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Weighing the Options for Improving the National Postsecondary Data Infrastructure

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September 2015

A Report By
Institute for Higher Education Policy

Supported By
The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Acknowledgements

This report is the product of hard work and thoughtful contributions from many individuals and organizations. We would like to thank the Institute for Higher Education Policy staff who helped in this effort, including Michelle Asha Cooper, president; Amanda Janice, research analyst; Colleen Campbell, former research analyst; and Jonathan Belford, Fernando Coello, Allison LaFave, and Damani Lewis, research interns. We also thank Amy Laitinen from New America and Clare McCann, formerly with New America, for their invaluable collaboration on the national postsecondary data infrastructure convening, as well as Public Agenda—especially Susan Shelton, Erin Knepler, and former staff member Isaac Rowlett—for conducting the pre- and post-convening surveys, producing reports that informed this work, and facilitating the convening. We especially thank the Reimagining Aid Design and Delivery (RADD) consortium and Postsecondary Data Collaborative members, all of whom have been strong partners throughout this project. Finally, we are grateful for the Gates Foundation's support of the RADD III project and, in particular, this research on postsecondary data. Although many have contributed their thoughts and feedback throughout the production of this report, the research and recommendations presented here are those of the authors alone.

This report is a product of the Reimagining Aid Design and Delivery project, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Through a consortium focused on postsecondary data and student aid, six organizations joined together to utilize their connections with key communities—institutions, students/consumers, and workforce leaders—to explore issues of data presentation and use, data collection and reporting, and public and political will for refining existing data systems or developing new ones. This paper represents the Institute for Higher Education Policy's research and recommendations. While collaborations with the consortium informed this paper, an organization's participation in the consortium does not necessarily signal full endorsement of this content. Consortium partners include: Center for Law and Social Policy, Institute for Higher Education Policy, National College Access Network, New America, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, and Young Invincibles.

We have reached a critical point in the pursuit of a national postsecondary data infrastructure that is capable of providing students, policymakers, and institutions with the information they need. These stakeholders are eager for answers to the most urgent questions about how today's students access and succeed in higher education. However, higher education leaders clearly recognize that the data that are currently available are inadequate. While there are merits to our current data infrastructure, it lacks many of the components necessary to address the issues that matter most to students, policymakers, and institutional leaders. For example:

Students need information to evaluate college costs against educational quality to make decisions about where to enroll, how much to pay, and how much to borrow.

Policymakers need better data to evaluate financial aid programs and inform accountability mechanisms that steward future financial aid funding.

Institutions need high-quality data to inform their efforts to distribute financial aid, enroll a diverse student body, and help students succeed—particularly low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color.

The higher education community has largely converged around what measures and metrics are necessary to answer core postsecondary questions at the national level.[1] As a result, the field knows *what* data we need to collect and report. Now, it is necessary to address the question of *how* to collect the data to best meet the needs of our diverse constituencies—students, policymakers, and institutions.

In some cases, the federal government already collects key data, but does not link data systems to answer core questions. In other cases, state and voluntary data systems fill gaps left by the federal system. This piecemeal approach is insufficient to empower students to make meaningful comparisons across institutions, steward the $165 billion federal investment in student aid,[2] or drive institutional improvement. Additionally, with numerous—yet often duplicative—federal, state, and institutional reporting requirements, burden on institutional research offices is an ever-pressing issue.

Now is the time to reform our national postsecondary data infrastructure. An improved system must be comprehensive and consistent enough to serve everyone who invests in higher education, flexible enough to adapt to a variety of valuable purposes, secure enough to thoroughly protect student privacy, and streamlined enough to manage reporting burden and encourage data use.

Exploring Seven Data Infrastructure Options

The purpose of this report is to identify the most viable options for improving our national postsecondary data infrastructure and to determine what actions are necessary to bring about the best possible solution. The first step was to engage a group of the nation's best thinkers on postsecondary issues. Through a day-long structured discussion,[3] more than 50 of the country's preeminent postsecondary data experts—representing membership associations, research and policy organizations, higher education institutions, philanthropic organizations, and former Department of Education (ED) and Congressional staff—explored seven potential approaches for reforming our national postsecondary data systems:

1. Creating a Federal Student Unit Record Data System (SURDS)
2. Expanding, Leveraging, or Linking Government Data Systems
3. Improving the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)
4. Linking to Workforce Data Systems
5. Linking State Longitudinal Data Systems
6. Expanding the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES') Sample Studies
7. Leveraging National Student Clearinghouse Data

Box 1 provides a brief overview of the seven approaches.

Participants evaluated the seven data infrastructure options against key criteria (see Box 2) deemed important for a national data solution. Participants rated a federal student unit record system as by far the best approach to improving the national data infrastructure (see Figure 1). However, they selected improving IPEDS—by a much slimmer margin—as the most feasible option, in large part due to concerns over the political feasibility of a unit record system (see Figure 2). Table 1 provides a more nuanced understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

Two areas of consensus emerged over the course of these conversations. First, many experts recognized that, in spite of the political challenges, a student unit record data system is the best option for improving the national postsecondary data infrastructure. It was also agreed that a student-level data

1 Mamie Voight, Alegneta A. Long, Mark Huelsman, and Jennifer Engle. "Mapping the Postsecondary Data Domain: Problems and Possibilities." Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2014. Retrieved from: http://www.ihep.org/sites/default/files/uploads/docs/pubs/mapping_the_postsecondary_data_domain_-_main_report_revised.pdf; Jamey Rorison and Mamie Voight, "Mapping Revisited: A Secondary Look at the Postsecondary Data Domain." Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2014. Retrieved from: http://www.ihep.org/sites/default/files/uploads/postsecdata/docs/resources/mapping_revisited_final.pdf.

2 College Board. "Trends in Student Aid 2014." Retrieved from: http://trends.collegeboard.org/student-aid/figures-tables/total-student-aid-nonfederal-loans-2013-dollars-time.

3 IHEP and New America hosted a one-day convening on February 19, 2015, to discuss options for improving the national postsecondary data infrastructure. Prior to, during, and after the convening, participants responded to survey questions related to the seven approaches. These survey responses, featured in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 5, guide this report's findings.

BOX 1: Seven Data Infrastructure Approaches

1 Creating a Federal Student Unit Record Data System—Great in Theory, Political Hurdles Remain

A student unit record data system (SURDS) would provide secure, restricted-access linkages between a core set of data elements in student-level data sets. The SURDS would be used to generate aggregate statistics for public and policymaker consumption. Proper security and privacy protections would be paramount in designing such a system, which currently is outlawed in federal statute. Many experts believe that a SURDS is the best technical solution to national data challenges, because it would include more students (e.g., part-time and transfer students) while decreasing burden through linking or leveraging existing data sets.

2 Leveraging Federal Student Aid (FSA) and Other Government Data—A Foundational Solution with Remaining Gaps

Various federal agencies—including the Social Security Administration (SSA), Department of Defense (DoD), and Department of Veterans Affairs—collect data on postsecondary students. If linked, these agencies could help answer critical questions. Also, Federal Student Aid (FSA), a division of the U.S. Department of Education (ED), houses over 25 billion records in the National Student Loan Data System (NSLDS). However, few parties—both inside and outside of ED—have had access to these data sources. These data could be better leveraged by linking data across the various data sources, creating policies to govern data access, and designing tools to use the data to generate aggregate statistics.

3 Improving IPEDS—Fortifying a Longstanding System

The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) is the most comprehensive publicly available source of data on the more than 7,500 postsecondary institutions in the United States, allowing users to identify and compare trends over time. Each year, institutions report data to IPEDS via surveys administered during three distinct reporting periods.† IPEDS has become an increasingly complex data system over time, to meet changing demands ranging from providing statistical information to serving compliance, consumer information, and accountability purposes.

4 Using Workforce Data—One Essential Piece of the Puzzle

Workforce data—more specifically, post-college employment and earnings data—are currently collected and housed by such federal sources as the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), the National Directory of New Hires, and the U.S. Census Bureau, along with state workforce agencies. Such data exchanges as the Wage Record Interstate System (WRIS/WRIS2) and Federal Employment Data Exchange System (FEDES) make it possible to share a limited amount of data across states. While workforce data are not a stand-alone solution to improving our postsecondary data infrastructure, these data are critical to answering important questions about students' post-college outcomes.

5 Linking State Longitudinal Data Systems—A State-Level Idea for a National Problem

In 2010, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) launched the Multistate Longitudinal Data Exchange (MLDE), a pilot program connecting K-12 and postsecondary education data with workforce data across state lines. Initially, four states (HI, ID, OR, WA) participated; WICHE plans to expand participation to at least 10 states. These linkages are useful for research and evaluation purposes in participating states, but are not intended to meet such national needs as accountability or centralized consumer information. For example, most state longitudinal date systems (SLDS) only include public institutions, and developing common data definitions to link all 50 states could be cumbersome.

6 Expanding NCES Sample Studies—Fills a Key Niche, But Not a Comprehensive Solution

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) currently administers the cross-sectional National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) and two longitudinal spin-offs—the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS) and Baccalaureate and Beyond (B&B). These studies are designed to answer research and policy questions about college students' enrollment, progression, financing, and post-college outcomes, but do not allow for institution- or state-level analysis. Expanding these studies for broader use would involve collecting data annually (as opposed to the current four-year cycle for NPSAS), improving and adding measures for post-college outcomes, and expanding the sample.

7 Leveraging the National Student Clearinghouse—A Private Option for a Public Problem

Initially founded to simplify student loan reporting for institutions, students, guarantors, lenders, and servicers, the National Student Clearinghouse has expanded its services over time and now houses data for over 197 million students across over 3,600 colleges and universities. While participation in the Clearinghouse is voluntary and the data are not publicly available at the institution level, colleges and universities, states, employers, and secondary schools can enter into contracts to query data related to their students. Also, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center publishes aggregate statistics on student enrollment and outcomes. Leveraging the Clearinghouse's data would require making it more accessible to policy, institutional, and consumer audiences.

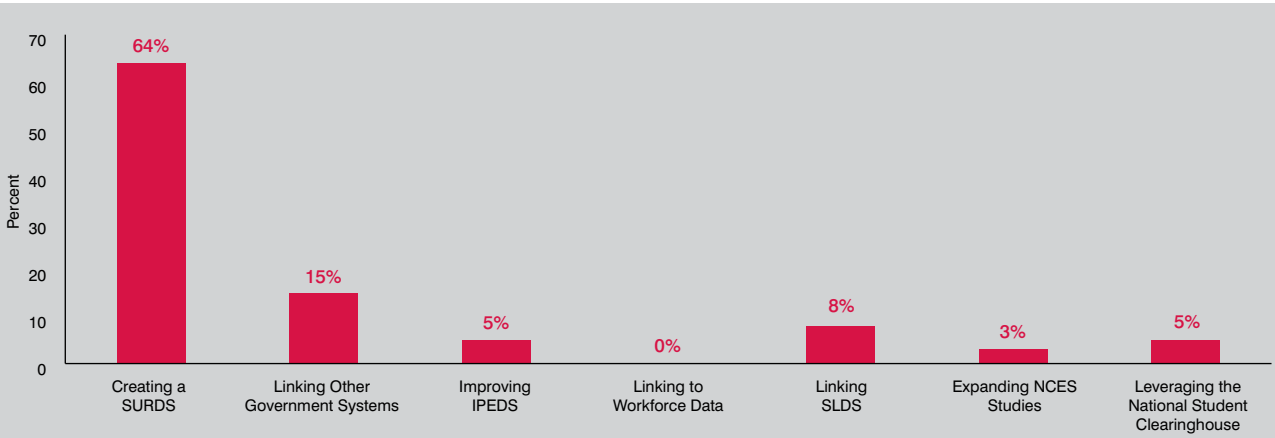
† IHEP IPEDS fact sheet. Retrieved from: http://www.ihep.org/sites/default/files/uploads/postsecdata/docs/resources/ipeds_final.pdf.

Box 2: Evaluating the Data Infrastructure Approaches

Prior to, during, and after the convening, participants evaluated the seven approaches against the following 10 criteria:

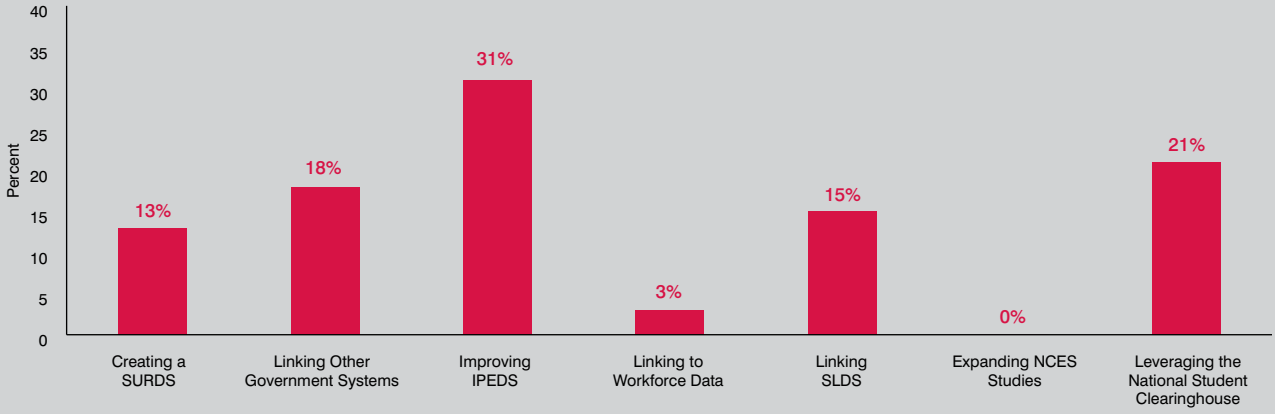
- **Timing**—the time it would take to build and implement the system
- **Funding**—the appropriations required to build and maintain the system
- **Privacy**—the ability of individuals to protect their information
- **Security**—the ability of the system to keep data safe, limit access appropriately, and protect personally identifiable information
- **Comprehensiveness**—the coverage of the system in terms of students, institutions, and data elements
- **Consistency**—the ability to reliably collect and compare data over time and across institutions and states
- **Flexibility**—how adaptable the system is to changing data needs
- **Currency**—the recentness of data in the system
- **Burden**—the difficulty of populating the system with data
- **Politics**—the political considerations that may affect the creation of the system

Figure 1: Which Approach to Improving the Postsecondary Data Infrastructure Do You Think Is the Best Overall? (n=39)



Source: National Postsecondary Data Infrastructure Post-Convening Survey

Figure 2: Which Approach to Improving the Postsecondary Data Infrastructure Do You Think Is the Most Feasible? (n=39)



Note: Values do not sum to 100 percent due to rounding. Source: National Postsecondary Data Infrastructure Post-Convening Survey

Table 1: Evaluating the Options

APPROACH	PROS	CONS
Creating a SURDS	•Increase data accuracy, scope, and quality •Flexible to changing data needs •Leverage pre-existing federal data through linkages •Decrease reporting burden	•Political challenges •Need to address technical and political concerns about privacy and security •Would take time to design and create
Linking Federal Student Aid (FSA) and Other Government Data	•Data systems are already built and funded •Data are being collected and do not require additional reporting burden •Data are current	•Built for business operations, not policy uses •FSA systems are complex and do not utilize the most current technology •Linkages require political maneuvering and overcoming bureaucratic hurdles
Improving IPEDS	•Broad coverage of institutions •High-quality standards •Politically feasible •Offers historical consistency •Aggregate data reduces privacy concerns	•Not flexible to changing conditions or varying data needs across diverse postsecondary system •Reporting is burdensome for institutions
Using Workforce Data	•Administrative data currently available at federal and state levels •States experimenting with data use	•Single data source may not meet all workforce needs •Data only measure economic post-college outcomes
Linking SLDS	•Adequately serves state needs •Data governance structures are well-trusted •Does not require additional data collection	•Coverage mostly limited to voluntary participants, typically public institutions •State capacity and ability to maintain governance of cross-state linkage •Need to monitor data consistency
Expanding NCES Studies	•Methodologically robust and statistically powerful •Suited to answer national policy questions •Capture data that can only be gathered through surveys	•Data cannot be disaggregated to state or institution level •Data are not collected annually
Leveraging the National Student Clearinghouse	•Data are current and flexible to changing data needs •Value outweighs burden for many institutions	•Institutional participation is voluntary •Data are not public at the institution level •Owned and governed by a private entity without public accountability •Not all users access data without paying fees†

† National Student Clearinghouse. "Fee Schedule for Colleges and Universities." Retrieved from: http://www.studentclearinghouse.org/colleges/fees.php.

system would be the most nimble and comprehensive way to meet various stakeholders' data needs. However, given the current federal ban on the creation of a federal SURDS,[4] some expressed concern about its political feasibility.

Second, in recognition of the political hurdles and the need for expediency, participants explored alternative solutions that could be executed without a unit record solution. None of these alternate approaches offer a system as comprehensive as a SURDS or could stand alone as a complete solution to meeting key stakeholders' needs. But if applied in an integrative fashion, these improvements would more adequately address today's critical student-centric data questions than would our existing infrastructure. Critical components of each of the options could be used to create an effective integrated system in the absence of a SURDS.

Figure 3 details some of the sentiments discussed at the convening.

4 In the 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act, Congress banned the creation of a federal SURDS within the U.S. Department of Education. For more information, see: Clare McCann and Amy Laitinen, "College Blackout: How the Higher Education Lobby Fought to Keep Students in the Dark," Washington, DC: New America, 2014. Retrieved from: https://www.newamerica.org/downloads/CollegeBlackoutFINAL.pdf.

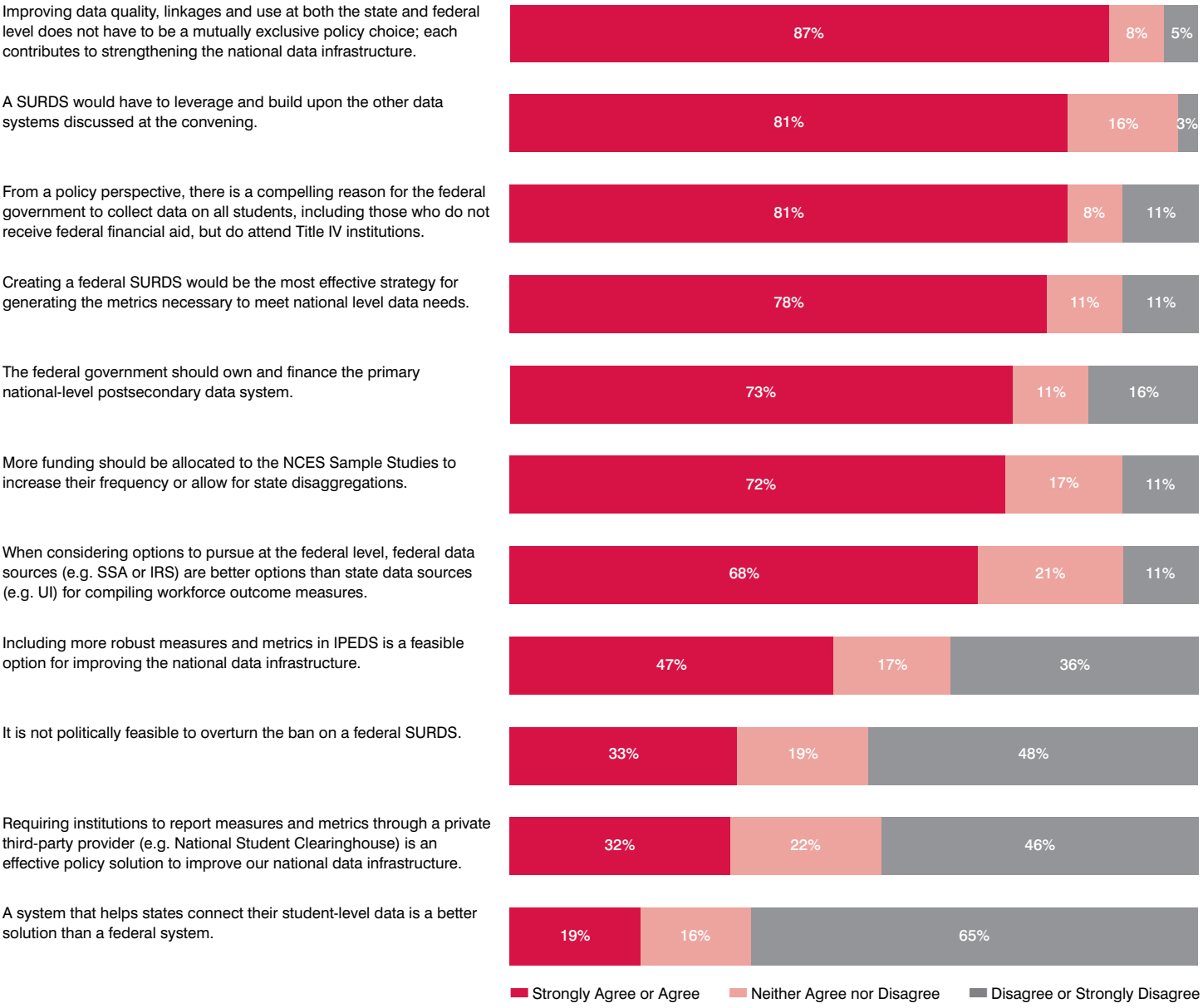
A SURDS is the best option, despite political challenges. Most experts see value in the creation of a federal SURDS and are hopeful that it may come to fruition in the not-too-distant future. In fact, 78 percent of survey respondents agreed that creating a federal student unit record system would be the most effective strategy for generating the measures and metrics necessary to meet data needs at the national level (Figure 3).

However, a *SURDS need not start from scratch*. Rather, 81 percent of survey respondents agreed that it should leverage and build on such other data systems as NSLDS and workforce data systems. Figure 4 explores the ways in which each of the current approaches can contribute to a SURDS.

Despite an overwhelming agreement on the value of creating such a system, experts diverged on the political feasibility of a SURDS given the current federal ban. Even among skeptics, however, many expressed interest in short- and long-term pathways to such a system. The first approach, albeit the most challenging, would be to *overturn the federal ban*; and nearly all (92 percent) participants see the upcoming reauthorization of the Higher Education Act as a prime opportunity to advocate for such a repeal. Some called for a broad scale effort to

Figure 3: Reactions to Sentiments Heard at the National Postsecondary Data Infrastructure Convening

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. (n=37)

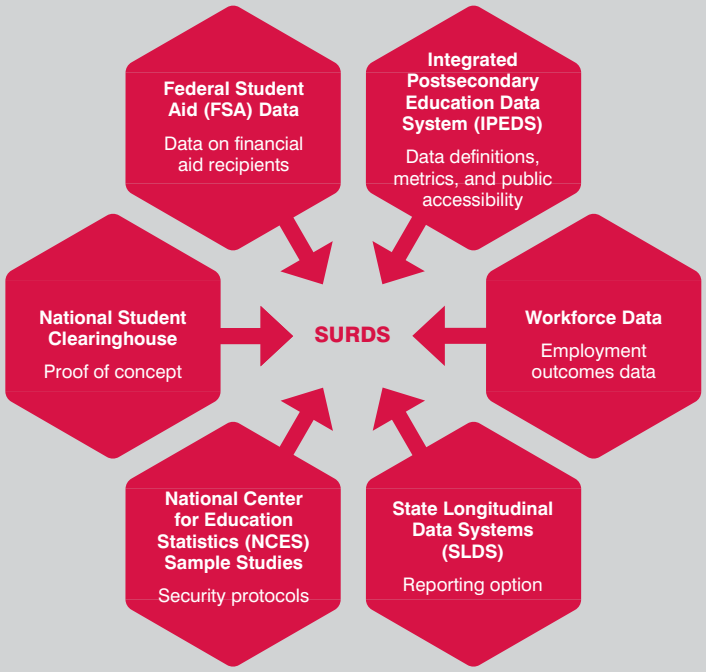


lobby members of Congress, and 65 percent supported a campaign to educate the public and policymakers about the current limitations of postsecondary education data. Participants noted that resistance to creating a student-level data system is weakening, and only 33 percent of survey respondents believed it was not politically feasible to overturn the ban on a federal SURDS.

A second approach is to find a way to *circumvent the federal ban* by exploring other possible channels, such as another agency or provider housing the student unit record data. While non-governmental options are on the table (e.g., using a third-party provider like the National Student Clearinghouse), the federal government is the best fit for this role, according to a critical mass (73 percent) of participants. It is better positioned to make data accessible to all stakeholders and mandate that institutions report key elements of public significance. Some participants identified the DoD as a possible option because the agency already collects data on college students.[5]

5 The 1996 Solomon Amendment of Title 10 of the United States Code allows the Secretary of Defense to deny federal grants (including research grants) to colleges and universities if they prohibit ROTC or military recruitment on campus. The Solomon Amendment also requires institutions to provide military recruiters with access to individual student data including names, addresses, telephone numbers, birth date, educational attainment, academic major, and most recent educational institution attended. 10 U.S.C. § 503(b). 2013. Retrieved from: http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/USCODE-2013-title10/pdf/USCODE-2013-title10.pdf.

Figure 4: Building a Student-Level Data System Using Existing Data



A student-unit record data system (SURDS) does not have to be built from scratch, nor should it be. Each of the six approaches to improve the national postsecondary data infrastructure has strengths from which a student unit record system can benefit, and should be leveraged to increase usability while limiting burden:

- **FSA Data:** A unit record system would need to build on data held in such FSA data systems as the NSLDS.† This system includes information on financial aid awards, loan repayment, program length, and completion for approximately 57 percent of the undergraduate student population—those receiving federal student loans and/or Pell Grants.
- **IPEDS:** A well-designed SURDS, if developed, could replace most IPEDS elements, but existing IPEDS metrics and definitions should be leveraged to inform development of a SURDS. In fact, the public access nature of the data could operate similarly (e.g., IPEDS Data Center, College Navigator), but with a more comprehensive and flexible foundational infrastructure.
- **Workforce Data:** To answer questions about student success in the workforce, workforce data from such administrative federal sources as the SSA or IRS could be linked to education and financial aid records, producing aggregate statistics for analysis.
- **SLDS:** SLDS should play an essential role in populating the national data system. Where possible, federal and state data elements should align so states can report to the federal system on behalf of institutions, eliminating duplicate reporting requirements for colleges and universities.
- **NCES Sample Studies:** NCES' student-level data collections are subject to strict data governance, privacy, and security protocols, which could inform protections surrounding a SURDS. In turn, these studies could use the SURDS to build samples and populate elements already collected in the SURDS, such as enrollment and completion data, alleviating institutional reporting burden. The surveys then could focus exclusively on gathering information on such things as student intentions and attitudes.
- **National Student Clearinghouse:** The Clearinghouse provides an example of an operational, national student-level data collection. While it is a private collection, it links to FSA for some data elements,‡ states can leverage the system's data, and some institutions use it to meet federal reporting requirements. It serves as a proof of concept for how a public SURDS might operate.

† Institute for Higher Education Policy. "National Student Loan Data System." 2015. Retrieved from: http://www.ihep.org/sites/default/files/uploads/postsecdata/docs/resources/nslds_final.pdf.

‡ Federal Student Aid. "Reminder to Institutions of NSLDS Enrollment Reporting Responsibilities." 2014. Available from: http://ifap.ed.gov/eannouncements/022414RemindertoInstitutionsofNSLDSEnrollment.html.

Regardless of the specific approach to creating a student-level data system, participants noted a strong need to continue pushing this agenda because large-scale changes like crafting a new national postsecondary data system take time. One participant noted that many laws and regulations that people never thought would change did change, as a result of diligence and patience.

Alternative Approaches to Improving the Infrastructure in the Absence of a SURDS

With distinct, yet overlapping, data systems and a complex infrastructure, any solution will need to combine promising elements from multiple approaches to build a more robust, operable system. If political realities continue to prohibit a national unit record system, we should at least bolster and link other systems to better meet today's data needs. This section explains how to improve various components of the national data infrastructure in the absence of a SURDS.

Federal Student Aid (FSA) Data

FSA data cover millions of students, but only students who have ever received federal student loans or Pell Grants. The majority (81 percent) of survey participants agreed there is compelling reason for the federal government to collect data on all students, not only those who receive federal student aid and are included in FSA data systems. Data on non-aided students are valuable because the whole institution—and all students—benefit from federal student aid subsidies. Non-aided students also need quality consumer information to inform college choices, while policymakers may need to compare outcomes for aided and non-aided students.

However, even if FSA data are not supplemented with non-aided students, ED should better leverage FSA data for analysis, evaluation, and policy development both inside and outside the Department. For example, ED could compile data from multiple FSA data systems in an Enterprise Data Ware-

house (EDW) to separate analytic data uses from business operations. Analysts within ED could use this EDW for internal evaluation and analysis, and a separate public access tool could provide external analysts with access to the aggregate data, similar to NCES' PowerStats tool.

Additionally, ED could use FSA data to supplement institution and/or program-level data in IPEDS with measures like repayment rates, borrowing rates, and cumulative student loan debt. These FSA-generated data elements could be incorporated into College Navigator and the IPEDS Data Center for download alongside existing IPEDS data on student access and completion, expanding on available information without additional burden on institutions.

IPEDS

IPEDS is the core postsecondary data system at the federal level, providing publicly available, institution-level data on student access, success, and college financing. However, some participants noted that IPEDS was not designed with many of today's data needs in mind. The aggregate nature of reporting is less flexible and adaptable than a unit-level collection, so when a new data need arises, institutions must calculate and report a new metric. If a SURDS is not created, IPEDS likely will remain a key component of our national data infrastructure, but it could be strengthened. Nearly half (47 percent) of experts agreed that including more robust measures in IPEDS is a viable option. Furthermore, as discussed in more detail throughout this section, other data sources could feed into the public access portion of IPEDS, complementing and supplementing the institutionally reported data.

Workforce Data

Workforce data play a critical role in our data infrastructure, as students, policymakers, and institutions are increasingly interested in employment and earnings outcomes. Most participants (68 percent) agreed that—for federal postsecondary purposes—data from the SSA and the IRS are better options than state unemployment insurance (UI) systems. State-based UI records, especially when supplemented with data exchanges like the MLDE, FEDES, and WRIS2, are valuable for state purposes and for evaluating workforce development programs, which require more frequent, quarterly information. However, SSA wage data capture more earners, including the self-employed and federal and military employees, and are not bounded by state lines.

Even without a SURDS, ED and SSA could collaborate to link wage record data at least for federal student aid recipients. Such linkages would not require all of the data to reside in one dataset, but rather SSA could run queries on student cohorts to generate the aggregate statistics, while protecting individual student privacy. ED then could enhance the IPEDS Data Center and College Navigator with these aggregate institution- and/or program-level statistics.

State Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS)

Federal and state data systems need not be mutually exclusive, as both contribute to strengthening the national data infrastructure—a point on which 87 percent of survey respondents agreed. However, in recognizing the challenges with building linkages between all 50 states, only a minority (19 percent) of participants felt a federated data system would be a better solution than a federal system. SLDS serve essential purposes in states, which should continue to strengthen their data systems, build within-state and cross-state linkages, and incorporate data elements relevant to state policymakers.

NCES Sample Studies

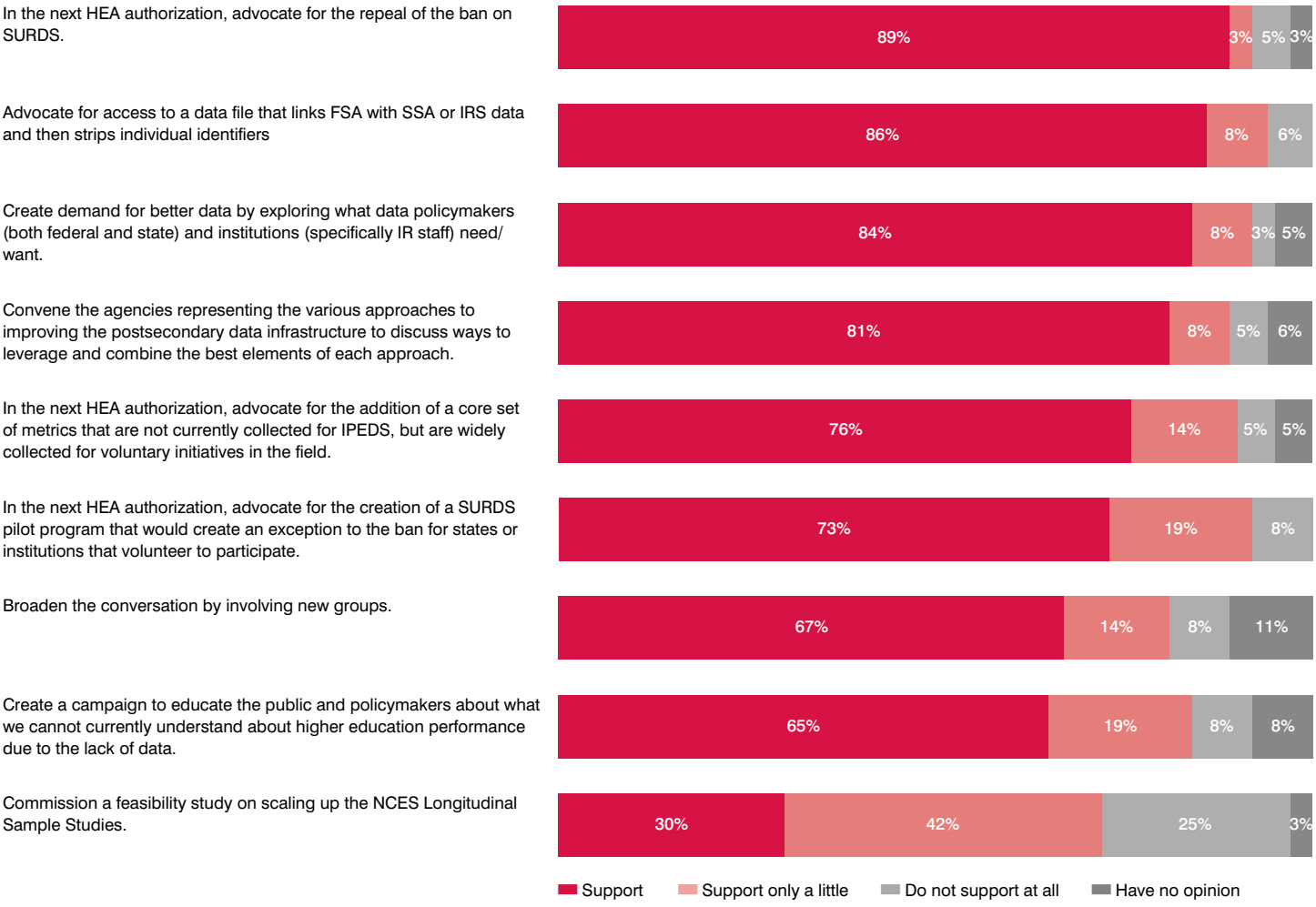
The NCES sample studies provide valuable national-level information to inform policy, much of which can be gathered only through student surveys. The statistically rigorous sample studies should continue to leverage FSA data and begin linking to such other government data sources as SSA wage records and DoD/Veterans' Affairs information on military students. Using administrative sources rather than student surveys can produce more accurate information and reduce the effort required to conduct individual student surveys. Furthermore, nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of survey respondents felt that more funding should be allocated to NCES to ramp up the frequency of the sample studies or to disaggregate at the state level.

National Student Clearinghouse

The Clearinghouse fills a niche in the existing postsecondary data infrastructure by collecting student-level data and making aggregate results available to institutions. Particularly in the absence of a more comprehensive, public solution, it should continue to meet this institutional demand for data. To better contribute to national needs, it also could create a free, public tool—like NCES' PowerStats—that allows users to analyze the underlying data and produce aggregate national, state, and institution-level statistics. Also, to best serve student and policymaker needs, the Clearinghouse should regularly publicize institution-level data on measures including student progression and completion.

These solutions would help address issues of transparency with Clearinghouse data. Participants discussed such ideas as a merger, purchase, or public-private partnership with ED. Notwithstanding, participants still expressed skepticism about the Clearinghouse as a stand-alone solution to the national infrastructure challenges. Experts noted that Clearinghouse data are not made public at the institution level and that institu-

Figure 5: Participant Feedback on Action Steps (n=37)



tions must volunteer to participate in the system—sometimes for a fee[6]—and to submit all data elements. While some suggested mandating institutional participation and public reporting, only about a third (32 percent) of survey respondents agreed that requiring institutions to report data to a private, third-party provider would be an effective policy solution. Instead, about three-quarters (73 percent) felt the federal government should own and finance the nation's primary data system.

Next Steps—Taking Action

The field has identified strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities related to various approaches for improving our national postsecondary data infrastructure. While some approaches rose to the top in terms of popularity and feasibility, future research will detail the technical aspects of the approaches to understand precisely what elements of each can make meaningful contributions to improving the overall data infrastructure. A forthcoming paper series commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation will provide additional insight on several of the approaches mentioned here, as well as issues of privacy, security, and burden.

To supplement this new line of research, opportunities abound for the field to develop an advocacy strategy. Participants noted the need to continue advocating as a community for higher-quality data (Figure 5). In fact, a critical mass of participants want to advocate for access to files that link data across multiple federal data systems. The field also supports convening the agencies who hold pieces of the data to find ways to build linkages. The Postsecondary Data Collaborative (PostsecData), in close collaboration with its partners, is developing recommendations for ways the Department of Education can improve access to high-quality data for a variety of purposes.

6 National Student Clearinghouse. "Fee Schedule for Colleges and Universities." Retrieved from: http://www.studentclearinghouse.org/colleges/fees.php.

Participants also offered strong support for creating a voluntary SURDS pilot program, as well as developing a better understanding of the types of data constituent groups want and need. Both of these efforts require grassroots advocacy from a critical mass of leaders in the field. It is incredibly important for the general public—in addition to policymakers—to feel that improving the national postsecondary data infrastructure is a relevant topic. Students and parents, as well as policymakers and institutions, need to understand how better data will serve their needs. There are two ways in which everyone committed to student access and success can contribute:

1. **Advocate for better postsecondary data.** Make sure that your colleagues and other key stakeholders understand that to improve student outcomes, we need high-quality, accessible data to inform public policies, institutional practice, and student decisions.

2. **Identify opportunities for collaboration.** Know that postsecondary data should be important to everyone: students, parents, administrators, faculty, policymakers, and civic and business leaders. Find ways to partner with colleagues who also recognize the value of data and share information.

Our nation's economy depends on an educated citizenry and workforce. Thoughtful use of quality data can help us strengthen it.

Conclusion

Our nation's postsecondary data infrastructure is failing to produce the types of information that contemporary students, policymakers, and institutions need to make informed decisions. If left on its current trajectory, our data system will become increasingly limited in its ability to improve an underperforming American higher education system. If our existing federal, state, and institutional data are appropriately linked and leveraged, key stakeholders will be able to answer critical questions that drive improved student and institutional outcomes. Additionally, policymakers will be able to create a more efficient and effective financial aid system. These data linkages would ideally take shape in the form of a student unit record data system, but even in the absence of such a system, our current data must be better integrated, working together more effectively to meet student, policymaker, and institutional needs.

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