Philanthropy

Resource Guide to Common Metrics for Postsecondary Access and Success

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When an organization that advances higher education access and success seeks funding for its programs, universal requirements emerge. Philanthropic institutions (funders) evaluate potential grant recipients based on multiple criteria, including, but not limited to: mission, areas of service, and outcomes. To demonstrate outcomes on grant applications, an organization must be prepared with the appropriate facts and figures. This publication focuses on how an organization can become prepared to meet this criterion — by collecting common metrics.

WHY DO FUNDERS REQUEST EVALUATIONS AND OUTCOMES MEASURES?

For many years, social service programs have focused on anecdotal evidence to demonstrate effectiveness, but now there is a growing demand, by funders, for organizations and programs to document their impact using quantitative data. While this can be daunting and expensive, it also provides a great opportunity to improve practices. Taking the time to measure program progress and outcomes allows an organization to see what is working and what is not, in order to make corresponding programming changes. An extensive evaluation can even allow an organization to determine which aspects of its program are most effective. If a less effective program is also more expensive, an organization can actually increase its impact and decrease its costs by diverting its focus to more effective interventions.

WHAT ARE SOME COMMON METRICS THAT FUNDERS COLLECT?

While data collection may seem daunting, there are wealth of tools that can make the process easier. Numerous professional associations have compiled industry best practices for reference and make them freely available. The following organizations offer some standard measures of access and success, summarized here with a snapshot of suggested measures that are common to the majority of the sources:

Central Texas Education Funders
www.centraltexasedfunders.org/Common_Outcomes___Indica.html

National Office for School Counselor Advocacy
http://nosca.collegeboard.org/tools-resources

National College Access Network
www.collegeaccess.org/Common_Measures

National Governors Association: Center for Best Practices
www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/1007COMMONCOLLEGEMETRICS.PDF

American Association of Community Colleges: Voluntary Framework of Accountability
www.aacc.nche.edu/Resources/aaccprograms/VFAWeb/Pages/VFAHomePage.aspx

TG Student and Institutional Success
www.TG.org/pdf/Certificate-Degree-Completion.pdf#search=certificate and degree completion

College Readiness and Access

ACADEMIC PREPARATION

- Percentage of students who complete college entrance exams
- ACT composite scores
- SAT composite scores
- Percentage of students who are college ready by state standards
- Students enrolled in and completing Algebra I
- Percentage of students on track to complete common core/rigorous college prep curriculum as defined by their state
- Percentage of eligible students enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP)/International Baccalaureate (IB) courses
- Percentage of students earning greater than a 3 on AP tests
- Percentage of students enrolled in dual credit courses
- Average high school GPA
- Percentage of on-time high school graduates
- Percentage of students completing college admissions applications, by school type
- Average number of applications completed per student
- Two- and four-year college acceptance rates
- Career and technical school acceptance rates
- Percentage of students who enroll in college within 12 months of high school graduation

COLLEGE ASPIRATIONS

- Percentage of students who visit colleges
- Percentage of students who complete at least one college application in addition to any two-year community college application
- Percentage of students reporting improved attitude/feeling about high school and college aspirations

FINANCIAL AID

- Percentage of students who receive scholarship and financial aid guidance
- Percentage of students who complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TAFSA)
- Percentage of students who complete scholarship applications
- Number of scholarships received per student
- Average financial aid award per student, not including loans
- Percentage of students awarded financial aid
- Amount of total financial aid awarded (per institution and per student), by aid type

PERSISTENCE

- Percentage of students who complete first year of college
- Percentage of students placed into remedial courses (English/math)
- Percentage of students completing remedial coursework within one academic year
- Percentage of students completing college level math course
- Percentage of hours attempted to hours successfully completed
- Average college GPA
- Year-to-year student persistence
- Term-to-term student persistence (community colleges)
- Percentage of eligible students transferring from a two-year to a four-year program with an associate degree
- Credit accumulation: number and percentage of first-time undergraduate students completing 24 credit hours (for full-time students) or 12 credit hours (for part-time students) within their first academic year
- Average length of time in years and average number of credits that graduating students took to earn a certificate, an associate degree, or a bachelor's degree

COMPLETION

- Percentage of students who earn an associate degree or certificate from a two-year college
- Percentage of students who graduate from a four-year college
- Percentage of community college students who transfer to other colleges/schools
- Degrees awarded: annual number and percentage of certificates, associate degrees, and bachelor's degrees awarded
- Number and percentage of certificate- and/or degree-seeking students who graduate within normal program time (two years for an associate degree; four years for a bachelor's degree) or extended time (three years for an associate degrees; six years for a bachelor's degree)
- Average time to certificate or degree

Additional Tools

LOGIC MODELS

Many organizations use logic models to visualize the progression of their program's activities toward achieving their goals. Each activity should lead to an intermediate outcome that leads to the goal. Using a logic model can help an organization determine whether it is missing sequential steps needed to reach its goal. Such a model can also help the organization ascertain whether it is focusing on activities that do not contribute to reaching its goal.

For additional information on logic models, consider the following resources:

W.K. Kellogg Foundation Logic Model Development Guide
www.wkkf.org/knowledge-center/resources/2006/02/wk-kellogg-foundation-logic-model-development-guide.aspx

Greenlights for Nonprofit Success Logic Model Development Guide
www.greenlights.org/search?searchword=logic%20model&searchphrase=all

BASELINE MEASURES AND NATIONAL STUDENT CLEARINGHOUSE DATA

To measure progress and outcomes, organizations must start by measuring baseline data. For example, if an organization wants to measure an increase in the percentage of students persisting from their first to second year of college, the organization should measure the persistence rate **prior to starting their activities.** This lets the organization's leaders see what students' persistence rates were previously, in order to watch for a change in this outcome.

Many organizations use National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data to obtain baseline measures as well as for outcomes measures data.

Important! Obtain FERPA Releases From Each Student

To access NSC data or to access a student's collegiate records directly from a postsecondary institution, an organization must have each student sign a FERPA release of information. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) protects students' personal information from being shared with a third party. With a release from the student, an organization can obtain data on their students' college performance in order to track outcomes. Without a release, an organization must rely on students to self-report data.

For additional information, please review the NSC website:
www.studentclearinghouse.org/high_schools/studenttracker/ferpa.php

Real-World Implementation

Sometimes it can be difficult to visualize what a data collection plan would look like for an individual organization. This section provides a real-world example of a college access and completion organization with years of experience measuring its impact.

ADVICE FROM COLLEGE FORWARD

College Forward of Austin, Texas, has prioritized outcomes measures as a key part of reaching its goals. Lisa Fielder, CEO, offers the following advice to organizations as they start to collect data to measure the effectiveness of their programs:

- **The best performance measures arise from an organization's mission**, and flow forward from there. For instance, College Forward exists to help low-income students earn bachelor's degrees, so that is our single most important performance measure (the number and percentage of students who earn bachelor's degrees). All other measures are milestones that indicate students' progress toward that ultimate goal.
- **Keep it simple.** To my thinking, the best performance measures are those that can be easily measured (e.g., number of bachelor's degrees) and verified (e.g., photocopies of final transcripts). Elaborate performance measures/formulas, or measures that rely too heavily on qualitative data, can seem a little suspicious — what is this organization trying to hide?
- **We're pretty relentless about "continuous improvement,"** so we review our stats closely and often. Is this program (or sub-program) working? How do we know? How did this year's results compare with the year before? What can we do to improve next year's? If the data shows a weakness, our team dives in to fix it, even if it means wholesale revision. We don't mess around, because we know that our programs affect real students who deserve our best and most responsible performance.

College Forward: Examples of Objectives and Deliverables

To show an example of what this looks like, College Forward shares the following objectives, and corresponding data collection, to measure attainment of its objectives, for one of its postsecondary success initiatives:

Objective A: At least 80% of students will enroll in a two-year or four-year college within 12 months of high school graduation.

Objective B: At least 80% of enrollees will complete their freshman year of college and be eligible to re-enroll the following fall semester.

Objective C: At least 80% will successfully complete each succeeding year and be eligible to re-enroll the following fall semester.

Objective D: At least 50% will earn a bachelor's degree within six years of initial enrollment.

Data sources for objectives: National Student Clearinghouse reports and individual student transcripts (obtained via an information release signed by students as a condition of enrollment in the program)

Working with a Professional Evaluator

While an organization can begin to collect data and better understand its programs on its own, at times an organization needs to bring in a professional evaluator. Designing rigorous evaluation studies that use best practices in social science methodology requires considerable experience and a substantial time investment. Professional evaluators (consultants or university researchers) can conduct an independent evaluation of programs to help measure impact accurately.

ADVICE FROM COLLEGE BOUND

Missouri nonprofit College Bound (CB) recently completed professional evaluation, funded by an organizational impact grant from TG, to determine the effectiveness of its programs. Based on this experience, CB's Founder and CEO Lisa Orden Zarin offers the following tips for other organizations:

- **Rigorous evaluation requires specialized expertise**. To invoke a common idiom, "You don't know what you don't' know." Before you begin an evaluation that leverages advanced statistical methodologies, engage someone to translate, challenge, validate and interpret the methods, outputs, and conclusions proposed by the evaluator.
- **Research your evaluators**. Some are good at analyzing quantitative data, while others have a strong background in qualitative analysis. Make sure you select an evaluator whose approach is aligned with your area of inquiry.
- **It is very difficult to prove causality**; that is, it is hard to show exactly what components of your programming directly cause certain student outcomes. Ask the evaluators to discuss this with you prior to starting an evaluation.
- **Consider timing**. Your program may need to wait a few more years before conducting a formal evaluation. But be sure to collect quality data starting now.
- **Getting data from other entities (such as school districts) takes time and effort**. You may not be able to get the data you need; this can limit the scope of the evaluation project. Before embarking on an evaluation, make sure data partners have the *intention* to provide the required information.

Resources for Working with Evaluators

The Community Toolbox: "Choosing Evaluators"
http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/sub_section_main_1351.aspx

Evaluation Toolkit: "Select an Evaluator"
http://toolkit.pellinstitute.org/evaluation-guide/plan-budget/select-an-evaluator/

Central Texas Management Assistance Program for Nonprofits. Free on-line management library. Specifically, "A Basic Guide to Program Evaluation" by Carter McNamara, PhD.
http://managementhelp.org/evaluation/program-evaluation-guide.htm

Centre for Community Based Research
www.communitybasedresearch.ca/

About TG

TG promotes educational access and success so that students can realize their college and career dreams. As a public, nonprofit corporation, TG offers resources to help students and families plan and prepare for college, learn the basics of money management, and repay their federal student loans.

For more information about TG, **visit www.TG.org**.

To learn more about college and career planning, visit TG's *Adventures In Education* (AIE™) at **www.AIE.org**.

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