

Evaluation of SHEEO's State Policy Resource Connections (SPRC) Initiative

FINAL REPORT

Prepared and Submitted by:

Ann Daley Ryherd

Ann Ryherd Consulting
3402 Gibraltar Ct SE
Olympia, WA 98501
Email: daley52@comcast.net.

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Introduction

With the assistance of the Lumina Foundation, the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) staff has been working to develop a broad, up-to-date database of policy relevant information for the states and to create analytical studies to help state leaders identify priorities and practices for improving policies and performance across the higher education landscape.

The project is entitled State Policy Resource Connections (SPRC). Its stated objective is ***to provide SHEEOs with rapid, easy access to policy relevant data, and to create analytical studies to help state leaders identify priorities and develop strategies for improving policies and performance.***

The project resulted in a data warehouse built through Microsoft SQL Server, which allowed for streamlined uploading, cleaning and organizing IPEDS data sets from eight institutional surveys (Completions, Enrollment, Employees, Fall Staffing, Finance, Financial Aid, Graduation Rates, and Institutional Characteristics) for the past ten years. Four analytical reports were prepared and distributed based on the direction framed by the SPRC Board of Advisors. Each report included a national overview (publicly released) and state-specific institutional profiles (released to the respective state's SHEEO).

This report summarizes the findings and recommendations from a formal evaluation of the states' responses to the project and the analytical reports described below.

Appendix A provides a brief summary of the findings of each SPRC report and a link to the full report. The following is a short description of the four reports that were the focus of this evaluation:

- ***Degree Productivity and Cost Trends (August 2010)*** provides a national and cross-state overview and analysis of trends in degree production and completion rates, costs per degree and completion, and enrollment in public higher education.
- ***Certificate Production and the Race toward Higher Education Attainment (December 2010)*** provides national, regional and cross-state overviews of recent trends in certificate production and the types of certificates being produced.

- *Staffing Trends in Public Colleges and Universities: A National Analysis 2001-2009* (May 2011) analyzes postsecondary staffing characteristics and changes over time by state, sector, and institutional type.
- *Degree Production Trends by Program Area: A National Analysis 2001-2009* (August 2011) examines degree productivity by specific program area using the Classification on Instructional Programs (CIP).

Evaluation Process

Individual telephone interviews were conducted with SHEEO offices in twenty-four states between August 29 and October 13, 2011. SHEEO staff selected the states and scheduled the interviews. The author of this report personally interviewed all twenty-four states. Two states initially selected were not interviewed due to time and scheduling constraints. The individuals interviewed in each of the 24 states are listed in **Appendix B**.

The interviews were framed around seven questions designed to assess whether the individual state SHEEO agency found the reports useful for informing policy and practice in that state, whether and how the SHEEO project helped the state with data analysis and policy development, and what recommendations, if any, that state official had for future SHEEO reports and analyses. The text of each interview question is provided below in the section entitled “Summary of Feedback Received.”

Interviewees were assured of confidentiality in an effort to obtain candid and thorough responses to the questions posed. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Several interviewees asked for and received the author’s contact information to provide follow up responses to the questions. However, as of this writing, no follow up responses have been received.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

1. A significant majority of the states interviewed in the course of this evaluation found the reports useful and have used the comparative analyses to inform decision makers (institutional presidents, boards, governors, legislators) and to identify priorities and develop strategies for improvement.
2. SHEEO’s effort to develop and distribute comparative analytical reports is a good strategy for focusing the attention of busy state higher education leaders on important policy issues.

3. The subject matter addressed in the four comparative analyses was generally considered timely and relevant to ongoing work in the states. A majority of those interviewed indicated great interest in the general topic of degree productivity and associated costs. Several states commended the staffing trends report because it provided data and analysis not collected by the state.
4. For states without robust data systems and large staffs, the reports were welcomed as filling a gap in terms of data collected and analytical capability. Even in states with rich data and analytical capacity, the studies provided the state and national average comparisons that put that state's situation and policy initiatives into context.
5. There is strong interest in the majority of the states for SHEEO to continue to keep these analytical studies current and to undertake new topics of interest to the states.
6. SHEEO is considered a credible source and should leverage its position to undertake original research (e.g. through state surveys or data agreements to access student record systems) to provide information and analyze data that is not easily accessible.
7. Two states indicated they were unaware of the studies until they were contacted to schedule the evaluation interview. SHEEO should review how the studies are distributed and ascertain if greater awareness could be achieved through webinars, or other ways to achieve broader distribution to key SHEEO agency staff in the states.
8. Two states offered the view that the SHEEO studies are duplicative of other resources, such as the Delta Cost Project, and suggested that SHEEO should find its own "niche" for future reports.
9. Three states expressed concerns about the timeliness and the consistency of the underlying data, while a large number of those interviewed expressed great interest in further disaggregation of the data as presented in the various reports, such as comparing states of similar size or demographic characteristics.
10. In undertaking future studies, SHEEO should consider how best to engage the states in the identification of topics of greatest interest or highest priority.

Summary of the Feedback Received

Question 1. Is the information provided in the past studies useful for informing policy and practice in your state? If so, in what ways? If not, what types of information would be more helpful?

A large majority of the states interviewed as part of this evaluation (17 out of 24) indicated that the reports were useful and relevant to policy and practice. Five states had a positive response to the studies but for a variety of reasons had not utilized them. Of these, three states indicated that while the reports appeared to be useful and topical, the particular circumstances in that state (e.g. leadership transition) had made it difficult for them to apply the findings to policy and practice in that state, and two states were simply not aware of the studies until they were contacted requesting they be part of the evaluation process. Only two states said the reports were not useful or were duplicative of other publicly available resources.

With one exception, the responses from the state SHEEO were quite positive, even enthusiastic, about the value and usefulness of the four studies. In the states without a SHEEO or in several states when the state SHEEO was unavailable for the interview, the SHEEO staff or institutional representative interviewed tended to focus more on their technical concerns about the underlying data and the methodology for making national comparisons. It is fair to conclude that the primary audience for this SHEEO project – the state SHEEOs themselves – were extremely positive about the usefulness of the studies and strongly supportive of SHEEO continuing this work.

Among those states with a positive response, many volunteered that the comparative analyses of degree productivity and cost trends provided an important national context for ongoing work in the respective states. Several indicated that the report on certificate production had prompted a reexamination of their performance funding formulas. Several other states commented that the report on staffing trends had been of particular interest and was especially useful because it had not been addressed by other research organizations.

Even among the states with a strong positive response to the analytical studies, there was considerable discussion during the interview of technical concerns about the quality, timeliness and consistency of the data underlying the reports. Two states raised questions about the validity of the findings claiming that their previous

feedback (provided during an earlier review process) had not been incorporated into the final reports.

In general, a significant majority of the states said the reports were helpful in that they focused attention on issues that were timely and relevant, provided a depth of analysis that is especially needed as states cut back on staffing and research capabilities, and even for those states with robust data and analytical capability, the national and state-by-state comparisons provided context that was otherwise missing in that state's own work.

Question 2. What recommendations do you have for future reports in these areas or other areas?

This question generated a large and diverse set of suggestions that is difficult to summarize. The most commonly mentioned topics for future research or reports were:

- Linking data on educational outcomes and degree productivity with workforce and employment needs;
- Continuing SHEEO's current focus on degree productivity and cost trends; keeping the data current; focusing the analysis on smaller groupings of states in regions or by grouping states of similar size and population characteristics;
- Disaggregation of degree productivity cost trends and completion metrics by sector and institutional mission;
- Completion statistics by states, disaggregated by student characteristics (race, gender, income);
- More information on certificate production, data on completions for certificates that are industry recognized
- Financial aid and student indebtedness;
- A comparative analysis of graduate degree production across the states;
- A compendium of best practices and innovations across the states on a variety of topics (completion and attainment; financial performance and outcomes funding; staffing and workload issues);
- Good metrics for accountability measures commonly used (graduation rates, degree production, expenditures)
- An analysis of the cost of "failure" – what is the lost investment or lost opportunity associated with not achieving national attainment goals?

This list barely scratches the surface of the rich response received to the question of future SHEEO analytical efforts. The variety and number of suggestions is testament to both the hunger for better information and the credibility of SHEEO in filling that gap.

Question 3. Do these studies fill a gap in terms of the types of data collected in your state?

Question 4. Do these studies fill a gap in terms of your state's capacity to analyze data of these and other issues?

These questions are closely related and states tended to respond to both similarly depending on the depth and breadth of state data collection and research capability. A majority of the states (19 of 24) responded that the SHEEO reports either filled a data and analytical capacity gap or complemented the work the state was doing. Having national and state-by state comparisons was seen as especially helpful even in states with robust data systems. The SHEEO reports helped states to see national trends, which provided perspective and focused the state on areas of concern. One state commented that if they knew in advance what research SHEEO was undertaking, it would allow them to divert their own resources to other pressing needs. Another state suggested that as states improve their data capacity, it would be helpful to have role clarification. What should SHEEO focus on and where should the states direct their attention? Several states indicated that while they collected a lot of data, the SHEEO report on staffing trends filled a particular gap.

Five states responded that the reports did not fill either a data gap or an analytical capacity gap. One state expressed concern that the reports provided institutional comparisons, which was not the policy approach preferred in that state. Rather, SHEEO should have focused on sectors or separated the analysis by institutional mission. Another state commented that the SHEEO reports caused extra work because the state had to "reconcile and contextualize the message." This comment was offered by an individual from an institutional research office, whose job is to review and report the findings of a large number of national reports.

Question 5. In addition to the reports for which we've asked your feedback, what other data sources have you found helpful? How and why are these sources useful? What are the issues that make them more or less useful?

All of the states rely on a variety of data sources. Commonly mentioned are IPEDS, NCHEMS, SREB, WICHE and the Delta Cost Project. States also rely on the work of Complete College America (CCA), the College Board for SAT reports, the Census, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the National Student Clearinghouse (NCS). Several states whose responsibilities include community colleges mentioned Achieving the Dream as a source of metrics and a model for collaboration. SHEEO's State Higher Education Finance (SHEF) annual reports were also mentioned.

When asked how and why these sources are useful, the response focused on particular needs met by the data source mentioned. For example, the CCA was praised for collecting attainment and degree completion data from the states. NCHEMS was mentioned for a variety of products and Patrick Kelley's work was

highlighted. Two states expressed the view that the SHEEO reports were duplicative of the work undertaken by the Delta Cost Project. Several expressed the hope that SHEEO might become a “one-stop shop” providing easy access to these commonly used data sources.

Question 6. Would you find it useful to discuss these findings with your colleagues in other states? And if so, how?

All but one state responded positively to this question. States are interested in discussing the issues raised by these reports with their colleagues at future SHEEO meetings, policy conferences, and through other means such as webinars. One suggested that the next step should be a SHEEO sponsored discussion about the results of this initiative (SPRC), what has been accomplished to date and what should be undertaken next. A number of states indicated that the conversation should be structured or focused among regions or by highlighting best practices among states with the best outcomes on various measures. Several indicated that this work should be augmented by a process like Achieving the Dream where colleagues meet face to face to share best practices and develop consensus on the metrics.

Question 7. What are the advantages and disadvantages of presenting data to you in different formats?

- a. **Written comparative reports like the SPRC reports,**
- b. **Web-based resources which you can use for your own data manipulation,**
- c. **Other formats (please describe).**

Most states indicated a preference for both written analytical reports and web-based resources they can access for data manipulation. Two states said that access to data was the preferred format. Two states preferred the written analytical reports and indicated that by “written reports” they meant PDF files that they could easily transmit to others. Several states shared the view that the comparative analytical reports raised issues and pointed to trends that were difficult for them to raise themselves but that it was important to access the data to “slice and dice” it to address that state’s context. It was suggested by several that the reports could be improved by providing clearer statements, especially on the charts and graphs, of the “take-aways.” As one said, “you need a teaser and then the ability to go to the website for the data.”

Additional Comments

At the conclusion of the formal questions, states were asked if they had any additional comments they would like to share. Many thanked SHEEO for

undertaking this initiative and indicated that SHEEO is a credible source of information that they rely on. A few additional comments are highlighted:

- It would be good to have an advisory board of SHEEO members with expertise in IPEDS.
- SHEEO is one of the best at helping us confront difficult issues and set the stage for a safer conversation. SHEEO brings credibility to these conversations.
- We recommend that SHEEO develop this body of work into an ongoing rigorous set of reports.
- The SHEEO work gives us “pillars and platforms” to do our public policy work.
- I like that SHEEO is attuned to users and works with the states in the design of these studies.
- The information is useful and we hope it keeps coming! All of this work has dovetailed nicely with the work of the National Governors Association and Complete College America and the national agenda on completions.
- SHEEO is in a good position to continue its work to provide national and state comparisons.
- The biggest help SHEEO could give the states would be to help us understand the WHY of the national trends, not just the WHAT.
- SHEEO has great credibility. So far these reports are right on target.
- It would be really cool if SHEEO would provide a centralized place to access IPEDS and other data sources, focused around research topics.
- The more we can move toward interpretation of the data, the better. SHEEO could help with interpretation and create appropriate benchmarks.
- This is a very worthwhile activity. Fine-tuning is always appropriate, but let’s do more!

Conclusions

SHEEO’s State Policy Resource Connections (SPRC) initiative has been well received by its intended users and there is strong interest among the states interviewed in assisting SHEEO in the development of next steps on this initiative and identifying priority areas of research. When asked for suggestions for future research, the great variety and number of recommendations received is testament to both the hunger for better information and the credibility of SHEEO in filling that gap.

Appendix A: Summary of SPRC Reports

Degree Productivity and Cost Trends

August 2010

http://www.sheeo.org/pubs/Degree_Production_and_Cost_Trends.pdf.

This report provides a national and cross-state overview and analysis of trends in degree and completion production, costs per degree and completion, and enrollment in public higher education. Specific findings included:

- Changes in FTE enrollment and awards (degrees and completions) are positive in the majority of states.
- In all Carnegie groupings, degree and completion productivity exceed FTE enrollment growth.
- Over the past decade, costs per degree and completion have been reasonably stable in every Carnegie grouping, with a modest amount of variation among the groupings. The cost per degree grew by 6 percent nationally in the first five years, and it declined by 6 percent in the last five years.

Certificate Production and the Race toward Higher Education Attainment

December 2010

<http://www.sheeo.org/pubs/pcn/Uploads/Final%20Report.pdf>.

This report provides a national, regional and cross-state overview of recent trends in certificate production and the types of certificates driving production. Specific findings included:

- Nationally, certificate and associate degree production grew over the last ten years, primarily fueled by strong growth in the first part of the decade, and with production in the public sector occurring at associates institutions.
- Certificates less than one year and certificates equal to one year but less than two years represent the majority of certificates conferred by associates institutions.
- Regionally, the South experienced the strongest growth in FTE, certificates, and associates degrees.
- Ohio, Kentucky, Arkansas, Nevada, and New Mexico saw the largest growth margin in certificates awarded.

Staffing Trends in Public Colleges and Universities: A National Analysis 2001-2009
May 2011

http://www.sheeo.org/pubs/Fall_Staffing-Final05-24-2011.pdf.

This report analyzes postsecondary staffing characteristics and changes over time by state, sector, and institution type. Specific findings included:

- Between 2001 and 2009, America's public colleges and universities experienced a decline in total staff per 100 student FTE. Although both student FTE and total staff have increased, staffing levels have increased at a slower rate.
- Part-time instructional staff (Faculty and Graduate Assistants) per 100 student FTE has stayed relatively constant while full-time instructional staff per 100 student FTE has declined. Public colleges and universities may be meeting increasing student demand with part-time staff rather than creating full-time positions.
- Staffing areas such as Clerical and Secretarial, Executive/Administrative and Management, and Maintenance and Skilled Crafts were more likely to see declines in staff per 100 student FTE while areas that are directly involved in serving students such as Faculty, Graduate Assistants, and Other Professional were likely to see increases in staff per 100 student FTE but with variations. This suggests that from 2001 to 2009 the sector has achieved some economies of scale, particularly in operational support.
- Carnegie groups with more emphasis on research employ more Other Professional staff per 100 student FTE, and Other Professionals make up a larger portion of their overall staff.

Degree Production Trends by Program Area: A National Analysis 2004-2009
August 2011

http://www.sheeo.org/pubs/Degree_Production_BY_Program_Area.pdf.

This report provides an analysis that builds upon the previous *Degree Productivity and Cost Trends* report by examining degree productivity by specific program area using the Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP). Specific findings included:

- Between 2004 and 2009, student FTE increased by 11 percent, while the number of degrees awarded grew by 13 percent and total completions grew by 15 percent. The total number of certificates awarded increased significantly (26 percent) over the same five year time period.

- Across disciplines, Health (37%) experienced the largest increase in the number of total completions, while total completions in Trades grew by 24 percent. Education (2%) and STEM (4%) experienced the lowest growth in total completions.
- Across the seven program areas: Associates institutions produced the highest number of completions with Arts and Humanities (54%), Health (65%) and Trades (83%); Baccalaureate, Masters and Doctoral institutions produced the highest number of completions within Business and Communications (35%), Education (54%) and Social and Behavior Sciences/Human Services (34%); Research – Very High Activity Institutions produced the highest number of total completions in STEM (37%).
- With regards to market share, the majority of disciplines maintained their market share levels from 2004-2009, with the exception of Health and STEM fields.

Appendix B: List of Participants

Alabama

Gregory Fitch, Executive Director
Alabama Commission on Higher Education

Connecticut

Mike Meotti, Executive Vice President
Connecticut Board of Regents for Higher Education

Florida

Frank Brogan, Chancellor
Tim Jones, Chief Financial Officer
Florida Board of Governors, State University System

Idaho

Mike Rush, Executive Director
Leah Schultz, Research Director
Idaho Board of Education

Illinois

George W. Reid, Executive Director
Illinois Board of Higher Education

Indiana

Teresa Lubbers, Commissioner
Ken Sawyer and Molly Chamberlain, staff
Indiana Commission for Higher Education

Iowa

Diana Gonzalez, Chief Academic Officer
Iowa Board of Regents

Kansas

Andy Tompkins, President and CEO
Diane Duffy, Vice President for Finance

Gary Alexander, Vice President for Academic Affairs
Kansas Board of Regents

Kentucky

Bob King, President
John Hayek, Senior Vice President for Budget
Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education

Louisiana

James Purcell, Commissioner of Higher Education
Board of Regents

Massachusetts

Richard Freeland, Commissioner
Alison MacDonald, Director of Finance and Administration
Jonathan Keller, Associate Commissioner for Planning and Research
Department of Higher Education

Missouri

Timothy Wittmann, Research Associate
Missouri Department of Higher Education

Nebraska

Marshall Hill, Executive Director
Nebraska's Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education

New Jersey

Betsy Garlotti, Director of Finance and Research
Alan Gunther, Senior Policy Advisor
New Jersey Commission on Higher Education

Oklahoma

Glen Johnson, Chancellor
Houston Davis, Vice Chancellor
Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education

Oregon

Robert Kieran, Assistant Vice Chancellor
Oregon University System

Pennsylvania

John Cavanaugh, chancellor
Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education

South Dakota

Jack Warner, Executive Director and Chief Executive Officer
South Dakota Board of Regents

Tennessee

David Wright
Associate Executive Director
Tennessee Higher Education Commission

Texas

Raymund Paredes, Commissioner
Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board

Virginia

Peter Blake, Interim Director
Virginia State Council of Higher Education

West Virginia

Brian Noland, Chancellor
West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission

Wisconsin

Heather Kim
Sue Buth
University of Wisconsin Office of Policy Analysis and Research

Wyoming

Don D. Richards
Director of Government and Community Affairs
University of Wyoming