

News, Views and Careers for All of Higher Education

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A National (But Not Federal) Student Database?

The idea of creating a national database to track the flow of students through the American educational system has been the holy grail for many state and federal policy makers, who argue that without good data about how students progress (or don't) from elementary and secondary schools into higher education and even into the work force, it is impossible to know what works and what doesn't, and which institutions are succeeding and which aren't.

But officials at private colleges, joined by key Republican members of Congress, have consistently fought and ultimately killed the idea of creating such a data system, [citing a combination of concerns about students' privacy](#) and a sense that the federal government [has no business](#) delving that deeply into the performance of individual institutions and, certainly, students.

As supporters have more or less given up on the possibility of establishing a system with the imprimatur of the federal government, they have generally shifted their focus to the states, where leaders may have more sway in compelling school superintendents and college systems and work force development agencies to collaborate in sharing their data to track state residents. [A 2007 study](#) by the Lumina Foundation for Education found that the vast majority of states had student record databases for all or parts of their public higher education systems, the U.S. Department of Education has begun giving grants to states to develop such systems, and the stimulus legislation being drafted by Congress would provide another \$250 million for that purpose.

The big problem with leaving that job to the states, though, is that students increasingly *cross* state boundaries during their higher educations and certainly once they enter the work force. So while 2007 Lumina study postulated that state data systems could be stitched together to create a national database, that would only work if they have enough in common, or share an underlying structure, to allow them to "talk" to each other.

[Thursday's announcement](#) that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation had awarded a \$2.9 million grant to the National Student Clearinghouse to develop a "high school research and reporting system that will allow participating high schools in all 50 states to better measure the academic success of their students after they graduate" could point the way to just such a result.

The clearinghouse, in which more than 3,200 colleges participate for help with federal and other reporting about financial aid, already holds key data about more than 90 percent of the college students in the country, and it has since 2003 begun working with high schools to help them assess the performance of their students.

Using the Gates grant, the Virginia-based nonprofit organization will work with a small number of states to help them develop better systems for sharing student academic data up and down their own educational pipelines, and to see whether they can develop consistent ways of collecting and reporting information across states. As currently conceived, the project is designed primarily as a K-12 accountability tool, to help individual schools or districts gauge how their students fare in higher education, says Rick Torres, the clearinghouse's president, and Vicki L. Phillipos, director of education at the Gates foundation. "Most high schools and school districts have no way of tracking their students from graduation through college enrollment and completion," Phillipos said.

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But such a system would also provide significant new data to colleges about their educational successes and failures, says Travis Reindl, state policy and campaigns director at CommunicationWorks, a Washington public affairs firm and a longtime fixture in higher education policy circles. “You’d get good data not only on why so many drop out of high school, but on why large numbers of those who graduate high school don’t go to college or don’t finish once they’re there,” he said.

The real promise of the Gates/National Student Clearinghouse partnership, though, said Reindl, is to move beyond getting individual states to improve the quality of data within their borders, which provides no data to help solve regional or national problems. “What you hear on the ground in the states is that all roads lead to data, and that you can’t begin to solve our problems of access and success without addressing the data question,” he said.

“The conversation as it relates to doing something at the federal level has hit a wall,” said Reindl, an advocate for student records systems. “What this really adds up to, with Gates stepping in and making this kind of work possible, is sending a signal that the push for getting better data is going to continue, with or without the [Washington] Beltway crowd. What we’re seeing here is a way to do a *national* test of this [approach], not a *federal* test.”

— [Doug Lederman](#)