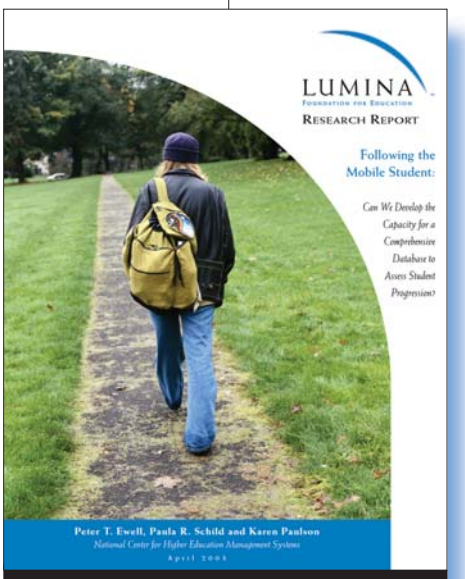
ILLUMINATIONS℠

Highlighting important research in postsecondary education access

The issue:

The need for more complete measurements of student success in the nation's colleges and universities is real, and it is growing. Current enrollment statistics and graduation rates don't tell us enough about student attainment — largely because they do not allow us to follow the progress of students who transfer from one institution to another, especially if they cross state lines. National studies show that more than half of the students who ultimately earn bachelor's degrees attend two or more institutions, and almost a fifth attend three or more. Schools collect data on their students, but that information is not routinely shared outside each institution. Most existing national data sources — student loan records, for example — record only enrollment status. That means there is no systematic, detailed method of following the student — no useful way to determine whether a "dropout" at one school goes on to complete a degree at another.

Though some statewide systems document students' progress effectively, researchers and other experts have long cited the need for a more comprehensive approach to following students' progress. A new study — *Following the Mobile Student: Can We Develop the Capacity for a Comprehensive Database to Assess Student Progression?* — is an important first step in filling that need. The study — conducted by Peter Ewell and other researchers from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), with funding from Lumina Foundation for Education — examines dozens of state databases to test the feasibility of linking them to create a voluntary 50-state network for following student progress.



Developing a comprehensive system to follow students' progress is both feasible and desirable.

The research:

Researchers looked at all existing state-level databases — 46 databases in 39 states. They concluded that these databases could be used to follow students' progress nationally under three conditions:

- A substantial proportion of the nation's enrollment is covered by such systems.
- Existing systems contain roughly the same kinds of data elements, defined in similar (or compatible) ways.
- A consistent method exists to link databases.

With these conditions in mind, researchers conducted a detailed survey of the managers of each of the databases. This survey obtained specific information about methods

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and frequency of data collection; exact types of data collected; methods of managing, reporting, using and sharing the data; and the potential for compatibility with other databases.

The findings:

- State-level databases contain information on 69 percent of the nation's full-time enrollment and 73 percent of its headcount enrollment.
- Multiple databases located within the same state are usually compatible.
- Few state-level databases contain information on private institutions, but the number is growing.
- Virtually all databases have been in place long enough to generate six-year enrollment records.
- Current databases are similar enough to permit annual snapshot statistics of persistence and program completion.
- Virtually all state-level databases use the student's Social Security number (SSN) to link records and compile statistics. Some states encode this number to protect privacy, and all states are increasingly concerned about SSN security.
- About half of the states with student-record databases link them with other state-level databases, but very few link with databases across state lines.
- All 46 databases can consistently follow students on the basis of six core pieces of information: enrollment, degree awarded, program/major, sex, race/ethnicity and birth date.
- Definitions and coding structures among all of these core data elements are sufficiently compatible that they can be linked through appropriate recoding, although there will be some loss of detail in a few cases.

Certainly, there are obstacles to overcome. Still, they should not be allowed to prevent the development of a network that will permit nationwide assessment of students' progress.

What's next:

Taken together, the findings of this study show that state-level student-record databases can be linked so student progress can be recorded from institution to institution across state lines. Certainly, there are obstacles to overcome — including federal privacy restrictions, growing opposition to the public display and use of Social Security numbers, and the technical challenges involved in merging and manipulating more than 13.5 million annual records.

Still, these obstacles are not insurmountable. They should not be allowed to prevent the development of a network that will permit nationwide assessment of students' progress. With such a network in place, state and federal planners and policy-makers could make better decisions affecting higher education. Institutions would be better able to assess and improve their own performance. Also, students and families could better judge an institution's ability to meet their needs.

In short, such a network, if developed, would give everyone interested in understanding educational attainment a much clearer and more accurate picture of student progress.

Read the report:

The report — *Following the Mobile Student: Can We Develop the Capacity for a National Database to Assess Student Progression?* by Peter T. Ewell, Paula R. Schild and Karen Paulson — is available in the Publications section of the Lumina Foundation Web site (www.luminafoundation.org), under the Research Reports heading. Free, printed copies of the full report also are available. To obtain a copy, or to request any of the Foundation's printed material, please send an e-mail request to Pamela Griffin at pgriffin@luminafoundation.org.