February 14, 2014

What Experts on College-Ratings System Mean by ‘We Need Better Data’

By Jonah Newman

NO MENTION

If any consensus arose last week at the Education Department’s daylong symposium on the technical challenges facing the Obama administration’s college-ratings system, it was on the need for better data about colleges and universities.

Tod R. Massa captured the sentiment in the opening line of his presentation: “To the department, I say this: We need better data. Let me rephrase that: You need better data.”

Mr. Massa, who directs policy research and data warehousing for the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, echoed other data experts when he highlighted the gaps in data the department collects through its Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, or Ipeds.

In some of the most important measures of college accountability—graduation rates, net prices, postgraduate wages, and community-college outcomes—the Ipeds data fall short, the experts said.

Several experts who spoke at the symposium, including Mr. Massa, said a unit-record data system that could track every student’s progress was the best solution to the bad-data problem. Alas, such a system is currently prohibited by law.

So what are the shortcomings of the Ipeds data? And absent a unit-record system, how can the Education Department improve the data it collects? In this and the next few posts, we’ll try to answer those and other questions by exploring in depth several of the most important college metrics and the roadblocks standing in the way of better data on college access, affordability, and outcomes.

Measuring Graduation Rates

Let’s start with graduation rates, one of the most relied-upon measures of outcomes in higher education. Ipeds calculates graduation rates using cohorts of first-time, full-time degree- or certificate-seeking students. The department asks colleges to report the number of students in each cohort who graduate with a degree or certificate in 100 percent, 150 percent, and 200
percent of “normal time,” which translates to four, six, and eight years, respectively, at a four-year college.

So what’s wrong with that? For one thing, the Ipeds graduation number can leave many students unaccounted for, said Christine M. Keller, associate vice president for academic affairs at the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities.

Consider a four-year public university with a six-year graduation rate of 47 percent. What happened to the remaining 53 percent of students? The Ipeds graduation-rate data don’t tell us anything about them (except for a widely mistrusted transfer-rate figure, which we’ll get to in a minute).

Ms. Keller and her association, on behalf of several other major higher-education groups, advocate a data-collection system that would track more than just the number of students who graduated from the college where they started.

The proposed system, known as the Student Achievement Measure, would also capture how many students were still enrolled in the same college, how many transferred and graduated from another institution, and how many transferred and were still enrolled at another institution. That approach would leave a much smaller group of unknowns.

Like other experts, Ms. Keller proposed a “limited, secure system for collecting student-level data,” a carefully worded call for a unit-record-like system, to achieve those goals.

**A ‘Good Metric’ for Community Colleges**

Some experts pointed out that the measures for evaluating two-year colleges should be different from those used for four-year institutions.

Patrick Perry, a vice chancellor of the California Community Colleges—the largest public higher-education system in the country, with more than two million students—criticized the transfer-rate metric in Ipeds, an important data point for community colleges, where many students enroll with the goal of transferring to a four-year institution.

Ipeds treats all transfers the same and transferring as a subordinate outcome to earning a degree or certificate, but, as Mr. Perry said, all transfers are not equal.

“A lateral transfer [to another two-year or less program] should not be treated the same as an upward transfer [to a four-year college],” he said.

Getting a better transfer rate is key to making any ratings system relevant to community-college students, said Thomas R. Bailey, director of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University’s Teachers College.

“If we don’t have a good measure of transfer, then it’s really not going to be a good metric for community colleges,” Mr. Bailey said.

Additionally, the department should collect data much further out than 200 percent of “normal” graduation time, Mr. Perry said.
“A student who is enrolled at six credits per term is going to get an associate’s degree in 10 years,” Mr. Perry said. “We don’t like students to take that long, and we discourage it, but from a state-resource standpoint, it doesn’t take any more state resources.”

**The ‘Largest Investment’ in Higher Education**

Both Ms. Keller’s and Mr. Perry’s goals would be much easier to accomplish with a unit-record system, which could track exactly where students enroll after they leave one institution and whether they ultimately graduate with a four-year degree.

But even under the current institution-level system, the Education Department could fill a major hole in the graduation-rate data, said Patrick J. Kelly, senior associate at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.

“The federal government doesn’t collect completion rates for Pell [Grant] recipients,” Mr. Kelly said. “This is the government’s largest investment in higher education.”

“It’s really a tragedy from a collection standpoint,” Mr. Kelly said.

Virginia, by contrast, measures three different graduation rates for public institutions: the graduation rate for students with Pell Grants, the rate for students receiving other financial aid, and the rate for students receiving no financial aid.

“The intent is to bring attention to the differences while requiring institutions to bring those three measures in line with each other,” said Mr. Massa of the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.

That is, perhaps, the most important—and most likely—first step to improve the current Ipeds graduation-rate data. It’s a step that would not necessarily require a unit-record system but would still shed much-needed light on how well colleges serve lower-income students.

The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 requires that colleges collect graduation rates for Pell Grant recipients and disclose them if requested, but that crucial piece of information hasn’t yet been incorporated into Ipeds. According to the experts at last week’s symposium, it’s long past time to do so.

“There really should be no reason why students admitted to an institution, allegedly believed to be able to do the required work and succeed, should have substantially different graduation rates based on their financial-aid status,” Mr. Massa said.

Next week we’ll look at net prices and how that widely used calculation obscures the reality of college affordability and access.
How Should Big-Time College Sports Change?

By Brad Wolverton

NO MU MENTION

The NCAA has been on the ropes lately, facing criticism for its treatment of players, doubts about its leadership, and departures of experienced staff. The association is still battling a federal class-action lawsuit over athletes’ rights and now faces a new effort to unionize college football players.

So it might seem that hundreds of Division I leaders who gathered last month for their annual meeting would be ready to debate serious change. Some small moves were made. But the officials spent little time discussing how they want big-time sports to look in five to 10 years.

That got us thinking: What are the big ways in which college sports needs to change?

The Chronicle put that question to more than a dozen experts in recent weeks, and came up with the following recommendations. Over the coming days, you can add your voice to the debate on Twitter using the hashtag #NCAAchange.

We’ll consider the best suggestions for a follow-up article, and hope to give the people in charge something to think about.

1. Create a football federation.

The desire to keep Division I together appears strong. But the priorities in elite football programs are so different from those at most colleges that they need their own governance system and full rule-making authority, neither of which would be provided under the recently proposed NCAA changes.

The transition to a College Football Playoff will create a new operating structure around the biggest-money sport, allowing power conferences to test whether they even need the NCAA. It's unlikely we'll see a split anytime soon, but some observers believe it is inevitable.

Todd Turner, a former athletic director at Vanderbilt and the University of Washington, says marquee football programs should form their own federation, giving them the autonomy they need while still operating under the NCAA banner. Last month Mr. Turner, now a consultant to NCAA colleges, sent a letter to Mark Emmert, the NCAA president, and other Division I leaders
proposing a football association for the 65 biggest programs and a separate regional network in which the next 40 or so largest institutions would vie for a slot in a major bowl game. (The big conferences could still contract with the NCAA for legislative and enforcement support.)

As more power consolidates with the five wealthiest leagues, they could benefit from having an independent leader to help shepherd changes and maximize media contracts, which are expected to double in value in the next six years. Many people predict a diminished role for the NCAA chief, with the next one coming from outside the ranks of college presidents.

2. Organize by sport.

The NCAA could avoid many of its headaches by giving each sport more autonomy. A federation model like the one used by the U.S. Olympic Committee makes sense to some. But the NCAA could accomplish a lot by creating coordinating bodies that take a long-term view. Jamie Zaninovich, commissioner of the West Coast Conference, suggests establishing one for men’s basketball, the NCAA’s crown jewel. Similar to the NBA’s Competition Committee, the group would monitor issues like officiating standards and one-and-done players, and help coordinate an agenda for the sport.

That would alleviate one of the biggest frustrations with the NCAA—a lack of leadership. "As it is, everyone's in charge but no one's in charge," says one longtime observer. "It's a mess."

3. Strengthen enforcement.

Mistakes in the NCAA’s investigation at the University of Miami, and subsequent staff departures, have led many Division I leaders to ponder outsourcing the enforcement system.

One Big Five commissioner suggested to The Chronicle that the NCAA could petition the Uniform Law Commission, which drafts and promotes the enactment of uniform state laws, for increased enforcement powers, including the ability to subpoena witnesses.

A more likely change: The NCAA keeps its enforcement and infractions operations in house, but they become subject to regular external reviews, says John Infante, a compliance expert who runs the Bylaw Blog. That would most likely lead to more consistent punishments and help the association avoid perceived conflicts of interest.

4. Clean up academics.

The NCAA has increased its core-course requirements for entering first-year students and toughened academic expectations for two-year transfers. But coaches continue to find loopholes for talented players. Meanwhile, the academic gap between high-profile athletes and the rest of the student body continues to grow.

Critics say the NCAA must raise its initial-eligibility standards, which many institutions use as a de facto admissions bar, or allow for an academic "year of readiness" to ensure that more players match up academically with their peers. One former academic adviser suggests a simple test: If you can’t read above a ninth-grade level, you aren’t allowed to play.

An equally important change would be to crack down on widespread abuses with online classes, academic advisers say. Colleges and accreditors might look the other way. But if the association is serious about academic integrity, advisers say, it could swing a bigger stick.
5. Get serious about players’ rights.

Unless Ed O’Bannon, a former UCLA star, prevails in his class-action suit over the commercial use of athletes’ images, the likelihood of players’ getting paid is remote. Players who want to unionize also face significant hurdles.

But there’s a push among the wealthiest colleges to pass along to players a greater share of the television revenue they generate. Expect that to come through new health and safety benefits, including better access to long-term disability, added money toward players’ full cost of attendance, and more scholarships in high-profile sports.

Others want to see guaranteed athletic aid, a relaxation of agent rules, and opportunities for athletes to do more than play sports. One proposal would restrict athletics obligations to three hours a day outside of competition, with one day a week in which players have no access to training facilities other than for injury treatment.

Players also deserve a seat—and a vote—on whatever new NCAA governing board is created, says Melissa Minton, a former soccer player at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette who recently completed a term on the Division I Student-Athlete Advisory Committee. "We have the potential to impact things a lot," she told The Chronicle last month. She and her colleagues say it’s time they were heard.

6. Improve safety protocols.

Mr. O’Bannon’s case gets most of the attention, but a federal class-action suit that says the NCAA has neglected its responsibility for players’ head injuries poses a significant threat. The NFL scored a major victory last year with its proposed concussion settlement, agreeing to pay just $765-million to thousands of injured players. But a federal judge last month questioned why the deal prevents NFL players who collect money under the arrangement from suing the NCAA.

At a minimum, medical professionals say, the NCAA should enforce more limitations on contact in football practice and require independent medical opinions on the sidelines, which professional leagues have already done. But the NFL discussions should give the association pause as it negotiates its own settlement. If the NCAA dedicates a sizable sum toward the prevention and treatment of head trauma, its reputation could begin to align with its mission of protecting the safety of players.

7. Strengthen oversight.

More than a dozen athletic trainers have been fired by major institutions after run-ins with football coaches over return-to-play decisions, The Chronicle found last year. Nearly every major medical association has supported new guidelines to help prevent such fallout, but the problem won’t improve unless more colleges require medical staff to report beyond the athletic department.

In coming years, expect to see more colleges move their compliance and academic-services offices outside of athletics as they look for more ways to protect themselves from liability. And as Mr. Infante, the compliance expert, says: "All it would take to get business offices moved out of the athletic department would be a series of financial scandals."
From Gaines to Strickland: Professors share black history at MU

By Jessica Karins

Black History Month began Feb. 1, and with it came a large number of events.

One event, titled “Rediscovering the Civil Rights History of Missouri and Columbia,” took place Thursday. Historians, professors and leaders in Columbia’s black community shared their experiences with racism and the civil rights movement.

At the MIZ-BLK event, MU political science professors James Endersby and William Horner shared their research about Lloyd Gaines, the subject of their book project.

In 1936, Gaines applied for the School of Law, but his application was turned down when the registrar realized he had attended an exclusively black college. With the help of the NAACP, he filed a lawsuit calling for the state to recognize that this was not “separate but equal.”

The case, Gaines v. Canada, made it all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which found that Missouri had to accommodate Gaines, whether that be by desegregating MU’s School of Law or by making another one available. The state chose the second option, opening a new law school in a building abandoned by a beauty college.

Before his legal team could protest that this, too, as unequal, Gaines disappeared. No one knows if he was killed or if he started a new life to escape his newfound fame, but either way, Horner said, his story was “a tragedy.”

Endersby and Horner both said the obscurity of Gaines’ story is part of what drew them to research it.

On the campus where he never attended law school, Gaines is commemorated in one visible way. The Gaines/Oldham Black Culture Center is named, in part, after him.

“Very few people know who Lloyd Gaines is,” Horner said.

It’s exactly these kinds of stories, though, the panelists said, that inspired them to confront prejudice in their activism and careers.

Michael Middleton, deputy chancellor and professor at the MU School of Law and one of the first black students to attend MU’s law school, said that when he first came to Columbia, he found “a fairly segregated campus and a fairly segregated community.”
White students shouted racial epithets at Middleton from a car on his first day on campus. Originally a music student, he eventually quit Marching Mizzou when he got tired of playing “Dixie” at halftime while Kappa Alpha fraternity members waved a Confederate flag.

Middleton, though, was inspired by activists — from his friends in law school to Martin Luther King Jr. — and stayed in Columbia, helping to found the fraternity Alpha Phi Alpha and the Legion of Black Collegians.

Arvah E. Strickland, director of the black studies program before it became a department, is remembered as another significant figure.

“I came here in 1999, and at that time there were about 25 endowed chairs across the United States that were established for and by people of African descent,” said Wilma King, the professor who currently holds the Strickland Endowed Professorship in African-American History and Black Studies.

King said the position has provided her with a unique opportunity to research the history of African-American women and children.

Other panelists included Darlene Grant, the assistant principal of Battle High School; Granny’s House Director Pam Ingram; and Mary Beth Brown of the black studies department.

Graduate student Portia Britt, president of the MU Black Law Students Association, said many MU students are unaware of this aspect of its history.

“I think a lot of people don’t realize the sacrifices that were made,” Britt said.

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**MU students from Russia share feelings on Sochi Olympics**

Thursday, February 13, 2014 | 7:24 p.m. CST

BY ELIAN PELTIER

COLUMBIA — There are four stars on each shoulder of Marat Musin's hockey jersey, one for each gold medal Russia and the former USSR have won in Olympic ice hockey. Musin, an MU Ph.D. student from Moscow, wore his jersey for the first time during a gathering organized by the MU Russian Club to watch the opening ceremony of the 2014 Olympic Games.
Musin, 27, said he regrets some portrayals of Russia in the press but hopes two weeks of competition will help show his country is capable of organizing such an event and keeping the venue safe.

Russia’s anti-gay law, the location of the games near the Caucasus region with tensions between ethnic minorities, the expense of hosting the games and problems with accommodations have drawn attention to the 2014 Olympics.

Anna Lanshakova, 23, said she was fed up with Western media coverage leading up to the games.

“Every day I open my Facebook page, and I see biased articles that create false polemics,” she said. As an example, she cited the Indianapolis Star’s article titled "Yellow water, weird toilets and more problems at Sochi Olympics."

“Come on, let’s divide sports and politics," Lanshakova said. "Let’s see how the games go.”

Russia spent an estimated $51 billion to organize the games, compared to $1.9 billion Canada spent for the last Winter Olympics in 2010, according to the Vancouver Organizing Committee.

Anna Berezhkova, 23, was skeptical about what will become of Sochi’s Olympic facilities after the two weeks of competition. Berezhkova thinks the money could have been used to develop infrastructure, education and finance research programs in the country.

Journalism student Olga Khrustaleva of Russia called Sochi a big laundry of money.

"I can’t say I’m proud of my country hosting the Olympics,” she said. But she also regrets a targeted coverage.

“Everybody is targeting Russia because of the Olympics, while there is also corruption in countries that organize sport events,” she said.
Ekaterina Shevchenko, 23, who works at the MU Department of Russian studies, reads Russian media, such as Lenta.ru, to balance her perspective.

“Some Russian media also focus on what is going wrong with unfinished projects in Sochi, for example,” she said. “But at least the judgment is balanced.”

Russia’s anti-gay law has also sparked controversy.

By banning the “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations,” the law passed in June tends to reinforce traditional Russian values. It also questions the freedom of expression during the games, where U.S. President Barack Obama sent three openly gay athletes.

Nicole Monnier, an assistant teaching professor of Russian at MU, said the law feeds a “strong cultural impulse against homosexuality in Russia” and is a form of discrimination that is important to mention.

Although some Russian students at the gathering said the law contributes to intolerance in their country, others argued that nothing has changed for gay and lesbian people in Russia. Lanshakova and Schevchenko said their gay friends in Russia have never been threatened.

“There is a tension between a real pride to host the games and that sensitiveness about the controversies,” Monnier said.

For Musin, being Russian is “a combination of self-proudness about our great past history and a perception that, sometimes, we’re not living in a civilized country,” he said in reference to the anti-gay law and corruption. “It’s almost cognitive dissonance. It’s not complete truth, but sometimes you just hardly can find better explanation.”

He's keeping the faith that after the men's ice hockey final on Feb. 23, he'll be able to pin a ninth star onto his Russian jersey.