

Student-Level Data Network (SLDN)

For most students, pursuing a college education produces a positive return on their investment. But while college may be worth it on average, students don't have answers to crucial questions like which programs at which institutions provide a low cost and high-quality education, that lead to the jobs students want. We could answer those questions with a Student-Level Data Network (SLDN). Unfortunately, federal and state agencies use different data systems that are unable, or even legally prohibited, to communicate with each other.

What It Is

A Student-Level Data Network (SLDN) would connect information that is mostly already collected by colleges, governments, and employers, to answer critical questions about how different students fare at different programs. Bipartisan and bicameral legislation like the College Transparency Act would create such a network and begin to answer these questions. The information would:

- Empower students to make more informed choices about where to invest their time and money.
- Align college programs with workforce demands and help employers recruit new workers.
- Spend federal and state taxpayer money more efficiently.
- Potentially reduce onerous reporting burden for schools and improve student success.

Students: Students go to college for all sorts of reasons, but consistently rate securing a good job at the top of the list. Considering the ramifications of college decisions, students and families deserve reliable information about a college's or program's performance, particularly how their students fare in the workforce. Are graduates of particular programs and colleges able to earn more than high school graduates? Are they able to comfortably pay down their debts? How do low-income or minority students fare? More information means smarter choices about where to go college, what to study, and how to pay for it.

States: Knowing where students enroll, graduate, but also what types of jobs they land and where, will inform state policy decision making. States could, at their own discretion, adjust budgets or policies based on the unique needs and challenges of their state. An SLDN could tell states what sorts of students are leaving the state or having trouble repaying their loans, and create policies or programs to address those trends.

Institutions: An SLDN benefits state agencies and institutions with otherwise-unavailable data to inform decision-making, particularly on strategies involving the outcomes of students after they leave campus. Often times, if a student transfers out or moves across state lines, the original institution doesn't know about it. Institutions care about their students, and want them to be able to repay their loans, land good jobs, and generally be happy and proud alumni. An SLDN would help institutions learn where they're succeeding and where they're falling short. By reporting raw data instead of specific statistics, an SLDN could also possibly reduce colleges' reporting burden.

What It Is, cont.

Workforce: Employers struggle to find workers with the skills and experiences to fill millions of jobs. An SLDN could help colleges and universities offer the skills and experiences employers are looking for, by helping them update programs to reflect the modern economy. Moreover, employers would have better information on particular institutions or programs for more effective recruitment.

Families, Communities, and High Schools: A clearer picture of how students fare in and after college benefits not only higher education institutions, but also communities and local school systems. When high school leaders have access to actionable and aggregate postsecondary data (such as FAFSA completions, enrollment, persistence, and remediation) of their communities, they can evaluate what's working and improve what isn't to ensure their students are ready for success in college and career.

Common Misconceptions

- Students care about how their personal data is used, but also recognize the benefits of responsible data collection. An SLDN also wouldn't track students' health, religion, or discipline records.
- Personally identifiable, individual-level data would not be available to the public. The CTA also prohibits the federal government from taking action against any individual student based on data compiled through the system.
- An SLDN is not a massive, centrally located database. For the most part, an SLDN would use data already collected, temporarily matching datasets to produce aggregate statistics. All data elements would be explicitly limited and justified by a compelling use case.
- Current privacy laws regulate how the federal government handles personal information and must be applied in all instances of postsecondary data use. The system should also follow widely accepted principles of privacy and security, such as those laid out by the Privacy Committee of the Federal CIO Council, NIST standards, including notification, opportunities to review and correct data, use limitation, and security safeguards.

References:

¹ <https://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/education-pays-2016-full-report.pdf>

² <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/collegedecisions/>

³ <http://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/2017-middle-skills-fact-sheets/file/United-States-MiddleSkills.pdf>

⁴ <http://younginvincibles.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Student-Agenda-Data-Reform.pdf>.

⁵ <https://www.newamerica.org/downloads/CollegeBlackoutFINAL.pdf>, 10

⁶ https://energy.gov/sites/prod/files/Elements%20of%20a%20Federal%20Privacy%20Program%20v1.0_June2010%20Final.pdf, 12.