

Informing Improvement:

Recommendations for Enhancing Accreditor Data-Use to Promote Student Success and Equity

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As the higher education landscape has expanded beyond issues of access and affordability to include an emphasis on student completion and employment outcomes, accreditors can play a leadership role in advancing this important change. A shift to student success that rightfully centers in part on closing equity gaps between low-income students and students of color and their peers ensures that students from all backgrounds have a genuine opportunity to thrive in and after college.

The institutions that have progressed the most have done so through concerted, systemic, and equity-minded use of data to shine a light on those areas where focus and resources are most needed.¹ Indeed, for institutions today, data-use is a prerequisite to making institutional improvement, especially in unpacking and addressing the systemic racial and economic inequities that continue to undermine justice and opportunity within our higher education system. **Accreditors, who hold primary responsibility for assuring quality and continuous institutional improvement, can wield enormous power in the drive to improve student success at more institutions by using data to shape their conversations with and evaluations of colleges and universities.**

However, despite incremental progress, accreditors—primarily regional ones—presently do far too little to integrate and focus on quantitative outcomes data, especially data disaggregated by race and income, throughout the review cycle or as a basis for setting institutional improvement expectations for their accredited institutions (please see **Table 1** on the reverse for more information). Better data-use is necessary to identify areas of success and areas in need of improvement, to guide institutional improvement processes, and to evaluate equity. Based on a review of accreditor materials and interviews with 10 high-level commission staff from regional, national, and programmatic accreditors, this report seeks to identify current practices, challenges, and opportunities with respect to data-use in accreditation.

We offer three recommendations for proactive steps that accreditors can take to incorporate outcomes-focused, equity-minded data into the entire review cycle to spur more evidence-driven institutional improvement:

1 Recommendation: Embed data-use into routine practice.

Accreditors should use data to explicitly inform their focus and conclusions by routinely leveraging existing federal data sources and, when necessary, requiring institutions to report additional quantitative student outcome data.

2 Recommendation: Emphasize equity.

Accreditors should make equity a higher priority by requiring institutions to report quantitative outcome metrics disaggregated by at least race/ethnicity, and income.

3 Recommendation: Increase transparency about data-use practices.

Building on the progress established by the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) graduation rate exercise, accreditors should increase transparency to the public about how they collect data, what data they collect, and how they use data in their review processes.

In discussions with accreditors, many voiced an interest in using data, and this paper profiles promising ways that four accreditors have incorporated data into their work. Building on such examples, accreditors could embed data more thoroughly into continuous institutional improvement efforts to demonstrate their collective commitment to evidence-based decision making. A more thorough focus on data also would demonstrate to policymakers and policy experts that both accreditors and institutions are willing and able to identify and address many of the shortcomings within our higher education system. More importantly, when accreditors make better use of student outcome data, the institutions and all the students they serve can benefit from enhanced and more equitable opportunities and high-quality educational outcomes.

¹ The Education Trust (2016). Using data to improve student outcomes: learning from leading colleges. Retrieved from Education Trust website: https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/HigherEdPG2_UsingDataToImproveStudentOutcomes.pdf

Table 1: Overview of accreditor data collection

Summarized below is an examination of whether the accreditors reviewed in this report collect various quantitative outcome metrics, and whether those metrics are disaggregated on the basis of race, Pell Grant status, or both. We have selected the most critical metrics articulated in IHEP’s “Toward Convergence” metrics framework, and based our initial research into these metrics on the analysis in the Center on American Progress (CAP) report on accreditor data collection and use. This analysis evaluates the collection of these data based on publicly available accreditor information, primarily annual information collections, supplemented in some cases by a sample of institutional self-study documents. Prior to publication of the final version of this report, the accreditors listed were given an opportunity to review and voice comments and concerns, if any.

STUDENT OUTCOME INDICATOR	ABET	ACCJC	ACCSC	ACEN	DEAC	HLC	NECHE	NWCCU ¹	SACSCOC	WSCUC
Total enrollment	•	•	• ²	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Number of completers	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	
Completion rate			•	•	•		• ³	•	• ⁴	•
Cohort default rate			•		•	•	•	•	•	•
Retention/withdrawal rate			•		•		•	•	•	
Licensure/certification passage rate		•	•	•	•		•			
Transfer-out rate		•	•				•	•	•	
Loan repayment rate							•		•	
Employment rate (for career programs)		•	•	•			•			
Median earnings			•						•	
Credit completion										
Credit accumulation										
Gateway course completion										

■ Elements disaggregated by race and Pell status ■ Elements disaggregated by race only ■ Elements disaggregated by Pell status only

- NWCCU does not require disaggregated reporting on the basis of income or race, but does require the institution to report whether they are designated by ED as one or more classifications of Minority Serving Institutions.
- ACCSC requires disaggregated reporting of enrollment on the basis of Pell receipt and ethnicity, rather than race.
- NECHE is the only accreditor that we reviewed that explicitly requested IPEDS OM measures in addition to their own graduation rate measure.
- SACSCOC collects completion rate data in the form of IPEDS Graduation Rate, IPEDS Outcomes Measure, and National Student Clearinghouse Total Completion Rate; for those institutions that do not report to IPEDS, institutional data is provided directly to SACSCOC using IPEDS completion formulas. SACSCOC disaggregates completion rate on the basis of ethnicity, rather than race.