits. Under a contract with each college that self-reports its data, the clearinghouse cannot release any institutionally identifiable information without permission. And demographic portraits are far from complete: Colleges only voluntarily report breakdowns by, for example, gender and race. Right now just about a third of institutions disclose such information.

Despite those constraints, the clearinghouse's data are the best available, Rick Torres, the nonprofit organization's president and chief executive, argued after the briefing. And, he said, the organization is neutral and nimble.

Thursday was the first time the clearinghouse asserted such a strong presence on Capitol Hill, Mr. Torres said, but it was time.

How students go to college is changing quickly, he said, and policy makers need to be informed. Meanwhile, they need to know what they're looking for.

"The single biggest discussion that has to be had with each sector," Mr. Torres said, "is what does it mean to have a successful outcome."

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