

Institute of Education Sciences
National Center for Education Statistics

EMERGING ISSUES IN POSTSECONDARY ACCESS AND CHOICE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Postsecondary Choice Project* was conducted by the National Institute of Statistical Sciences (NISS) for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to address existing and emerging issues of postsecondary access and choice. The project culminated in a workshop held on 26 January 2009 at NCES in Washington, DC, where the papers that make up this report were presented.

Postsecondary choice comprises a complex set of issues with strong scientific content and important policy implications. The processes are inherently complicated, involving a multiplicity of participants and stakeholders. Consequently there is a multiplicity of goals for collecting data, which has implications for NCES' postsecondary data collections.

The goal of the *Postsecondary Choice and Access Project* was to examine the possibility of creating a set of economic- and social-based constructs for describing and reasoning about postsecondary choice today and into the future. Once defined, these constructs could be mapped into ongoing and potential future data collections by NCES. To the extent feasible, data elements and instrument designs could be identified in order to operationalize and measure the constructs.

This report includes the five papers presented at the Workshop. The process of making choices was viewed in terms of what decisions are made, when, by whom, under whose influence, using what criteria, and on the basis of what information is obtained from which sources. Authors were asked to consider three aspects of the topic:

- What we know about the rapidly changing, increasingly heterogeneous processes of postsecondary choice?
- What components of postsecondary choice are possibly less completely understood than they should be? One example is the increasing multiplicity of agents - among them, students, parents, secondary schools, postsecondary institutions, the federal government, and lenders.
- How can extant and future NCES data collections better inform both policy and scientific understanding? Individual papers discuss background, criteria for defining constructs, and consequences for data collection.

In *A Conceptual Structure for Postsecondary Access and Choice*, Alan Karr sets the stage for discussing choice and access by providing a structure to be further defined by core constructs. The process is inherently complex, first because choice among alternative postsecondary paths is actually a series of choices, second because of the involvement of multiple agents beside the student, and third because processes themselves are evolving, reflecting diverse family characteristics, new student trajectories, new

Postsecondary Access and Choice

sources of information such as social media, and new forms of communication. Progress will depend upon collection additional data and on not restricting analyses to a limited set of model frameworks.

In *Emerging Issues in Postsecondary Access and Choice: Implications for the Conceptualization and Modeling of College Decisions*, Bridget Terry Long discusses theoretical and empirical tools that might improve understanding of higher education decisions. Economic models, such as the human capital (HC) model, could be used to better understand current trends and developments. Within Economics, theoretical advances especially in Behavioral Economics, might help researchers better conceptualize postsecondary access and choice. Then consideration is given to how both tools and theoretical frameworks might be utilized at NCES to map central constructs discussed onto existing NCES data collections to improve NCES surveys.

In *Data Collection for Econometric Analysis of Schooling Decisions*: Charles F. Manski considers how NCES data collections can contribute to effective econometric analysis of schooling decisions, with emphasis on postsecondary schooling. The credibility of econometric analysis depends on the realism of the model used to represent decision making. Since surveys rarely query respondents about their perception of the choice-set, it is not unclear what researchers really know about how decision makers perceive the available alternatives.

This paper offers a perspective on what modeling is feasible with existing data and explores how new data collection could enhance modeling capacity.

In *Improving NCES Data Collection* Eric Bettinger, focuses on three key points: the role of expectations in future data collection; the appropriateness of behavioral economics as a framework for future data collection; and the integration and use of state administrative data with NCES data collection. From a different perspective, alternative survey designs could be advantageous in expanding the scope of NCES and allowing the flexibility for future changes in NCES data collection.

In *NCES Data Collections: Information and Gaps* Jack Buckley notes that the tension to balance the needs of many diverse stakeholders results in data collections - such as those in education – that are “general purpose” products. Buckley focuses models and specific issues in measurement of salient interest to NCES. Recommendations to NCES include changes to existing data collection activities to directly address perceptions. That would allow expanding analyses, going beyond econometric models and beyond a purely decision-based framework.

In *Conceptualizing Postsecondary Access and Choice: The Role of NCES Datasets* Laura W. Perna identifies further issues in particular the desirability of a multi-disciplinary perspective. While useful, human capital models alone are insufficient for understanding inconsistencies in college enrollment decision-making. With current data, these models shed little light on how students develop perceptions or understandings of financial aid. Specific recommendations for NCES data collections include: collect data to understand how students acquire and use information about college; develop better measures of students’ postsecondary options; measure non-traditional pathways to degree completion; and consider data collection and sampling issues.

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