

Author's Commentary on "Student Unit Record Databases: Ethical Implications and Considerations"

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Student Unit Record Databases: Ethical Implications and Considerations

A critical ethical concern in this case is the issue of informed consent by students. From the time a student contacts a university or college to express interest in applying to the moment a student departs (either as a graduate, a transfer, or a drop out), a variety of data are collected about the student. These data, such as financial aid status, academic progress, and application material, are necessary for the business of the institution. They can be used by the institution for any operational purposes or internal program evaluation without student consent. However, the use of these operational data for secondary purposes (that is, purposes other than those originally intended during collection) raises many questions about how to treat informed consent on the part of students.

Obtaining informed consent from the hundreds of thousands of students whose information would be contained in databases similar to those proposed in this case presents considerable challenges. For example, the monetary costs associated with contacting each student and explaining the proposed research to be conducted would be prohibitive. In addition, because personal identifiers are often completely stripped from the databases, it may in fact be impossible to contact individual students for their consent. These obstacles make it even more incumbent upon researchers to consider the ethical issues raised in using these data.

The question of developing and maintaining comprehensive student unit records is complex. On the one hand, legislators, taxpayers, parents, and students increasingly demand accountability from institutions of higher education. For example, legislators want to know if taxpayer money is being spent effectively to educate citizens. Student unit records enable institutions to answer such questions more precisely as well as more broadly. The finer the level of detail stored in research databases, the

more precisely questions about effective education can be answered.

On the other hand, student unit record databases are not a panacea. They cannot answer all questions raised by the constituents of higher education in a definitive manner. The nature of the educational enterprise is so complex (think about all the factors that can influence whether a student graduates and in what length of time) and so varied that it is almost certain that disagreement about what constitutes an effective education will be around as long as there are institutions of higher education. Given this reality, the potential costs and consequences of a student unit record database must be seriously considered. To illustrate ways in which SUR systems impact the lived experiences of students, it may be helpful to briefly consider a current and sometimes contentious debate within the higher education community.

Equal opportunity to pursue higher education — particularly for low-income and historically underrepresented groups — is a major concern for policy makers and researchers in education. A considerable body of literature exists exploring the pathways students take to college, the factors that influence opportunity to attend, and the variables that impact whether students are successful in their educational pursuits. Within this debate, the impact of financial aid and academic preparation are two key areas of exploration. Student unit record databases have enabled researchers to examine the effects of high school curriculum on college enrollment. Likewise, the effects of financial aid have been closely examined using SURs. One school of thought argues that academic preparation has the greatest influence on college enrollment. Another school of thought agrees that academic preparation is important, but alone is insufficient to ensure college qualified students enroll. Rather, meeting financial need — particularly for low-income students — is equally important. As policy makers have increasingly focused on academic preparation in high school as the key factor in college enrollment, low-income, college qualified students are losing the opportunity to attend college because of unmet financial need (St. John & Parsons, 2003).

Regardless of the school of thought with which one agrees, data collected for administrative purposes by institutions is used in the research both sides use to support their arguments—all without informed student consent. In addition, policy makers may leverage particular aspects of this research base to support ideological arguments that may or may not be in the best interests of particular students. For example, focusing on academic preparation to the exclusion of financial aid may

disproportionately impact students of color. With decreasing public support of education and increasing demand, the equal education opportunity stakes are high. Research often plays a crucial role in shifting or buttressing terms of the debate.

In addition to potential policy effects of SUR based research, security comprises another area of ethical consideration. Although technological advances enable increasingly secure storage and transmission of private data, recent high visibility data theft at institutions of higher education (Northwestern University, California State University at Chico, Boston College, University of California at Berkeley, to name a few) illustrate the potential for abuse of large student unit record systems (Carnevale, 2005).

In conclusion, researchers, policy makers, and administrators who currently use or are part of the creation of student unit record systems must weigh the potential costs and benefits of such a system. If possible, students themselves should be involved at some level of the discussion. The ethical implications of creating a database should be considered before more technical discussions about security are had. In short, the “why” of student unit record systems should be addressed before the “how.” Central to the debate of SUR systems is the issue of informed consent. If informed consent cannot be obtained, researchers may want to consider other ways in which the autonomy of subjects can be respected. For example, researchers might make the effort to distribute research findings to constituent groups represented in the databases. Minimally, researchers should engage other researchers as well as policy makers in ongoing debate about how to be responsible stewards of data which was obtained without explicit consent.

References

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Carnevale, D. May 6, 2005. “Why Can’t Colleges Hold On to Their Data? A string of high-profile security breaches raises questions about the safety of personal information.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Volume 51, Issue 35, Page A35.