

Students

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CONFERENCE NOTEBOOK

Institutional Researchers Delve Into Student Data at Annual Meeting

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If colleges want to avoid increasingly onerous forms of government regulation, they should become smarter about analyzing and responding to their own internal student-achievement data.

That, in a nutshell, is the message that six representatives of major regional accrediting organizations delivered at the annual conference of the Association for Institutional Research, held here last week.

The accreditors told the assembled scholars that they have a responsibility to persuade their deans and faculty colleagues of the importance of using such data.

"We're operating on borrowed time," said Linda A. Suskie, vice president of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, the college-accrediting arm of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. "If we don't properly assess student learning and share our results with the public in ways that they understand, then someone else is going to tell us what and how to assess, and we're not going to like it."

College leaders should not be cynical about the public desire for accountability, said Barbara Wright, an associate director of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges' Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities. If colleges make visible, good-faith efforts to live up to their own missions, she suggested, then they can stave off new legal regulations.

"There has been a historic sense of arrogance toward the public," said Ms. Suskie. That sort of attitude, she said, is indefensible and unsustainable.

First-Generation Problems

First-generation college students are less likely than their peers to earn degrees, even when differences in high-school preparation have been taken into account, according to a College Board analysis of more than 1.1 million student records that was presented at the meeting.

The study examined the fates of SAT takers who had graduated from high school in 1999. The College Board worked with the National Student Clearinghouse to compile data about the students' college

records. The clearinghouse was established in 1994 to facilitate student financial-aid applications, but it is increasingly being used as a source of large-scale data for education research.

The College Board found that first-generation students — defined as students whose parents had not completed a bachelor's or an associate degree — were, by every measure, less likely than their peers to finish college. Strikingly, the College Board's study found that the graduation gap existed even among the best-prepared students.

The Value of Racial Data

Colleges should continue to collect detailed data on their students' racial and ethnic identities, notwithstanding new federal guidelines that will categorize many students simply as "two or more races," two scholars urged at another presentation.

Beginning in the 2010-11 academic year, colleges will be required to collect and report racial and ethnic data to the U.S. Department of Education according to a specified format or risk losing eligibility for federal student loans.

C. Anthony Broh, director of research policy at the Consortium on Financing Higher Education, and Stephen D. Minicucci, the consortium's director of analytic studies, offered a model for collecting racial and ethnic data that they said would minimize disruption and maintain continuity with colleges' existing records.

Under the new federal guidelines, colleges must report those students to the government as belonging to "two or more races," with no further detail given. But that framework, Mr. Broh said, will not allow colleges to keep adequate track of historically underrepresented minorities.

The new federal guidelines do permit colleges to collect and analyze additional data for their own purposes. Mr. Broh and Mr. Minicucci urged institutional researchers to take advantage of that flexibility by continuing to specifically classify students for their own internal purposes as one race or another.

"I'm not saying that there isn't such a thing as a multiracial identity in the United States," Mr. Broh said. But for purposes of redressing historic injustices and maintaining continuity with existing data, he said, it is worthwhile to force students into particular classifications.

Members of the audience seemed broadly sympathetic to Mr. Broh and Mr. Minicucci's model, but some asked whether it would be cumbersome for colleges to maintain, in effect, two sets of books — one for federal record keeping and one for internal purposes. Mr. Broh acknowledged that challenge but said the right database programming could make the system feasible.

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