STUDENT AGENDA FOR POSTSECONDARY DATA REFORM

For the past two years, Young Invincibles, a non-profit research and advocacy organization dedicated to expanding economic opportunity for young adults, conducted workshops, listening sessions, and roundtable discussions with current and aspiring college students across the country to better understand their perspectives on how to reform our postsecondary data systems and develop this agenda. The groups and individuals signed below join those voices and urge policymakers to adopt the reforms laid out here to ensure a more transparent and effective higher education system.

Background

A college education requires investing significant time and money, and it carries major ramifications for an individual's financial future. With so much on the line, students and families need reliable information to make smart choices about which college to attend, what major to choose, and how to pay for it. Unfortunately, college and career information across the country is disjointed, unreliable, or completely unavailable.

Moreover, without outcomes information on which schools and programs lead to jobs and ultimately financial security for their graduates, policymakers are left in the dark, unable to intelligently align funding with policy priorities. Colleges are also blind to students' trajectories after they leave campus and cannot adjust academic programs or systems to ensure students can land good jobs or pursue further education.

In short, students, policymakers, and institutions are unable to answer basic questions about colleges and the outcomes they produce. This is a remarkable lack of transparency and accountability for the over $500 billion colleges spend every year,[1] half of which comes from students and families who have taken on in total over $1.3 trillion dollars in debt to finance these tuition dollars.[2]

The Student Agenda for Postsecondary Data Reform synthesizes and elevates students' calls to action to improve how the United States collects and uses data in our higher education system. To keep the student perspective at the heart of higher education reform, policymakers should adopt the following agenda, sourced from young adults across the country, to meet the needs of today's students and tomorrow's workforce.

More & Better Data

Policymakers should enact the following reforms to collect new information about college outcomes and improve current collections.

Overturn the Student Unit Record Ban

The vast majority of today's college students pursue higher education to broaden and improve their economic opportunities,[3] and yet we do not know which programs lead to the best outcomes for different types of students. Crucial measures concerning jobs, salaries, and loan repayment elude us. The primary reason we cannot answer basic questions about higher education outcomes is the Student Unit Record Ban, a single paragraph in the 2008 reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act preventing the Department of Education from collecting and using student level data.[4] That paragraph should be struck and the ban overturned.[5]

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Expand information about college majors and programs

Choosing a major is a significant decision with long-lasting ramifications, and students deserve more information on the outcomes of an institution's programs. Students often pursue education with a specific job or field in mind, so knowing whether a school's program produces graduates who go on to get jobs in that field is important. Notably, the Student Right to Know Before You Go Act, introduced in varying forms in the last three Congresses, would mandate that information about median income, federal loan debt, and the rate of students earning advanced degrees be disaggregated by program level and made available to students and policymakers. [6][7]

More information about alternatives to traditional higher education

Alternatives and innovations to traditional education models like competency-based education, industry certifications, vocational certificates, coding academies, and boot camps offer the potential for lower-cost and high-quality training and skills. Legislators, accreditors, and administrative actors authorizing and subsidizing innovative platforms should properly evaluate the effectiveness and outcomes of these emerging programs and make their continued operation contingent on sufficient performance or improvement.

Count all of us

Current data collection often only counts students entering school for the first time and those attending school full-time.[8] Other sources only capture students who receive federal student aid. This is not an accurate reflection of college students and leaves out the experiences of millions of people. It is essential to count all students in data systems to better understand the modern college student, including part-time, returning, veteran, and transfer students.[9] If these students and their outcomes are not tracked and reported, students and families will be left with incomplete information when choosing a college.

Responsible Data Use & Access

Policymakers should also adopt the following reforms to ensure that postsecondary data is used responsibly and benefits students.

Data should enhance choices, not restrict them

More and better data can improve decision-making by helping students better understand what educational pathways are their personal best options. At the same time however, policymakers should avoid unintended consequences such as tracking students into programs based on algorithms that perpetuate existing inequalities. Evidence shows that academic tracking in the K-12 system exasperates disparities and should be avoided in higher education.[10]

Personal information can and must be protected

Students value privacy of sensitive information about their education and personal finances. Current privacy laws regulate how the federal government handles personal information and must be applied in all expansions of postsecondary data use.[11] We also recommend that the data paradigms follow widely accepted principles of privacy and security, such as those laid out by the Privacy Committee of the Federal CIO Council.[12]

Data should be accessible for students on campus

Students care about their schools and want to make evidence-backed decisions to improve academic and campus life. New data, such as graduation rates of different types of students or workforce outcomes of departments and majors, should be accessible and usable for students. Any publicly facing tools should be easy and intuitive to use.

For citations, please visit: http://younginvincibles.org/higher-education-data-reform/student-agenda/