



News, Views and Careers for All of Higher Education

July 12

State Leaders Tackle Unit Records, Remediation

State policy makers debated and discussed hot topics in higher education Wednesday at the Education Commission of the States' National Forum on Education Policy, in Philadelphia — including unit record unrest, strategies to cut the costs of remedial coursework, and efforts to learn more about those sometimes elusive adult learners.

Where federal efforts to collect data on individual student outcomes [fell flat this spring](#) amid concerns about what some in higher education felt to be the Education Department's big-brotherish approach to accountability, [states have stepped in](#) to create their own longitudinal, "student unit record" databases. The Data Quality Campaign, a national effort to encourage state policy makers to improve the collection and use of educational data, reports that 44 states, up from 37 last year, are developing "unique statewide student identifiers" that can be used to track students' performance and demographic data as they move through a state's school system.

Despite well-documented concerns about privacy, 87 percent of attendees indicated that there's value in a nationwide student record system, in an informal survey at a plenary lunch on unit record data Wednesday, and 56 percent of the admittedly biased audience of state leaders believed such databases should be controlled by states. But though state-specific systems certainly boast the benefit of local control, they also come with problems of transferability, both across the gulf separating high schools and colleges, and across state lines. Only 12 states have the capacity to connect postsecondary data with that of the preschool-12 system, the Data Quality Campaign finds, and, beyond that, the systems are losing students as they move from state to state.

"It's inevitable we're going to lose some people," said Clifford Adelman, senior associate for the Institute for Higher Education Policy. "The question is, 'What's our tolerance for loss?'"

Following up on that heavy lunch, in a session on "Increasing College Readiness: Reinventing the Role of Postsecondary Education," Houston D. Davis, associate vice chancellor for academic affairs for the Tennessee Board of Regents, described the state's systemwide attempt to cut the costs of offering remedial education — and simultaneously boost quality.

While the need for remedial education continues to increase, it's no secret that state appropriations for higher education have often been flat or falling in recent years. So in Tennessee, which spends \$27 million statewide on developmental education, Davis said, "if we are going to continue to serve more students in the future, we're probably going to have to

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do it on \$27 million or less than that.”

In cooperation with a number of entities, including the Education Commission of the States and the National Center for Academic Transformation, [which focuses on improving outcomes while reducing costs through the strategic use of educational technology](#), the Tennessee system is in the early stages of re-imagining its delivery of remedial education. One of the main areas being examined, Davis said, is the need for “modularization.”

Rather than placing a student in one of three, semester-long remedial math courses, for instance, a student’s knowledge could be pinpointed more specifically on a 10-point scale, with the remedial course sequence divided into 10 shorter-term corresponding modules.

“The whole goal is a more flexible, modularized curriculum that can respond to student needs,” Davis said of the project, still in its early stages. “Instead of taking everyone in the room and saying ‘We’re going to put you in ‘Developmental 750,’” Davis said educators can instead say, “‘You’re at level 8, we’re going to put you into stages 8, 9 and 10 and get you into college algebra.’” The strategy, Davis said, not only could reduce instructional costs, but also save students the time and money it takes them to undergo remedial coursework — thus hopefully speeding, and easing, their time to degree completion.

A session Wednesday morning focused on another population that colleges are increasingly feeling the pressure to serve as the demand for high-skilled jobs increases — adult learners. Cheryl D. Blanco, vice president for lifelong learning policy and research for the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, described an ongoing effort to develop a series of indicators to track how adult learners are doing, in terms of affordability of programs, their levels of educational attainment, and their aspirations and completion rates, among other measurements. That project, too, is in its early stages.

— [Elizabeth Redden](#)

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