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INTRODUCTION

Determining the Economic Benefits of Attending Community College, edited by Sanchez and Laanan, provides information on the techniques of measuring the economic outcomes of community college attendance. This Digest concentrates on one aspect of the journal, the various ways states measure student economic performance. Performance measures are critical to improve and illustrate institutional effectiveness, though the limitations of those measurements must be communicated to reduce the possible misunderstanding of legislators, local communities, and students.

Until recently, the economic benefits of attending a community college have been unaddressed or hidden from public view. U.S. Census measures of educational attainment and earnings do not include two-year colleges as a separate category, and state efforts to collect such data have been uneven. Passage of the federal Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act (VATEA) in 1990 created an incentive for states to develop and implement a system of accountability measures. To receive federal funding through the Perkins Act, states are expected to develop standards and measures to evaluate the quality of vocational education programs in four areas (cited in Sanchez and Laanan, 1998 from the U.S. Department of Education, 1998):

* Measures of learning and competency gains, including student progress in the achievement of basic and academic skills

* One or more measures of performance such as competency attainment, job or work-skill attainment, retention in school, or placement in school, job, or military

* Incentives and adjustments designed to encourage service to targeted groups and special population students

* Procedures for expanding existing resources and methods used by other programs receiving federal assistance, such as the Job Training Partnership Act Program and the

Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program

To meet the requirements of the Perkins Act and to maximize the benefits of performance measures, states have embarked on different means to measure economic benefits of attending community college.

MEASURING BENEFITS

Several proposed accountability measures link community college attendance to student earnings. Rather than use survey data to gather this information, states have created data links between Unemployment Insurance (UI) earnings information and community college administrative records through the students' Social Security numbers. This procedure achieves a higher rate of return of information at a lower cost than surveys or the analysis of administrative records alone could achieve. However, each state varies in its ability to collect data because state laws, reporting procedures, and higher education agency organizations differ.

WASHINGTON

The Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges links college data files with other administrative records from the Employment Security Department. Through the assistance of the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, it creates partnerships with the managers of the Job Training Partnership Act and other programs to defray the cost of data linking. The partnership results in the Data Linking for Outcomes Assessment (DLOA) program. DLOA contains one record for each student for every three-month period with information on firms for which the student worked, and colleges attended for a six-year time frame. Uniquely, DLOA contains the number of hours a student has worked in a quarter (Seppanen, 1998).

NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina uses three multivariable collection systems called Critical Success Factors, Annual Programs Review, and Common Follow-Up System. Critical Success Factors include seven critical factors and 33 measures of program success to measure a common core of indicators of success, and measures of progress. Annual Programs Review collects outcome measures of program and college satisfaction, goal attainment, employment rates, and employer satisfaction. Common Follow-Up System includes records of individual enrollments in education, training, and placement programs in addition to program participant demographics, and UI wages for individuals before, during, and after training (Gracie, 1998).

FLORIDA

Florida gathers performance measurements from several systems broken into a common three-tier measurement system. Measurements are applied across all workforce education and development programs at progressively detailed levels. Tier 1

measures outcomes for all workforce education system-wide. Tier 2 looks at program level measurements such as postsecondary education. Tier 3 examines program operations and management and outcome measurements demanded by federal and state agencies (Pfeiffer, 1998).

CALIFORNIA

Student records organized by Social Security numbers are matched with the California Community Colleges Chancellors' Office Management Information System (COMIS) database and UI records. Using median gross wages for comparison, a measure for full-time employment is extrapolated. Measurements of student last-year-in-college earnings and first-year-out of college earnings are used as baselines for third-year-out of college earnings. Students are also classified by vocational student, skill upgrade student, and enrollment concentration categories. Additional links to the California State University system are used to remove transfer students from the outcome measures (Wiseley, 1998).

APPLYING PERFORMANCE MEASURES

In every state, attempts are being made to link performance measures to funding, value, and change. While the Perkins Act requires states to measure performance, a few states have developed additional detailed measurements. Performance measures communicated to students, faculty, staff, and the communities demonstrate the institution's value to inform critical planning decisions made by all parties. Programs that do not create high wage positions, or meet the needs of employers or communities can be placed under review.

CAVEATS AND LIMITATIONS TO PERFORMANCE MEASURES

The federal government analyzes and reports state information too late for strategic planning. Therefore, some states use their data to act proactively, but accumulated data based on earnings have limitations. In states that rely exclusively on UI and college records to meet measures of performance, some employments are excluded, for example federal employees, the military, and the self-employed. In areas where these represent significant number of employees, performance measures are not representative. Local wage earnings and measures of inflation also need to be taken into consideration. The reporting practices of some state agencies may impede the gathering of accurate performance measures. The problem of incorrectly classifying or lumping together disciplines with highly variable wage earnings results in inaccurate outcome measurements. Finally, cross-state comparison is difficult because state measurements systems are not standardized.

CONCLUSION

This Digest attempts to demonstrate the various ways states have derived

measurements to illustrate the positive economic outcomes associated with attending community college. While all states have access to nearly the same data, complex interrelationships and state practices pose limitations. However, some states are working toward communicating timely results of student economic outcomes to concerned constituents and potential economic partners in order to create greater opportunities for general funding and specific programs.

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