Report and Suggestions from College Scorecard Technical Review Panel 1: Consumer Information

The Technical Review Panel reviewed the College Scorecard and considered a number of potential changes to improve the information available to consumers. This summary provides feedback on how potential changes would impact data quality and identifies topics for further discussion. Comments from interested parties are due to Janice Kelly-Reid, Project Director at RTI International, at ScorecardTRPcomment@rti.org by February 26, 2016.

RTI International (RTI) is under contract to the U.S. Department of Education (Department) to form a Technical Review Panel (TRP) and conduct meetings to solicit expert discussion and suggestions on a range of topics related to the College Scorecard. The TRP is designed to provide input to RTI on data, measures, and tools to help inform ongoing improvements to the College Scorecard. The TRP does not advise or report to the Department.

On December 2 and 3, 2015, RTI convened a meeting of the TRP in Washington, DC. RTI's specific purpose for this TRP was to explore the best ways to present data to consumers and to consider how potential changes would impact students, stakeholders, and the Department. The panel consisted of 57 participants representing institutions, researchers and other data users, higher education associations, the federal government, and other experts, reflecting a wide range of expertise and a diverse array of perspectives on this topic.

Background

The Department launched the new College Scorecard in September 2015 to provide better information to students and families and help them make more informed choices about their higher education options. This includes a redesigned consumer tool and a policy- and research-oriented data page. The new College Scorecard, accompanying data, and research analysis are the result of collaboration from teams across federal agencies. The Department provides open access to the data behind the Scorecard, including a vast array of data on student completion, debt and repayment, and earnings, disaggregated by various student subgroups, including first-generation students, low-income students, and federal Pell Grant recipients. The entire dataset spans nearly 20 years of information from more than 7,000 institutions and covers multiple federal sources, including the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the National Student Loan Data System (NSLDS), and administrative earnings data from tax records maintained by the Department of the Treasury.

The consumer tool enables users to search for and evaluate options according their own specifications, and presents comparable and accessible data on postsecondary institutions and their performance on measures of access, affordability, and student outcomes. For the first time, this includes students' earnings after attending an institution, percentage of students who earn more than an average high school graduate, the cumulative debt of students who graduate, and borrowers' loan repayment rates. The data are listed on the College Scorecard page for each institution, along with other consumer information, such as the available areas of study, the rate at which first-year students choose to return the following year, and details about the particular mission of the school (e.g., Historically Black Colleges and Universities and minority-serving institutions, or schools with a particular religious affiliation).

The data site makes the data available for download to enable researchers, policymakers, and others to conduct more in-depth analysis, and for institutions to use the data to benchmark against peer institutions. This release represents the best national data on higher education, ranging from demographic information to student outcomes. The Department also shares the College Scorecard data

and functionality through an open application program interface (API), making the data even more accessible by more easily allowing for the development of new applications and tools by outside organizations. To date, the Department had identified over 15 organizations that are already using and building on the data to conduct their own analysis, and have incorporated the data in their web and mobile tools.

Going forward, the Department plans to continue its efforts to facilitate transparency and support consumer choice and will continue testing the College Scorecard with students and counselors to optimize features and capabilities; use analytics to gain a deeper understanding of how users interact with the site and API; and consider updates to the site as they learn more about which additional information and functionalities are most useful to students, families, advisors, and other users. As part of these efforts, RTI convened this TRP to engage the community in a discussion on how to present students with the information they need to find the best schools for them. Panel presentations from counseling and college pipeline programs, developers, policy and data experts, researchers in consumer choice, and other experts in higher education provided background and context for this discussion. This report summarizes the outcome of the TRP discussion.

Discussion Item 1: Improvements to the College Scorecard Consumer Tool

Institutions serve students from a wide array of backgrounds with diverse needs and different education and career goals. When asked about the college decision-making process, prospective and recently enrolled students cited cost, availability of financial aid, and the majors or programs offered as the most important factors in deciding to attend a specific school. Although they assign relative importance to outcome measures, students assume they will complete and earn enough money after graduation to pay off their loans, and tend to prioritize more immediate factors like cost.[1] However, the College Scorecard data reveal differences in outcomes across institutions and within those schools across student subgroups. While some of the outcome gaps can be expected (e.g., students with a degree are more likely to repay their loans than those who leave school with debt but no degree), some achievement gaps exceed expected variations, suggesting that some students do not have the same chance of success at all schools. The panel provided feedback on changes that could be considered for future iterations of the consumer tool.

Personalized information. Panelists discussed the idea of individualizing searches to help students find their best schools, as described below.

- **Student subgroup data ("Students like me").** Panelists noted that information about differences in opportunities or outcomes for students with profiles like theirs can be helpful in their searches. For instance, this could mean leveraging data disaggregated by student subgroup to help prospective students identify which schools are best serving students like them (where they might have the most opportunities and the best chances for success) or presenting a list of schools sorted by those that offer the best opportunities for students with similar profiles. Although providing personalized information to students could serve as a starting point to help students narrow down the field of options, this approach poses challenges. It means weighing what the students are looking for—knowing that students might be defining success in any number of ways—with the factors that are most likely to influence their chances for success.

  Panelists questioned the degree to which a federal tool should attempt to influence behavior. Since students have diverse goals, pointing them towards a cost/benefit analysis attaches a higher weight to a specific outcome (e.g., a higher graduation rate means a "better" choice) and

[1] Findings from the New America College Decisions Survey, 2014. Decentral.org/tag/college-decisions-survey

makes an assumption about the quality of an institution based on certain data points. Without a clear definition of the best measures of student success, or the right ways to combine those measures to present a comprehensive view of institutional outcomes, panelists cautioned against using a federal tool to make implied value judgments about what is important to students or make endorsements about the quality of a school for an individual student.

Panelists noted that while personalized matching efforts could be beneficial for students with less access to resources or advisory support, the challenge is finding the touch point to reach these students. It is critical to examine students' outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged students, within the context of those students' academic preparation and other factors in their ability to attend school and remain on track to graduate on time. Panelists suggested that if future iterations of the College Scorecard will use personalized information, further work is necessary to determine for which subgroups of students this should apply and the appropriate weights to assign to outcomes to provide curated information without limiting the choice set unnecessarily. Some panelists thought that third parties may be better suited to create new capabilities with the open API to provide personalized information to specific subgroups of students. For example, developers may wish to, rather than present data for "students like me," present data to students on "institutions for you" and be clear about why the institutions are included.

- "**Have you considered…." list of schools.** In large part, students are looking at schools within their price range and a certain geographic range. Panelists considered ways to broaden the choice set to present additional options to the student, particularly for students who may be geographically constrained in the locations they can consider. For instance, this could mean a list of additional institutions with similar net prices outside of the search parameters but on a transportation line (using College Scorecard data layered with transportation data); algorithms keyed off search behavior by providing a list of institutions with lower net prices and higher graduation rates than the searched-for institution; or suggesting similar institutions to which students apply (gleaned from FAFSA send behavior). While this "have you considered…" concept could expand the radius without narrowing in on a particular school, panelists cautioned against breaking down the data to micro-target students in such a specific way. Further, there were concerns that while this could be used as a behavioral nudge for students to consider institutions with more competitive outcomes, this approach could be also be perceived as recommending or endorsing specific schools, should the Department of Education make those determinations. However, panelists pointed out that the site already makes some suggestions, if not recommendations, about the types of factors that students should prioritize in their college searches. Panelists acknowledged that some students do only apply only to one school and suggested that if a tool is going to return results based on anything beyond the criteria specified, the Department should be careful and considerate in how to present alternative options to consumers.

- **Default sort options.** Similarly, the current default sorting choice could also be viewed as an implicit judgment about what students should prioritize when researching colleges on the site. The default sort option drives traffic to the profiles of schools that appear at the top of the list. Considering that only a small percentage of users have sorted their results by the nondefault option,[2] it is not surprising that one of the users' most popular schools is the first school with complete data that shows up in a search without any specified criteria. Threshold earnings—the proportion of students who later earn more than what a high school graduate is expected to make—are

[2] Usage Analytics on College Scorecard, compiled using Google Analytics. December 3, 2015.

used as the default to sort institutions appearing in search results. As a result, elite schools and special focus schools (e.g., nursing schools, pharmacy programs) are most likely to be at the top of the list. Panelists expressed concern that the current default sort option could be interpreted as an indicator of quality and, as such, could be nudging consumers either arbitrarily or in the wrong direction for students' personal goals. Panelists considered setting up the default option differently, such as sorting the list of schools that are geographically closest to the student, or by net price, and doing more research into what default search options are preferred by students.

- **Filters.** Given their concerns with using a federal tool to make recommendations to help students find their "best" school, panelists suggested instead providing more filtering options to help students narrow their searches themselves based on criteria important to them. This will allow them actionable information to assess institutions according to their own priorities. RTI would appreciate additional comments on this topic, particularly with respect to additional filters to include.

Institutional comparisons. Panelists noted that allowing for side-by-side comparisons and saved sessions could make the information more consumable and accessible for students. Several panelists also discussed allowing students to create additional customized comparison groups, based on factors that are important to them or by allowing them to select individual institutions to compare with group institutions; however, further study is needed to determine how this approach would accommodate a degree and program mix.

Additional information provided by institutions (footnotes). Panelists suggested that the presentation of data on institutions' College Scorecard pages should include context information or footnotes provided by the institution to allow for the appropriate interpretation of the data. However, according to presentations by the behavioral scientists, too much information can also cause students to either delay making a decision or to make no decision whatsoever.

Sustaining the site going forward. Several panelists suggested that the Department's efforts should concentrate on data dissemination rather than data packaging, moving away from the College Scorecard consumer tool entirely. There were concerns that the consumer tool is competing not only against third-party tools, but other Department consumer sites, such as College Navigator (hosted by the Department's National Center for Education Statistics), which can serve as a secondary source of information for students looking for more detail on an institution. Many of the same data elements in the College Scorecard are also available through College Navigator, but the two sites are updated at different times, which can result in different presentations of the same data element (i.e. different cohort year). However, simply aligning the update schedules does not eliminate all issues associated with multiple versions across federal systems because, in some cases, they are calculated using varying definitions. For example, the average annual cost figure on the College Scorecard comes directly from the IPEDS Student Financial Aid (SFA) component—the source data are first-time, full-time students who were awarded any Title IV federal student aid.[3] Other IPEDS net price metrics, including the net price data published on College Navigator, are based on the data for first-time, full-time students who were awarded any grant/scholarship aid from the federal government, state/local government, or the institution.[4]

Panelists noted that discrepancies, primarily those related to outcome measures, may lead to confusion and misinterpretation when data are used for accountability and consumer information purposes. If the Department plans to continue to support both consumer tools, panelists suggested providing additional

[3] For public institutions, this only includes students in this group who paid the in-state/in-district tuition rate.
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context about how the sites interact and link together (e.g., "for further information about [institution], refer to the institution's profile on College Navigator [URL]") to clarify the multiple measures published in federal consumer information sites.

Discussion Item 2: Improvements to College Scorecard Data

In considering improvements to the data, panelists struggled to find a balance between presenting data that are consumable with data that provide greater depth and accuracy. To strike a balance, panelists suggested focusing on data quality and promoting access to the API to create and cultivate an ecosystem around the data which, in turn, will encourage new capabilities and more customized tools for students. Panelists considered a number of potential changes to improve data quality.

Classification of institutions. Institutions are classified by predominant award level, based on the number and level of awards that the institutions reported on the IPEDS Completions component. Panelists discussed the impact of current institutional classifications on the College Scorecard data, as follows.

- **Predominantly certificate-granting institutions.** At the time of the TRP, the College Scorecard was limited to degree-granting institutions that predominately award associate's or bachelor's degrees. Institutions that predominantly award certificates were excluded from the first release of the site, although their data do appear in the full data file. This omission primarily affected community colleges and other 2-year degree-granting institutions that awarded more certificates than degrees. Panelists pointed out that many of these institutions serve and are closely connected to the populations in their areas and offer affordable options to students. Omitting these institutions could lead prospective students to make assumptions about why a particular school does not appear on the site (e.g., academic quality, accreditation issues). The Department is aware of this concern and is actively working to add approximately 600 institutions to the consumer site by the beginning of 2016. These institutions that offer both degrees and certificates—even if certificates are the predominant offering— will be included on future iterations of the Scorecard. Panelists agreed with this approach and, as an interim measure, suggested adding a disclaimer on the site to indicate that not "all" schools are included. Since the TRP, all degree-granting institutions, regardless of predominant degree type, have been added to the website.

- **Predominantly degree-granting institutions.** The classification of institutions by predominant degree limits the view of the highest educational offerings. For instance, a school that awards more associate's degrees than bachelor's degrees in a given year is classified as a predominantly associate's degree-granting institution and labeled a 2-year (associate's) school on the consumer tool. Although the school offers bachelor's degree programs, it is not included in the search results for 4-year (bachelor's degree). Panelists noted the importance of taking steps to ensure that the underlying data do not limit student choice. For example, panelists pointed out that the 2-year label could lead prospective students seeking bachelor's degrees to assume that regional colleges do not meet their needs. Further work is underway to identify potential solutions for classifying institutions in the most appropriate way for consumer information purposes.

Branch campuses and level of aggregation. Institutions are structured in a variety of ways, often comprising multiple campuses, branches, and vehicles for providing instruction. The existing federal data systems have different requirements for aggregating campus and program data and use different institutional identifiers. While many institutions have only one main campus identifier, there is inconsistent organization concerning reporting structure for institutions with branch campuses. The combination of data from different sources limits how data can be presented for institutions with branch

campuses. Some institutions with multiple campuses manage and administer financial aid for all branches of the institution through the main campus. As a result, the student debt and earnings data are rolled up to the main campus level and the data listed for the branch campuses duplicate the data at the system level. Outcomes at branch campuses may vary greatly and there was concern, for example, that potential students would conclude that graduates of 2-year programs at regional campuses would have the same earnings as 4-year degree graduates from the main campus. This is less of an issue for multicampus institutions that structure their reporting to use identifiers for each campus, because reporting in that fashion allows earnings and repayment data to be provided at the campus level.

Panelists pointed out that this issue could be mitigated by releasing program-level earnings data. Further study is needed on this topic, particularly with respect to the best way to handle branch-level data (e.g., impute branch-level data, provide context or disclaimers). The Department has begun to collect both program-level and branch-level data, but is not yet able to produce the necessary statistics to publish those data.

Completion and transfer outcomes: Although completion and transfer rates are available both through IPEDS and NSLDS, these systems were designed for specific purposes and each data source has its own set of limitations. Going forward, the Department plans to release more accurate NSLDS data on part-time students, transfer rates, and Pell Grant recipient graduation rates, but the data are currently not entirely accurate. Panelists noted that, although the NSLDS metrics are an improvement over the current data, these measures remain limited and provide results only for federally aided students. Several panelists noted that a student unit record system could fill in the gaps in data from existing federal sources.

Updates to NSLDS completions file. Panelists questioned whether institutions can update their previous submissions of NSLDS data (to be incorporated into future updates to the College Scorecard data) and to what extent the Department can prompt institutions to revise their completion file or use earnings data collected under the Gainful Employment regulations. However, such changes would require significant work on the part of institutions. Further consideration is needed to examine the impact of updating a transactional data system, as well as Office of Management and Budget (OMB) implications. Changes in the accuracy of reporting that institutions make to their data moving forward will be reflected in future data publications.

Labor market outcomes. Surveys uniformly suggest that getting a good job or earning more money are among the top (if not the top) reasons students attend college, but average earnings measures in their current state may be insufficient in guiding their college choices (i.e., may provide an inaccurate forecast of a particular student's earnings). Earnings data produced for the College Scorecard[5] apply only to entry cohorts of federally aided students; do not account for completion status (graduates and nongraduates); and are not necessarily causal. Research shows that outcomes can vary for students within the same institution based on student subgroups and program of study. While data are not yet available to produce program-level earnings data, data on completions reporting improve with every cohort and may ultimately be available to produce earnings disaggregated by completion status. Even with this improvement, panelists suggested that further information should be given as context to better explain the variation in earnings data:

- By geography: Given that earnings depend largely on the economic conditions of the area, provide regional context on earnings as opposed to national averages. For example, provide

[5] To produce the labor market outcomes for the College Scorecard, data on cohorts of federally aided students are linked with earnings data from de-identified tax records and reported back at the aggregate, institutional level.

tailored earnings thresholds for both the state and county of the institution, or establish an algorithm to regionalize for contiguous counties.

- For which students: Provide transparent information on cohort design for labor market outcomes. Clearly label that earnings data are for students who received financial aid; clearly label that published earnings are not earnings of graduates.

- By subgroups: Consider showing the cumulative debt and earnings of entering students and graduates side-by-side to underscore the importance of completing. If this level of detail is intended to be published for consumer use, panelists suggested further consideration with respect to cut-points and the impact on privacy protection.

Support an API ecosystem. Panelists noted that the API format is desirable from a technical standpoint and makes data distribution across third-party college sites easier. The API also makes it easier and faster for researchers, policymakers, and others to leverage the data to conduct their own analysis. The group agreed that contextualized data point to a strong future for the College Scorecard data on third-party sites, and suggested the following actions to support the API community:

- Continue to provide support and resources to create a positive feedback loop among developers.
- Conduct ongoing usability testing with developers to ensure that third-party sites are able to use the documentation in a way that allows them to present the data most accurately and that information is being disseminated in a way that is useful to students.
- Integrate IPEDS data into the Scorecard API. IPEDS data would be easier to use in this format, and having one-way to access all of the data through a single API would streamline processes for developers (note: the Department is currently exploring an IPEDS API).
- Indicate the consumer readiness of data. For example, the Department identified several limitations to NSLDS completion and transfer rates that led them to exclude these rates from the consumer tool until schools have an opportunity to improve their reporting. It would be helpful for developers to know when data are not recommended for consumer information applications. This information is included in the documentation, as well as in the policy and technical reports published alongside the Scorecard.
- Provide guidance for use of multiple indicators for a single metric. For example, graduation rates are calculated two different ways—the completion rates in a single year and completion rates pooled for 2-year rolling averages. It would be helpful for developers to know which should be used. This information is included in the documentation, as well as in the policy and technical reports published alongside the Scorecard.
- Provide a narrower and more defined use of *0*. Differentiating between *0*, *N/A*, and *Suppressed* is difficult, as these categories are coded as *0* in the data.
- Consider a lower threshold for data suppression. Some data elements are suppressed for institutions or subgroups with few observations.
- Provide an intermediate-size dataset (with key elements) to journalists and researchers. Further input is needed on which elements this should include.

Discussion Item 3: Outreach Efforts

To date, over 1 million unique users have accessed the College Scorecard website since September 2015. Twenty-seven percent of users reach the site directly by typing the website address into their browser or clicking a link embedded in a PDF or email; 17 percent reach the site via Google. Among websites referring users to Scorecard, 30 percent at the time of the convening were college websites,

though they generate a small amount of traffic. Analytics on search feature performance indicate that the majority of users have conducted a customized search based on one or more criterion; and, search by school name has been the most popular type of search. The preference for searches based on school names—often those of elite institutions—suggests a more privileged or curious user base; that is, the consumer tool is reaching users who may already be more knowledgeable about and likely to explore multiple college choices. Further, while normal for a newly launched site, the steep decline in new users since September 2015 signals a need for additional and continuous outreach.

The Department can tack onto campaigns such as the American Education Week[6] and the National College Application Month,[7] but direct marketing campaigns to prospective students is challenging. The panel suggested that the Department partner with developers, researchers, and counselors to get the data in the hands of students.

Use third-party providers. The Department should support the consumer tool only as a minimally viable product and focus resources on the API. The Department is encouraged to partner with partners to build tools on top of the College Scorecard API.

Outreach in partnership with other agencies and organizations. A key component of outreach is ensuring that students and their families understand the data being presented on the College Scorecard. To this end, guidance counselors, financial aid officers, teachers, advisors, college admissions counselors, and others who work directly with students may be the first and best constituency to educate them about the College Scorecard. The Department should partner with relevant and affected organizations and provide direct assistance to them on how to utilize and interpret the data. The Department should also work to provide additional information to students via the FAFSA; continue partnering with the Veterans Administration and the Department of Defense and other groups that provide outreach to nontraditional students; consider the array of potential influencers, such as community and faith-based organizations; and conduct additional research on communication channels that effectively reach students.

Next Steps

Once the TRP summary comment period has closed, RTI will review the comments and outline recommendations for the Department of Education based on the outcome of the TRP meeting and subsequent public comment period. The Department will review the recommendations to determine next steps.

Comments

RTI is committed to improving the quality and usefulness of the College Scorecard. We encourage interested parties to send any comments or concerns about this topic to Janice Kelly-Reid, Project Director at RTI International, to ScorecardTRPcomment@rti.org by February 26, 2016.

[6] https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2015/11/18/2015-29627/american-education-week-2015
[7] https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2015/11/02/2015-28037/national-college-application-month-2015