THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF DATA INSIGHTS

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE POSTSECONDARY SURVEY ECOSYSTEM

Danielle Melidona and Hollie M. Chessman

ACE
American Council
on Education®

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The democratization of data insights involves making data readily accessible, understandable, and usable for all stakeholders, which in turn fosters transparency, inclusivity, and equity. The postsecondary survey ecosystem—comprising administrators and data users such as institutions, policymakers, and organizations— stands at a pivotal moment. The current administration's efforts threaten data continuity and the sector's ability to garner critical insights for student success, creating both a significant opportunity and a pressing challenge. This memo explores these evolving challenges and provides guiding questions to help the survey community better connect and integrate insights from across surveys and administrative data collections.

INTRODUCTION TO THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF DATA INSIGHTS

The challenge in the postsecondary sector is not a shortage of data but rather the lack of coordinated methods for connecting insights from a variety of sources—including sample survey data, administrative data, and more. We—the authors and the American Council on Education—view the democratization of data insights as central to fostering equitable and inclusive decision-making and stakeholder engagement.

Democratizing data involves ensuring that data is not only accessible to a broad range of stakeholders but also that it is both understandable and usable. To do so, barriers must be reduced. Users should be empowered with the skills and tools that are necessary to extract meaningful insights and then act on them.

The benefits of democratized data insights include:

- **Accessibility**—data can be accessed by stakeholders regardless of their position or expertise
- **Understandability**—data are presented in formats that are intuitive for users of various expertise levels
- **Usability**—tools and resources are provided to help stakeholders effectively and accurately apply and integrate data insights

These benefits prioritize inclusivity, transparency, and equity in both how data are disseminated as well as how they are utilized. In the postsecondary sector, democratization will require cross-collaboration and partnerships that are focused on improving data integration and facilitating informed decision-making for users.

It's also important to note what democratization does *not* mean:

- Democratization does not mean that data should be shared indiscriminately, nor does it mean that privacy or ethical standards should be ignored.
- With democratized data insights, accessibility should never come at the expense of quality, reliability, or validity of data.
- The vision of democratized postsecondary data represents a culture shift in the notion that only people of certain expertise or with certain resources can understand or act upon insights.

WHY THIS MOMENT CALLS FOR COLLABORATION IN THE SURVEY ECOSYSTEM

The postsecondary survey ecosystem refers to the collection of surveys, instruments, and methodologies that are used to gather data from various stakeholders—including but not limited to students, faculty, staff, and institutions—across the higher education sector. Survey data are a cornerstone for research, institutional improvement, student outcomes assessment, policy evaluation, and accreditation. The breadth and depth of surveys in higher education is vast, and the unique insights gathered from diverse stakeholder groups provide a complex and comprehensive picture of academic, social, and institutional dynamics that are unparalleled in other sectors. Thus, the democratization of data insights is meant to elevate the collective impact and integration of these efforts. The urgency for collaboration is greater than ever, as the evolution of tools such as artificial intelligence and big data analytics can divert attention and resources away from the rich insights surveys provide. Additionally, recent developments around the fate of national datasets make collaboration essential across the ecosystem. To remain relevant and impactful, survey administrators and users must align their value propositions to continue playing a crucial role in decision-making.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS BARRIERS TO DATA DEMOCRATIZATION

Data democratization without barriers is complex. Therefore, to deconstruct and address what may prevent effective democratization, it becomes important to ask broad questions and to anticipate what barriers exist. The following five areas have been identified as potential barriers.

1. **Data Definitions:** Data definitions are important in how data are communicated accurately and with utility. For example, when student populations are defined differently across surveys, the insights generated are not widely applicable or could potentially be inaccurate. Definitions of what is considered a first-generation student can vary depending on the administration and might have implications for different student populations.

    a. How do we ensure that data definitions are the same across surveys in the postsecondary ecosystem? What would be required for this to happen?

    b. What are we losing when definitions do not match? What would we gain?

2. **Data Reporting:** How data are reported ultimately needs to benefit the institutions and their students. Having data dashboards that do not specifically address institutional goals and outcomes does not inform effective decision-making. Additionally, reporting needs to speak to what is working rather than just documenting the challenges or the problems.

    a. How can we ensure more effective and informative reporting of the data?

    b. What will it take to move the system to using the data to understand what is working?

    c. How can we more effectively partner with institutions to understand their reporting needs?

3. **Diverse Needs:** Across the survey ecosystem, there are different needs around data. Some need it to inform strategic plans, while others want to understand a particular student group or intervention. What a community college requires from its data is going to be different than what a public land-grant university or small private liberal arts college may need.

    a. How can we make the data accessible and usable for the entire ecosystem?

    b. How do we consider the unique needs of institutions and states in the data and its collection?

4. **Data Agency:** An essential equity issue surrounding data is the uneven distribution of resources that enable individuals and organizations to exercise agency over data—understanding, analyzing, and applying it meaningfully. By centering data agency, the survey ecosystem can move beyond data literacy as a skillset and toward a model through which individuals, institutions, and organizations can actively shape how data are used to inform decisions and drive change.

   a. How do we cultivate an ecosystem in which all stakeholders are empowered to exercise data agency?

   b. What tools, knowledge, and systems are necessary to enable true data agency?

   c. Who should lead and contribute to efforts that expand data agency across the ecosystem?

5. **Data Integration:** Within the survey ecosystem, there is variance in survey methodologies, definitions, data formats, quality, and timepoints. These factors can limit the ability of data insights to be meaningfully integrated for sensemaking purposes.

   a. What are the most widely used data formats? Methodologies?

   b. How might the ecosystem leverage existing identifiers (e.g., Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) IDs) to improve the integration of data insights?

   c. What technologies could improve the collective ability of the sector to integrate data across multiple surveys?

WHAT'S NEXT

The democratization of data insights represents a transformative opportunity for the survey community to foster improved transparency, greater equity, and better-informed decision-making across the postsecondary sector. Achieving this bold vision requires collaboration that leverages our collective expertise and action—no one can do it alone.

Contact research@acenet.edu with any questions or comments.