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Student Unit Record Databases: Ethical Implications and Considerations

Year

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Description

A case that discusses data management and human subjects research. In this case, researchers are looking to store data from students in a centralized records system and wonder if they need to consult an institutional review board before moving forward.

Body

Part 1

As a senior scholar in the field of higher education, Dr. Schonfeld conducts most of her research using statewide student unit record (SUR) systems databases. SUR systems contain information about individual students, as opposed to data aggregated at the university or college level. Such information may include financial aid status, progress toward degree, cumulative grade point average, or race and ethnicity, as a few examples. The use of SUR systems has significantly helped to advance empirical and theoretical understandings of major issues in the field. As one example, researchers and legislators are increasingly interested in whether historically underrepresented groups, such as African-Americans, attain degrees at rates equal to those of White students. Data on individual students allow researchers

to better explore this question.

Dr. Schonfeld has been watching closely the emerging debate about the creation of student unit record (SUR) systems by state consortia and the national government. SUR systems contain information about individual students, as opposed to aggregate data, for example, at the institutional level. Dr. Schonfeld's own state has just entered into a consortium of states developing a regional database to track students individually across state lines as they move through systems of higher education.

Although the data that would be stored in the proposed regional SUR database have been collected by institutions as well as states for years for such things as course registration and financial aid distribution as two examples, the prospect of further centralizing student information has ignited a firestorm of debate. Some are concerned, for example, that it is not appropriate to use student data — originally collected for institutional purposes — for research without informed student consent. Students have no option of opting out of the institutional databases because they are a necessity for institutional operations. Dr. Schonfeld has been asked to serve as one member of a university-wide committee to advise the chancellor about whether the university should join the consortium.

Questions

1. Should student consent be obtained before student data are entered into the institutional databases? What are the pros and cons of seeking consent? Should student consent be obtained before data from institutional operations are used in research databases?
2. Is there a conflict of interest in Dr. Schonfeld serving on the committee given her potential use of such databases for her own research?
3. What are the ethical implications of creating and maintaining such a database?
4. Even if data can be made completely secure, for example through encryption technologies, what are the ethical implications of using data collected through institutional operations for research?
5. What are the implications if database security is compromised and data are stolen?
6. Do scholars who use databases like the one discussed in this case have an obligation to discuss the ethics involved?

Part 2

Again and again, debate within the committee returns to a key question: How might the data be used and what are the potential impacts upon students? Conclusions drawn from research on topics like financial aid may have real and disparate consequences for groups of students. For example, what if the data suggest low-income students are not more likely to graduate whether they are given financial aid or not, resulting in policy makers reducing the amount of need-based aid to low-income students?

Questions

7. Should researchers using such databases seek human subjects approval from institutional review boards?
8. What responsibility, if any, do researchers have to share findings with groups who may be negatively impacted by research conclusions? What responsibility do researchers have, if any, to share findings with groups who may benefit from research conclusions?
9. Should Dr. Schonfeld recommend to the committee that a regional SUR database be created? Should Dr. Schonfeld recommend any protocols in research uses of such data, for example, seeking informed consent? Would such protocols be possible?
10. Who should have access to these data?

Contributor(s)

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Resource Type

Case Study / Scenario

Parent Collection

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Topics

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