

New data
needed:
improving
survey research
on two-year
college
experiences



Institute of Education Sciences

U.S. Department of Education



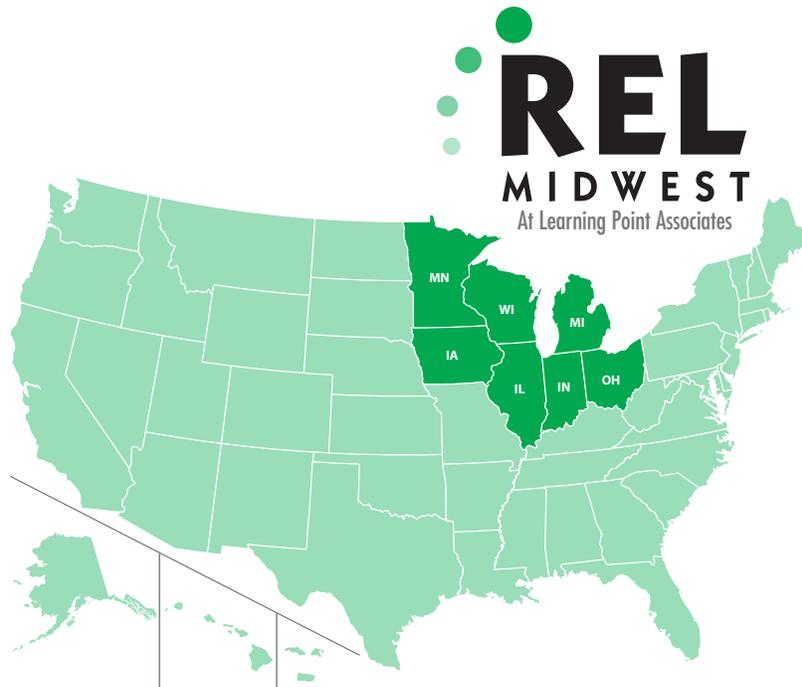
New data needed:
improving survey research
on two-year college experiences

Summary

August 2007

Prepared by

**James E. Rosenbaum, Ph.D.
Northwestern University**



Issues & Answers is an ongoing series of reports from short-term Fast Response Projects conducted by the regional educational laboratories on current education issues of importance at local, state, and regional levels. Fast Response Project topics change to reflect new issues, as identified through lab outreach and requests for assistance from policymakers and educators at state and local levels and from communities, businesses, parents, families, and youth. All Issues & Answers reports meet Institute of Education Sciences standards for scientifically valid research.

August 2007

This report was prepared for the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) under Contract ED-06-CO-0019 by Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest administered by Learning Point Associates. The content of the publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

This report is in the public domain. While permission to reprint this publication is not necessary, it should be cited as:

Rosenbaum, J. E. (2007). *New data needed: improving survey research on two-year college experiences* (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2007–No. 015). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

This report is available on the regional educational laboratory web site at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

Summary

New data needed: improving survey research on two-year college experiences

Research can improve understanding of two-year colleges, but new detailed indicators are needed to capture the complexities of this changing sector.

“College” is more complex today than it was three decades ago. Two-year colleges used to be a small part of higher education, but now they enroll almost half of all entering college students. Research can improve understanding of two-year colleges, but new detailed indicators are needed to capture the complexities of this changing sector. This report identifies new complexities and suggests new data needed from survey research on the following questions:

- What are the unseen barriers in two-year colleges?
- What are the unseen college options?
- What are the implications of new pathways through college?
- What are the ways that college can improve labor market outcomes?

The report identifies the kinds of information that research can obtain to answer these questions and how that information can be useful for understanding new college realities and improving college procedures and policies.

College programs and experiences have changed in radical ways that make many customary assumptions wrong. Adults who attended traditional four-year college programs—including most researchers and educators—may not understand the complexities of nontraditional programs that serve students who do not seek bachelor’s degrees or who do not meet traditional achievement requirements. Educators may give students poor advice and make poor education policy decisions, research may not improve educators’ understanding because of poorly worded or misleading items in surveys, and some outcomes may have different value than traditionally assumed. New measures are needed to make important distinctions and evaluate processes.

This report uses prior studies of two-year colleges and students to identify information, not often collected from national surveys, that researchers need to understand students’ two-year college experiences, and it outlines what information is not being obtained from current national surveys. Surveys need to collect better information about new programs, new colleges, new degrees, noncredit courses, test scores alignment, and job placement. Also needed are new indicators of attainment (such as skill relevance and timely completion). Programs that are preparatory, exploratory, or

recreational in college and occupational programs need to be better understood, as do new patterns of college attendance (delayed entry and college moves). And amid all this, how students understand (or misunderstand) the college experience and its implications must also be examined.

Research needs to examine a great number of issues that are not being studied at all or in insufficient detail: college students who are several years away from taking college credit classes that count toward a degree, who do not understand noncredit classes, who choose classes that do not count toward their major, or who have unrealistic timetables. Research should also study the implications of new options and pathways: new kinds of colleges, new kinds of associate's and bachelor's degrees, delayed college entry and college mobility, ways colleges prepare students for the labor market, and ways colleges offer job placement services.

Of course, this kind of information is not always readily available. Some students in college are not actually in college-level classes that satisfy degree requirements (students in remedial courses, for example), are not working toward a degree, are proceeding more

slowly than assumed, and have less certain employment prospects than they expect. Researchers can and must endeavor to provide information that helps make the college experience more transparent and encourages policies toward that end.

Examining some of these issues requires institutional information, but that is often hard to gather and interpret. Student surveys can provide much of the data researchers need to begin examining these issues. Students tend to know which associate's degree they are pursuing, about how long it will take to obtain their degree, and whether they are proceeding on schedule. They can later report whether they have lost time in taking the wrong courses and whether they had enough information to choose the right courses. They can report whether their college offers job placement assistance and whether they used it to find a job after graduation. They can also report whether their job uses the skills they learned in college and whether their coursework advances their career. These easily asked questions are a good starting point because they have important implications for education policy and practice.

August 2007