
IN SEARCH OF A VALUE PROPOSITION: POSTSECONDARY THOUGHTS ON THE COMMON EDUCATION DATA STANDARDS

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TAKING THE POSTSECONDARY COMMUNITY'S PULSE

Data requests from legislatures, the federal government, national organizations, and foundations lead to data collections and reports that beg for standardization. Postsecondary leaders certainly understand the meaning and purpose of CEDS. They appreciate that having a shared, common language via common definitions in a standard dictionary for multiple sectors is especially valuable when it comes to exchanging and sharing consistent and comparable data. Several leaders described the eye-opening moments they experienced in understanding the data of other state partners, recognizing the power of CEDS as a facilitator of cross sector conversations. Having a national dictionary that can serve as a reference is highly desirable and has the potential of providing numerous benefits to the community.

Outside audiences might not fully appreciate the collaborative nature of the effort and the multiple voices included.

-Comment paraphrased from an institutional leader with a longstanding data system

The postsecondary perspectives featured in this brief were generated from a series of interviews with postsecondary leaders (see below) and are presented as constructive criticism and advice on how to make this initiative a successful one meeting the needs of this community. There is genuine interest in CEDS and for standardization in general.

When the postsecondary members of the CEDS Stakeholder Group met in 2011 to identify postsecondary elements for CEDS Version 2.0, they agreed that coming up with the unit record elements necessary to report Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) was the natural place to start given that IPEDS is common across all institution types (public, private, two-year and four-year). The postsecondary leaders interviewed supported this focus, while signaling a need to move beyond IPEDS to other areas of policy significance, such as Complete College America (CCA) and Access to Success (A2S).

The author conducted a series of semi-structured interviews in February/March 2013 with a representative group of 21 state, institutional, and national leaders in 15 states to gauge their thoughts on the CEDS initiative. This very diverse group of leaders hailed from public and private two-year and four-year sectors, coordinating and governing boards, and data, information technology, and policy shops. SHEEO appreciates their contributions, which were confidentially obtained in order to ensure frank and open discussions about the benefits and challenges associated with CEDS, as well as identify areas of improvement for SHEEO and its partners to pursue.

The current value of CEDS is that it gets people to recognize the inconsistency across data systems.

-Comment paraphrased from an institutional leader within a multi-campus system

POTENTIAL BENEFITS CURRENTLY EXCEED EXISTING ONES

The overwhelming benefit of CEDS for postsecondary leaders has been as a topic of discussion at both state and institutional levels. Several state leaders have already used CEDS as a means to identify gaps and areas of alignment, and have found it useful as a crosswalk for comparing elements from different sectors. In addition to these positive aspects, many respondents hope to obtain future time and cost savings on the data collection and reporting end, but recognized that without wide adoption within and across states, these savings would not be realized.¹

The postsecondary leaders interviewed envision several benefits from wide-scale CEDS adoption, many of which were echoed by more than one person. Their high hopes and expectations are very evident. In no particular order, the expected benefits are:

- receiving requests for data using the CEDS elements and definitions;
- making national data sharing and data matching possible;
- having nationally comparable data;
- reducing the number of data translations performed to meet reporting requirements;
- including elements that appropriately capture what a sector has to offer;
- including more accurate elements that reduce or eliminate the need for proxies;
- showing how raw data elements are used to come up with derived elements;
- improving the efficiency and knowledge of practitioners at both institutions and states; and
- improving data quality.

The aspirations behind these benefits highlight the constraints states and institutions face. States are under enormous pressure to provide easy-to-understand institutional data and institutions are expected to accept that states and other audiences will homogenize data in a way that might blur institutional differences. These issues increase when sharing or exchanging data across sectors.

¹ It is useful to keep in mind that the postsecondary leaders' opinions are highly influenced by individual roles and involvement with CEDS. Those directly involved have a better/more universal understanding than those not directly involved. Also, these leaders tend to view CEDS through the lens of their own work: those in information technology see it as an implementation; researchers see it as a research or data quality tool; state leaders see it as a way to lessen burden associated with data collection and reporting responsibilities.

CEDS ADOPTION: AN EMPHASIS ON NEW AND NUANCED AREAS

The scope of CEDS adoption for the postsecondary community should be viewed within the lens of its longstanding data collection and reporting history. Although their evolution continues today, many state postsecondary coordinating and governing board data systems were first created in the 1970s and 1980s (Garcia & L'Orange 2010). As such, it is not surprising that half the postsecondary leaders interviewed see adoption in terms of the elements needed for multi-sector data sharing, whether via state P-20 data warehouses or federated data models.

This initiative enables us to talk more intelligently to one another and gaining knowledge of other sectors.

-Comment paraphrased from a state leader with a longstanding data system

A handful of leaders indicated their scope would be limited to the elements needed to report IPEDS, and a couple would use CEDS to figure out which elements were necessary for generating new reports. Various leaders are also interested in browsing CEDS to identify which course elements to include in their data systems, which makes sense since not all states engage in collecting this type of data (Garcia & L'Orange 2010).

The responses to the scope question, together with the interest in adding workforce elements to future versions of CEDS, signal an interest in standardizing newer elements that *goes beyond traditional postsecondary data collection practices*. While the postsecondary elements being shared in P-20 data warehouses or federated data models are not new, they are being repurposed vis-à-vis thinking about student progress along a P-20 continuum.

CEDS adoption will be here when the state postsecondary entity mentions CEDS when talking about data collection effort and when the institutions understand what they need to pull from their systems to get it right.

-Comment paraphrased from an institutional leader within a multi-campus system

CHALLENGES MAKE CEDS ADOPTION AN ARDUOUS TASK

Limited human and financial resources and a lack of a postsecondary value proposition for CEDS are the biggest hurdles to adoption. In the Spring of 2012, SHEEO was part of a team working on CEDS *Align*, an NCES tool designed to facilitate uploading of data dictionaries from states, institutions, and schools and enable users to compare their elements to CEDS elements. The *Align* verification process was burdensome in at least a couple of states, and in others the process only took them so far since addressing inconsistencies would still be necessary to complete the assessment.

CEDS is human readable but not implementable on a technical level.

-Comment paraphrased from a state system leader with a longstanding data system

Several leaders agreed that a quicker and more direct way of determining the value of CEDS would help in its adoption. The development of “killer apps” for data transfers and the creation of a metadata layer that could be used by several entities regardless of platform were among the various ideas that emerged on how to make the process less labor intensive.

The other significant challenge expressed by more than a handful of postsecondary leaders is the genuine need for a value proposition. In light of the longstanding data collection history mentioned earlier, these leaders want valid reasons for why they should change their historical practices. Many already share data with multiple sectors in their state with existing data elements and definitions, so CEDS must offer them more than such a benefit. These leaders are not immune to change; rather, they want to know what would be in it for them before deciding to expend the time and resources to assess the value of CEDS.

There is no expectation that the work and dollars going into preparing data for another partner will be reciprocated and meet the needs of other partners.

-Comment paraphrased from a state system leader with a longstanding data system

NEXT STEPS

What does the postsecondary community need to fully embrace CEDS? They want a value proposition tailored to their sector, a set of elements that address the difficult aspects of postsecondary data collection, tools that work seamlessly with their data systems, a national dictionary used by multiple data requestors, and mutually beneficial data sharing relationships with other sectors within and outside their states. Attention to these needs would alleviate their concerns around the time and financial resources they are being asked to invest.

Develop a postsecondary value proposition for CEDS tied to a national imperative that matters to state agencies and institutions.

-Comment paraphrased from a state leader with a longstanding data system

Several leaders also suggested expanding outreach to vendors beyond the current work with electronic standards and technical specifications organizations. Vendors provide valuable services to the states and institutions and their model rests on customizing their products to meet the needs of their primary users. While customization is part and parcel of the way business is done, the community should consider what should be standardized for the good of the whole and work closely with vendors to balance these priorities.

What these postsecondary leaders clearly expressed was the need for more examples of states assessing and adopting CEDS, including the creation of an implementation guide. They want tangible artifacts deployed through a variety of media and other formats in order to convince their state and institutional leaders of the value of CEDS. Several leaders would be willing to design technical reference tools with other members of the community. Their decades-long experience in this area would likely benefit other sectors that have only recently developed their technical expertise.

I might not use the exact CEDS dictionary, but would enable the system to map in and out of CEDS.

-Comment paraphrased from a state leader with a longstanding data system

remediation^{VFA} FinancialAid^{CCA} IdentifyingTypesOfStudents^{ICRM} workforce^{CommonDataSet}

There was no shortage of ideas on the types of elements postsecondary leaders would like to see in future versions of CEDS. Remediation (and those related to courses in particular) was at the top of the list, followed by workforce, financial aid, elements associated with identifying different types of students (remedial, veterans, disabilities, etc.), and those pertaining to national data collections such as IPEDS, Complete College America, Voluntary Framework for Accountability, Voluntary System of Accountability, University and College Accountability Network, and Common Data Set. At the same time, however, these leaders cautioned against a vast accumulation of elements for each CEDS version and are in favor of improving the existing elements to address issues of temporality, which would round out the Complete College America use case, for example. A few leaders expressed frustration with the public comment period; they represented states with longstanding data collection histories and felt that their views were not appropriately addressed or appreciated in the responses received.

CEDS has opened up the possibility of reexamining our definitions.

-Comment paraphrased from a national leader with state and institutional experience

It is apparent that many postsecondary leaders are taking a wait and see approach as CEDS develops. In the interim, it will be useful to consider how postsecondary input will be incorporated into this work in progress beyond the public comment period. Just as important, what are the different flavors of CEDS adoption? Is CEDS supposed to be the lowest common denominator that states build upon as they craft their more detailed definitions and code sets? Is CEDS what eventually improves historical data collection practices? CEDS might be the bridge between how things have been done in the past and how our future work might evolve. Regardless, the postsecondary community is poised to work with K-12, labor and other partners to help achieve the goals of CEDS as education becomes more student-centered.

Tanya I. Garcia joined the SHEEO staff in December 2008. She specializes in state postsecondary data systems and has brought this knowledge to bear on the Common Education Data Standards initiative. She is indebted to the national, state, and institutional leaders who provided the rich and substantive advice that informed this brief. And she appreciates and acknowledges the input and guidance of her SHEEO colleagues Hans Peter L'Orange and Katie Zaback.

CEDS VOICES OF SUPPORT

The following support this statement: *"Tackling America's education challenges requires clear, consistent data improved through the use of common data standards. We support the efforts of the CEDS Initiative to help all education stakeholders work together toward this goal."*

State Higher Education Agencies

Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education
Arkansas Department of Higher Education
Connecticut Board of Regents for Higher Education
Idaho's State Board of Education's Data Management Council
Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education
Missouri Department of Higher Education
Nebraska's Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education
New Mexico Higher Education Department
Puerto Rico Institute of Statistics
South Dakota Board of Regents
Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board
University of Wisconsin System
Wyoming Community College Commission

National Organizations

Complete College America (CCA)
Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)
Data Quality Campaign (DQC)
EDUCAUSE
The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS)
Midwestern Higher Education Compact (MHEC)
National Student Clearinghouse (NSC)
New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE)
Postsecondary Electronic Standards Council (PESC)
SIF Association
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Higher Education Research Organizations

Center for Studies in Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley (C. Judson King, Director)
Cornell Higher Education Research Institute (CHERI) ILR School, Cornell University (Ronald G. Ehrenberg, Director)
Institute of Higher Education, University of Georgia (James C. Hearn, Professor and Associate Director)
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Iowa State University (Linda Serra Hagedorn, Professor)
Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, University of Michigan (Stephen L. DesJardins, Professor and Director)

NCES STAKEHOLDER GROUP FOR CEDS VERSION 3.0

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For a listing of the *Early Learning, K-12, and Race to the Top Assessment Stakeholders*, visit <https://ceds.ed.gov/stakeHolderGroup.aspx>

Take part and submit public comments on the draft of Version 4 CEDS elements by September 20, 2013 at <https://ceds.ed.gov/elementsCEDS.aspx>!