

Report: Federal Outcome Metrics Need to Better Reflect Missions of Community Colleges

[By Hunter B. Martin, NASFAA Staff Reporter](#)

Many higher education advocates have pointed out that current federal outcome metrics do not accurately capture the unique student demographics and missions of community colleges. However, lawmakers have a chance to reform the federal data collection process as they work toward the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA), according to a new report.

According to [the report](#), “How Outcomes Metrics Can Better Reflect Community College Performance,” published by Third Way last week, to accurately reflect student outcomes at community colleges, existing federal metrics need to be improved and new metrics need to be created, such as an enhanced graduation rate, a transfer performance metric, and the employment rate on an institutional and program level.

“[W]hen it comes to evaluating the performance of two-year institutions, traditional outcomes metrics can provide an incomplete picture, failing to account for the multiple missions of community colleges, the diversity of the students they serve, and the variety of educational pathways those students pursue,” the report said. “... While both transparency and accountability for student outcomes need to exist for all sectors of higher education, we can and should also recognize that not all institutions are the same.”

Community colleges enroll a significant portion of the college-going population — 41% of all undergraduates, the report said — and disproportionately serve “students of color, working adults, and other student populations that have conventionally been classified as ‘non-traditional.’”

Due to the structure of current federal outcome metrics, many of those unique student populations are either not accurately represented, or not captured at all. One way to expand and strengthen current data collections, Third Way argued, would be lifting the ban on the student-level unit record system, such as through the bipartisan College Transparency Act, which NASFAA supports.

Currently, federal graduation rates are determined by measuring degree completion within six years at four-year institutions and within three years at community colleges. However, Third Way said this time frame is not enough.

Instead, the report proposed creating an “enhanced” graduation rate metric that would measure three different views: the graduation rate within 150% of the standard program time — including those who transferred after receiving a credential — the transfer rate for those without a credential, and the rate of those who remained enrolled at the institution beyond the standard program completion time. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of completion rates at community colleges.

Rather than measuring how long it takes students to complete their degrees, Third Way proposed monitoring the credits it takes to achieve a degree. Community colleges are often the affordable and geographically convenient option for students, yet some students are taking more courses than is necessary or cost effective.

Potential ways that students end up taking credits they don't need includes taking more classes to maintain full-time status and therefore Pell Grant eligibility, losing credits during the transfer process to a four-year institution, poor advising, or taking excessive prerequisite courses among other things, according to Third Way.

“Affordability and access have always been hallmarks of a community college education — so when students end up earning more credits than they actually need for a two-year degree, it costs them unnecessary time and money and erodes these central commitments,” the report said.

Since a common reason for attending community college is to eventually transfer credits to a four-year institution, Third Way also proposed a more nuanced way to monitor transfer outcomes, by measuring the percentage of students who transfer “laterally” to another two-year institution, and “vertically” to a four-year institution.

The think tank also proposed measuring the rate of those who transfer with a credential, and the percent of students who transfer to a four-year institution with “junior” status, showing their credits were accepted. The creation of these metrics would help in the collaboration between two- and four-year institutions to maintain transfer pathways that enhance college affordability.

Many advocates have also criticized how current federal measures for student loan outcomes often reflect poorly on community colleges. To rectify that situation, Third Way also proposed metrics change in the reporting of [cohort default rates](#) (CDR). The traditional CDR calculates the percentage of borrowers who default on their student loans within three years of entering repayment.

The proposed adjusted cohort default rate would not only calculate the default rate, but take into account the percentage of students at that school who borrowed federal loans. This is important because about 87% of community college students do not take out any loans to finance their college coursework.

Similarly, Third Way discussed implementing a metric measuring the loan repayment rate in addition to the adjusted cohort default rate. While lawmakers have discussed whether a loan repayment rate would be a better metric than the CDR, there has not been agreement on how to develop such a rate.

According to Third Way, the repayment rate is “a less ‘gameable’ metric” in comparison to the CDR. Focusing on both the CDR and a repayment rate “presents a clearer picture of student success,” the report said.

Another new metric Third Way proposed was the first-time pass rate of workforce training programs and certification exams. Not all community college students are seeking an associate degree or transfer credits, some students are instead seeking career development through industry-recognized credentials, according to the report.

“Focusing on first-time pass rates can prove illustrative,” the report said. “If students do not pass a licensure examination on the first try and need to invest additional time and resources into preparation, it raises questions about the quality of the program in which they enrolled and the value they received from their tuition dollars.”

Accurately collecting and measuring outcomes data about community colleges can be challenging. But it is important to accurately reflect the outcomes of community colleges

because they are often the closest, most affordable option for a higher education for most students.

“For prospective students, the community college located in their district or county is typically the single most convenient and most affordable option, so it is imperative that every community college be held to the highest standard for serving students in its jurisdiction well and preparing them for a successful future,” the report said. “... Not only will such efforts help better align federal outcomes metrics with key distinctions between two- and four-year schools, but they will also unlock insights to promote institutional improvement and ensure that community colleges are providing real value for students and taxpayers.”

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