

# THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT

POLICY BRIEF ■ FALL 2009

## BUILDING AND STRENGTHENING STATE DATA SYSTEMS TO MEASURE COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND WORKFORCE OUTCOMES

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### THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT

Strengthening State Policies for America's Working Poor

Millions of American breadwinners work hard to support their families. But, despite their determination and effort, many are mired in low-wage jobs that provide inadequate benefits and offer few opportunities for advancement. In fact, more than one out of four American working families now earn wages so low that they have difficulty surviving financially.<sup>2</sup>

Launched in 2002 and currently supported by the Annie E. Casey, Ford, Joyce, and Mott foundations, the Working Poor Families Project is a national initiative that works to improve these economic conditions. The project partners with state nonprofit organizations and supports their policy efforts to better prepare America's working families for a more secure economic future.

For more information:  
[www.workingpoorfamilies.org](http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org)

### INTRODUCTION

Too many community college, state adult basic education and skills development systems do not effectively set goals, measure performance or track outcomes for nontraditional students and low-income workers. Yet the success of these participants is critical for the nation to remain competitive and build a workforce for the future. In order to develop a more skilled workforce, it is critical that all states be able to assess program performance and participant outcomes. This requires well-designed and effectively-used state data systems that measure all participants' educational progress and labor market outcomes.

A recent National Governors Association (NGA) report brings attention to this challenge in the postsecondary system.<sup>3</sup> NGA calls on governors to take action to design postsecondary data systems that can measure progress and achievement, especially for nontraditional students including those who enroll part-time and in non-credit courses. They came to this position after finding that many states could not answer these basic questions:

- ◆ Are low-income, low-skilled adults succeeding with classes and/or graduating with degrees or certificates?
- ◆ Did education or training lead to better employment and earning outcomes?
- ◆ Which adults are not succeeding and why?

NGA's report stated that "improving the performance of postsecondary institutions, including community colleges, has increasingly taken center stage in state economic recovery plans."<sup>4</sup> The same holds true for adult basic education and skills development systems.

Making state postsecondary and skills development data systems more effective for low-income, low-skilled students is a primary interest of the [WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT \(WFPF\)](#). WFPF supports efforts of state non-profit organizations to strengthen state policies that can help low-income workers achieve economic security and become productive participants in local economies. WFPF encourages states to focus on making postsecondary, adult education and skills development programs work better for low-skilled adults and believes that well-structured and effective state data systems can lead to better decisions about programming, investment and customer service. The availability of pertinent data (inclusive of low-income, low-skilled adults data) means that a range of analytic questions can be answered on specific policy or institutional practices, providing a foundation for improving program performance, participant outcomes and making future investment decisions. In essence, a solid state data system has the potential to be a guiding compass for these large systems and can lead to improved performance and outcomes for low-income, low-skilled workers.

As part of the agenda to strengthen America's economic competitiveness, President Obama has set a goal of an additional five million community college degrees and certificate holders by 2020.<sup>5</sup> Future labor market demands cannot be met solely by those with a high school degree. However, increasing the number of community college certificate and degree holders will not be easy. Today, far too many existing adult students fail to successfully complete their postsecondary studies and too few adults in other education and skills development programs effectively transition to community college programs.

How this goal becomes reality will involve multiple reforms at many different levels. The important issue is whether state data systems can generate the information needed to drive these reforms.

This policy brief examines the issues associated with creating and improving state postsecondary, adult education and workforce development data systems. It examines possible barriers states may

encounter, profiles effective state systems, and offers policy recommendations to help state advocates build or improve upon data system efforts.

## WHAT IS A STATE DATA SYSTEM?

An effective state data system combines information from K-12, workforce development, and postsecondary education programs (primarily from public institutions), including adult basic education and skills development programs systems, and tracks employment outcomes. The Florida Department of Education has been successful at combining this data and has created a Business Intelligence Portal that tracks students over time and across delivery systems (*Sidebar on page 3*).

The business community has already recognized the power of using data to make key decisions, evaluate and improve performance, drive innovation and more. In his Harvard Business Review article, *Competing on Analytics*,<sup>6</sup> Professor Thomas Davenport talks about how companies are amassing and applying data in ways that “transformed the technology from a supporting tool into a strategic weapon.” Certain public sector agencies, such as state K-12 systems, are starting to adopt this mindset. Due to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), there is more opportunity than ever for state workforce systems, community colleges and other higher education institutions to put data to work evaluating and improving program performance (*See more below*). With this data in hand, state elected officials and other key stakeholders will be better equipped to make funding and policy decisions related to low-skilled adults.

## CASE STUDY: WASHINGTON STATE'S “TIPPING POINT”

Many states in the country understand the intrinsic relationship between data systems and performance, and many are using data as a strategic weapon. Washington state collects and

combines data on K-12, postsecondary, workforce, and unemployment insurance/wages. The state then analyses this data in order to change policy, make investment decisions, evaluate performance and improve customer service. Washington's story exemplifies the power data can have in improving to policy, practices and financing.

David Prince of the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) and Davis Jenkins of Columbia's Community College Research Center<sup>7</sup> are the authors of research that has come to be known as the "Tipping Point Study" in Washington state. The study provides the nation's best example of how a well-structured data system can lead to significant policy change and can in turn improve the educational and economic outcomes for low-income adults and their families.

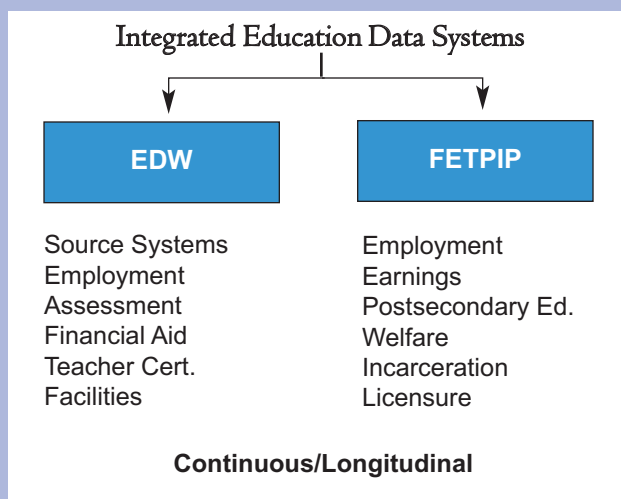
Prince and Jenkins used transcript data on individual students collected by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges to track the progress of college students 25 or older who entered the system with, at most, a high school diploma over a five-year period. The study included students in adult basic skills programs provided by the community and technical colleges in Washington State. The research was initiated to examine the educational and labor market outcomes of over 150,000 low-skill adult students, a solid third of the state's community college population.

The study found that students who took at least one year's worth of college credit courses (equivalent to two semesters of full-time study) and earned a certificate or other credential over five years earned substantially more than students who did not reach that threshold. Compared to students who earned fewer than 10 credits, those who reached this "tipping point" of at least two semesters of credits and a credential had a considerable average annual earnings advantage: \$7,000 for students who started in ESL (English as a Second Language), \$8,500 for those who started in ABE (Adult Basic Education) or GED, and \$2,700 and \$1,700 for those who entered with at most a GED or high school diploma.<sup>8</sup> Although

## FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION: HUB BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE (BI) PORTAL

The mission of the BI is to provide stakeholders - including, but not limited to, administrators, educators, parents, students, state leadership, and professional organizations - with the capability of receiving timely, efficient, consistent responses to inquiries into Florida's kindergarten through university education.

What is the Integrated Education Data System (IEDS)? The IEDS consist of the Education Data Warehouse (EDW) and the Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program (FETPIP).



- Providing capabilities to track students over time and across delivery systems.
- Providing capabilities to perform trend analysis.
- Allowing business users to run their own queries against summarized data in a timely, efficient manner.
- Enabling informed, data-driven decisions about education.

Further information about: Integrated Education Data System (IEDS):

<http://www.fldoehub.org/IEDS/Pages/default.aspx>

Florida Department of Education's K-20 Education Data Warehouse: <http://edwapp.doe.state.fl.us/doe/>

Florida Education and Training Placement Program (FETPIP): <http://www.fldoe.org/fetpip/>

these were exciting results, there were also a significant number of adult students who earned no college credits at all over the five-year period.

This longitudinal analysis signaled to the SBCTC leaders that they had two issues they needed to focus on operationally: One, how to help more adult students gain college credits and two, how to help as many adult students as possible reach the “tipping point.” Having the data to prove the economic reward for one year’s worth of college credit and to show where along the process adult students were failing was significantly persuasive to state leaders. As a result, the Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training, or I-BEST, was developed. Under I-BEST, courses for basic skills students are jointly taught by basic-skills and college-level occupational faculty, and students receive college credits. The SBCTC went on to evaluate I-BEST pilot programs and found that they substantially increase the rate at which basic skills students advance to college and reach the tipping point.<sup>9</sup>

At this point the data had a snowball effect. Having evidence about what was working and what wasn’t was a powerful motivator for SBCTC to convince state leaders to functionally change policy, practice, and investment. After the I-BEST pilot evaluation, the state invested \$4 million in “Opportunity Grants” in 2006, which were created to help students reach the tipping point and offered tuition for up to 45 credits. After 10 Opportunity Grant pilots were evaluated and shown to have a 73 percent retention rate, the state then expanded opportunity grants to a total of \$11.5 million per year. In 2008, the grants served over 5000 students. SBCTC has also launched a system of financial incentives (Student Achievement Initiative<sup>10</sup>), which rewards colleges for increasing the rate at which their students reach “achievement points” that are associated with increased likelihood of earning a credential or advancing to the next educational level.

Another part of this story is the applied baccalaureate. This baccalaureate was developed on evidence that students who earn applied

associate degrees tended to be disproportionately from lower income backgrounds than students who earn other sorts of associate degrees, and applied degrees tend to more effectively address unmet local labor market needs.

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*“We use data to improve all adult basic education instruction, in the same way we used data to create the I-BEST initiative, because it is the only way to assure that our efforts make good on the promise to open the door to postsecondary education success and the economic mainstream for low-skilled and low-income adults.”*

-Israel David Mendoza, Director, Adult Basic Education,  
Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges

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Focusing on how a system or systems are performing for customers has profound implications. Answering core questions about whether people were succeeding and what the economic impact was on their earnings made ripple effect changes within SBCTC. Washington’s story of revolutionary system transformation, complete with overarching policy and performance improvements, happened in large part because of a robust integrated data system within the community college system, which made it possible for Washington state to have and use combined post secondary, workforce, and wage record data for enterprise-wide continuous improvements.

## **WHY DOESN’T EVERYONE HAVE AN INTEGRATED STATE WORKFORCE-POSTSECONDARY DATA SYSTEM?**

### **THE COMMON CHALLENGES**

The Washington story makes developing and using a data system sound almost effortless but it isn’t. If creating a state workforce and community college data system were easy, every state would have one. Unfortunately, multiple barriers stand in the way. The primary challenges can be characterized in four major categories:

- ◆ Leadership and Management (mega-coordination across multiple institutions);
- ◆ Privacy Laws and Data Sharing Agreements;
- ◆ Missing Data on Crucial Populations and Linkages to Wage Record Data
- ◆ A Culture of Continuous Improvement

## LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Building and using a multi-agency data system requires the involvement and commitment of top level officials and leaders. Even the best advocacy in the world cannot replace the need for top-level leadership. Advocates can, however, cultivate relationships with senior leaders and act as trusted advisors, coaching leaders on successful efforts in other states, infrastructure needs, and other key strategies along the way. Senior executives must believe in the cause and display a passion for an analytic approach. Far too many leaders think of data collection as a compliance issue rather than a strategic planning and evaluation tool for improving performance.<sup>11</sup>

Successful efforts are managed as an “enterprise-wide” approach rather than a departmental approach. This means bringing multiple agency and institutional leaders together to collaborate on strengthening state data systems and on using data to improve performance. Leadership is crucial for building a constituency, for generating enthusiasm, persevering over the long-term; and for setting the stage for accountability, especially for the use of public funds.<sup>12</sup> This means sending consistent messages for all agencies that data is crucial to performance; that data will be used to drive how business is done in the workforce and community college systems, and that the data will assist evaluation, continuous improvement, accountability, funding, and new research.

There must be agreement about the key purpose of data, and “efforts to collect and use data should be driven by the questions the state wants to answer, which in turn should be guided by the strategic goals and outcomes they hope to achieve.”<sup>13</sup> The data systems efforts need to have appropriate staff

and agency management and must create a culture that supports these efforts, including the use of incentives. Even in the best scenarios at the state level or corporate sector, data system endeavors take time to come to fruition and begin to pay off. Florida and Washington have spent over a decade working on their systems.

The Indiana Department of Workforce Development (DWD) worked for a number of years to launch the Indiana Workforce Intelligence System (IWIS). For the first time ever, DWD wage records were made available for matching with data from the educational and workforce training systems. An additional priority was to integrate the adult basic education program data into IWIS. As the IWIS website states: “The state doesn't collect data for data's sake, but there is significant recognition and support of new data mining techniques that can yield information from state data to help support policy and decision making statewide.”<sup>14</sup> Top officials in state agencies are coming to realize that data systems can provide new ways to improve performance, especially with regard to using public funds more effectively and efficiently, thus maximizing the state's and students return on investment.

## PRIVACY LAWS AND DATA SHARING AGREEMENTS

Having strong leadership and management is essential to tackling the next hurdle to connecting workforce and community college data systems: privacy and data sharing. Balancing privacy with the need for accountability and performance can be tricky. Student privacy issues are a legitimate concern when thinking about collecting, storing, sharing and analyzing information from individual Student Unit Records (SURs). In the post-Watergate years, public suspicion about domestic surveillance was at the forefront of people's minds. The 1974 Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) was intended to prevent educational institutions from abusing student privacy. It applies to all educational institutions that receive federal funds – both K-12 and postsecondary institutions.

There are three main FERPA exceptions (sidebar),

and most state data systems endeavor to qualify under “studies to improve instruction.” Most experts agree that FERPA is more of an obstacle than a prohibition. But not being fully aware of them can slow the process down and pushing through the various state interpretations can be difficult. As Jenkins and Ewell write in *Tracking in the Community College*: “In order to avoid problems with FERPA, states and community college systems must make a clear case that the information that will result from any match will be useful for improving instruction and policies related to instruction. States should also establish clear, written ground rules that govern who can have access to SUR data and for what purposes.”<sup>15</sup>

Washington state postsecondary institutions ask students at enrollment for permission to release their demographic and educational data for research and accountability purposes, which addresses the requirement in FERPA that educational institutions must receive written permission from students before releasing data about students’ records.<sup>16</sup> Finally, there are two

excellent resources on FERPA: the Data Quality Campaign’s *Data Quality Campaign’s Layman’s Guide to FERPA* and Jobs For the Future’s *State Data Systems and Privacy Concerns: Strategies for Balancing Public Interests* by Jack Mills (see **Additional Resources** for more details).

Another issue that arises when working across more than one large agency is data sharing agreement and alignment of the data. States like Washington, Florida and Indiana have all survived the tedious legal process of creating data sharing agreements. Washington established the Education Research Data Center (ERDC) through state legislation. (<http://apps.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx%3fcite=43.41.400>). It was established in the Office of Financial Management and collaborates with the Legislative Evaluation and Accountability Program (LEAP) committee. The ERDC conducts collaborative analyses of early learning, K-12, and higher education programs across the P-20 sectors; identifies data to be compiled and analyzed; tracks enrollment and outcomes; and provides research that focuses on student transitions in early learning, K-12, and postsecondary education.<sup>17</sup>

### FERPA EXCEPTIONS:

- 1) Disclosure of “directory information,” defined as information contained in an education record that would not generally be considered harmful or an invasion of privacy if disclosed;
- 2) Disclosure to authorized representatives of state or local educational authorities in connection with the audit and evaluation of federally supported education programs or in connection with the enforcement of federal requirements that relate to such programs;
- 3) Disclosure for studies “to improve instruction,” so long as the study is conducted in a manner that does not permit identification of students or parents by individuals other than representatives of the research organization and the information is destroyed when no longer needed for the purposes for which the study was conducted.

Data sharing agreements are in place between:

- ◆ Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)
- ◆ State Board for Community & Technical Colleges (SBCTC)
- ◆ Public Baccalaureate Institutions
- ◆ Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB)
- ◆ Employment Security Department
- ◆ Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS)

Newly added partner agencies include:

- ◆ Department of Early Learning
- ◆ Professional Educator Standards Board
- ◆ State Board of Education
- ◆ Workforce Training & Education Coordinating Board<sup>18</sup>

For the past four years, the federal government has been providing resources to improve local and state educational data bases. This State Longitudinal Data System initiative started with the K-12 system and is now moving to integrate that system with other educational and workforce systems. It is worth noting that the two data sets that seem to be the slowest to be added are workforce data and wage record data, which are essential to reporting performance outcomes from training to education to job.

### MISSING DATA ON CRUCIAL POPULATIONS AND LINKAGES TO WAGE RECORD DATA

Having strong leadership to create a data system and working through the privacy and data sharing agreements are huge tasks. There is, however, another complication that hinders states from having fully effective workforce and postsecondary data systems: missing data on nontraditional students, who are often low-skilled, low-income populations. Many states are missing data for nontraditional community college students and on participants from the skills development systems, thus negating their ability track transitions between systems. In addition, many systems do not include linkages to wage records, which is essential in order to track economic mobility outcomes.

Postsecondary systems often do not effectively include nontraditional students (those not enrolled full-time in degree seeking programs). For instance, a 2008 Connecticut report found that the community college data system could only account for fifty percent of students; those not accounted for included part-time students, those taking non-credit occupational programs, and those who dropped out for financial or other reasons.<sup>19</sup> The end result is that too many states have limited ability to track participant progress, especially for nontraditional students, and outcomes over time and to measure program performance, particularly for low-income and low-skilled populations. If a state cannot track progress toward certificates, which may include non-credit occupational certificates, it may limit a state's ability to count progress toward completion goals.

Even when data is captured on nontraditional students and disadvantaged populations, it is rarely used to focus on achievement. States and institutions often fail to generate analyses and reports on progress and outcomes for this population. In addition, when used, current data/measures frequently do not capture key steps in student progress, such as advancement from course to course, and year to year. Washington state's new focus on achievement points is an example of how states can use different data to measure the progress for nontraditional students.

Few state education and workforce systems are connected or integrated, meaning they do not have the ability to track educational progress from skills development and adult basic education into postsecondary. In order to capture information about low-income workers, data systems must link adult education, literacy, WIA-Title I, TANF, corrections, and other systems together and with the state postsecondary system. The systems must be able to track progress from one system to another as well as measure progress within systems. For instance, it is not enough to know whether someone succeeded or failed in a program or in achieving a certificate or degree. State leaders need to know at what point someone failed on the continuum and why; for students who succeed, state leaders need to know more what contributed to that individual's success.

The earlier mentioned National Governors Association report outlined four key student achievement milestones all states should track:

1. Successful completion of remedial and core courses;
2. Advancement from remedial to credit-bearing courses;
3. Transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution; and
4. Credential attainment.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, too few state data systems, including postsecondary as well as adult education and skills development systems, actually measure students/participants employment and earnings

outcomes. That means they are not connected to the Unemployment Insurance wage record files. States cannot hope to tell the complete story of student success without knowing the economic mobility impact – on work and earnings – as a result of further training and education.

### CREATING A CULTURE OF USING DATA FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The last challenge to creating successful data systems is to assure that data is used to answer key policy, evaluative and predictive questions. The beginning and the end of the creation of a state data system must be driven by the core questions that need answering. State advocates can actively take a leadership role in helping policymakers understand what key questions. If the system is built around answering key questions or policy issues, then it can fulfill its primary purpose of generating information to improve outcomes and performance.

*“Our improved data collection has resulted in an increase in completion areas: improved basic literacy, GED and postsecondary education. The data indicated that there are still improvement areas. The results of this have indicated that we need to focus on the data collection in our open enrollment and off-site classes.”*

-Cascadia Community College

During spring quarter 2008 it was discovered that information regarding employment goals and gains were missing. WWCC’s enrollment database indicated 1,810 students, but only 8 students were reported as “job seekers” and only 7 students as “job keepers.” The question we asked ourselves was, “Do we have a data reporting issue, or an intake issue?” This led us to not only correct our WABERS intake form and replace the missing goals information, but also gave us the opportunity to review our entire orientation to program services including the intake, registration, and educational interview process.”

In a recent book about student tracking, authors Davis Jenkins and Peter Ewell highlight important lessons from using state student unit record (SUR) data. One of the lessons is that “states are most likely to stimulate systemic and sustainable reform when data are used to inform and empower educators.”<sup>21</sup> This point reinforces the need to insure that data and analysis is useful to local institutions and their leaders, particularly as they pursue internal quality review and improvement processes. Washington state has committed to training staff throughout the agency on the importance of the data but also about why it is being collected; how it can be used to improve instruction and outcomes; and how program and policy decisions emanate from this data. Washington used an online and live format to reach target audiences.

When Maine moved to strengthen its state longitudinal data system through state legislation it not only focused on the uniform data collection but also on creating the ability to assess progress toward established goals or benchmarks.<sup>22</sup> It was felt that solid policy decision-making was dependent on both variables – good data and how that data was used to measure actual progress or problems. This exemplifies how it is not enough to collect the data but that the data must actually be analyzed and used to measure progress and make future decisions. In fact, the WFPF state partner, the Maine Center for Economic Policy, has already requested that it be allowed to use the data system to conduct analyses.

### STATE LONGITUDINAL DATA SYSTEMS: A PENDING OPPORTUNITY

The original No Child Left Behind federal legislation requires states to develop K-12 State Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) that track students’ (and teachers’) performance over time. Three rounds of federal funding have been awarded to states to create these systems (some WFPF states have received no funds, including AL, NJ and NM). The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 provides \$250 million in additional Department of Education resources to



state departments of education for further SLDS development. In doing so, ARRA requires that these systems now cover PreK-20; specifically linking to the postsecondary system and workforce systems. State projects are expected to be approved and funded in early 2010. ARRA resources are intended to “accelerate the development of their data systems, to include not only data related to K-12 education, but also data on preschool and postsecondary education and workforce information, and to promote linkages with other data systems where such linkages may inform education policy and practice.” Additional SLDS funds are requested in the Department’s 2010 budget and there is every expectation that the federal government will continue to finance the further development and improvement of state longitudinal data systems. This is a real opportunity to enhance the postsecondary and skills development data systems so that low-skilled adults are fully included and connected.

One immediate challenge is that there is no definition or common understanding of what postsecondary or workforce means in these grant applications. Because the funding goes to the state departments of education which serves a P-12 population, efforts must be taken to educate state officials on the importance of two things: first, the need to link to all education and workforce systems and the second, and most importantly, insuring that postsecondary and workforce data systems include all students (e.g., nontraditional, part time, remedial education, non-credit, etc.) and can report their educational and labor market progress and outcomes.

WFPF suggests that in order to provide meaningful information about the performance of the state’s education systems and how well they serve all students and the workforce, *linkage to postsecondary systems and workforce* should be at a minimum defined in the following way:

1. Postsecondary means that the state data system must have data that cover all students, and particularly those attending community colleges, including part-time, remedial, and non-credit career students, and

2. Workforce means that the state should have the capacity to:
  - a) link to wage record data to measure employment and earnings outcomes for all secondary and postsecondary students and all participants in adult basic education and skills development programs (e.g., Adult Basic Education (ABE), Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), etc.), and
  - b) link secondary, postsecondary and workforce (e.g., ABE, WIA, TANF, etc.) participant data systems to each other in order to measure education and training flows and progress within and among all systems, such as the transitions for adult basic education and skills development programs into postsecondary institutions.

State departments of education are not likely to be knowledgeable about or even interested in this issue. It is important for the postsecondary system and/or the state workforce board representatives to request resources to expand their data systems to include low-skilled adults in the ways suggested above. Another group who will likely be interested in this issue is state legislators who oversee funding for the community college, adult education and workforce agencies. They will have a vested interest in assuring that fully functional data systems be developed so program performance can be tracked and analyzed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PERSUADING STATE OFFICIALS: POLICY ACTION STEPS

As concerns about outcomes and return on investment grow, especially regarding massive amounts of public dollars, state data systems cannot be an afterthought. Future decisions will be based more and more on strong analytics and hard evidence, and this is quickly becoming a hallmark of PreK-20 reform agendas at the federal and state levels. Strong data systems must help drive the change and transformation process and be seen as

an imperative for strong performance. Maintaining the status quo will not produce the additional five million degrees and certificates called for by President Obama this summer. Changes at all levels will be needed, and those states that use data to improve their systems and programs may come out ahead in their efforts to improve the economic well-being of low-income, low-skilled adults and the economic competitiveness of their states.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL STATE DATA SYSTEMS:

1. Set goals for workforce and program performance to advance all adult low-income students toward increasing earnings, including the completion of a postsecondary certificate or credential.
2. Develop program performance questions that will answer how well the systems are attaining the goals and will help identify where improvements are needed. (See page 8 for the NGA four recommended achievement milestones that all states should track.)
3. Develop a comprehensive and integrated data system for workforce and postsecondary data that tracks all students including nontraditional students; work to build off and connect to the current federal investment in the state SLDS.
4. Focus indicators on disadvantaged populations and corresponding labor market outcomes.
5. Build in capacity for public reporting and analysis.
6. Reward successful performance that advances more low-skilled adults toward certificates and degrees.
7. Measure progress toward goals.
8. Ensure the data can be accessed and used.
9. Build capacity of all stakeholders to use the data for enhanced decision making

### RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS: HOW TO MOVE FORWARD

1. Identify your state's existing data systems now: what is collected and which systems are already connected?
2. Cultivate state leadership that will work across multiple agencies to advance the creation and management of data systems that will help improve postsecondary and workforce program performance.
3. Build a strong policy case for how data can improve system performance and continue to build an appetite for data. Help leaders envision the possible and address political concerns. (see Maine Center for Economic Policy February 2009 newsletter as an example). And where strong data systems already exist, effectively communicate findings and implications of analysis and research to persuade stakeholders to act.
4. Identify your strategic goals for student performance improvement and encapsulate them in a "storyline" that succinctly conveys what you are trying to accomplish and why. Develop a compelling message that can be delivered clearly and concisely.<sup>23</sup>
5. Focus leaders' attention on the importance of goals, purpose and core analytics: what do you want to know, for what purpose? Identify research questions that if answered could help advance your strategic goals; involve key stakeholders such as college personnel, other state agency staff, and governor's or legislative staff in defining and helping to prioritize the research questions.<sup>24</sup>
6. If there are efforts already underway in your state to strengthen data systems and capacities, become part of the process and a valued partner. Identify a guiding coalition

of leaders who can capture the state's attention.

7. Help define the data sets that will be needed – make sure that data about low-income workers is part of the system (adult education, TANF, WIA Title I). (See WFPF recommendation for defining above).
8. Find innovative ways to tackle the privacy and data sharing issues (if not already addressed), and highlight states that have been successful.
9. Support the development of longitudinal data systems so individual progress and success can be tracked over time.
10. Promote incentives or rewards for improvement, thus necessitating that state workforce and postsecondary data systems can measure achievement similar to the Student Achievement Initiative in Washington state.
11. Engage stakeholders at the state and college levels in interpreting the findings and considering the implications for policy and practice; encourage colleges to conduct further research to diagnose the causes of the gaps in student achievement identified and formulate solutions based on that diagnosis.<sup>25</sup>
12. Be aware of funding opportunities, such as the Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) grants, and take steps to influence the use of those resources to support systems that include and measure the progress of low-skilled adults.<sup>26</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Improving the performance of workforce and postsecondary systems, especially for low-skilled, low-income adults, has become a focal point for some state and federal leaders and a rallying cry for fueling state and national economic recovery efforts. The future livelihood of millions of low-income, low-skilled workers and the economic health of states depend on workforce and postsecondary systems seriously examining performance and setting higher achievement benchmarks for themselves. Effective, strategic and highly functional state data systems are an imperative for reaching these goals.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Jeremy Bearer-Friend, *Measuring Student Achievement at Postsecondary Institutions*, NGA Center for Best Practices, November 9, 2009.
2. Data Quality Campaign:  
<http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org/>
3. Jack Mills, *State Data Systems and Privacy Concerns: Strategies for Balancing Public Interests*. *Achieving the Dream Policy Brief, Jobs For the Future*, Feb. 2005.  
  
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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Jennifer L. Phillips is a private consultant specializing in strategic planning, program evaluation, meeting design and facilitation, and issue reconnaissance and works mostly for philanthropic and other non-profit organizations. She is a former C.S. Mott and Joyce Foundation program officer. Many thanks to Mary Kay Devine, Davis Jenkins, Israel Mendoza, Deborah Povich, Brandon Roberts, Jessa Valentine, and Frank Waterous for their helpful advice, comments and feedback in producing this policy brief.
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