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SHEEO RELEASES
STRONG FOUNDATIONS: THE STATE OF STATE POSTSECONDARY DATA SYSTEMS

The full report and supporting documents are available at www.sheeo.org/sspds.

Boulder, Colorado – SHEEO has released ***Strong Foundations: The State of State Postsecondary Data Systems***, a report that describes existing state postsecondary student-level data systems and provides examples of how they have been used. This study included 59 data systems in 44 states and the District of Columbia.

State-level data systems serve two primary purposes: 1) they can monitor the progress of individual students as they move from one school to another in our educational system; and 2) they can help assess the effectiveness of policies and practices to promote student success, including transfer policies, admission policies, high school preparation, high school counseling, degree completion, and student financial assistance. These systems provide valuable feedback to both educators and policy makers seeking to improve educational outcomes.

The value of student unit record databases has recently been powerfully demonstrated by an important new book, *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities*, by William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson. Their analysis yielded important insights about ways to increase college completion rates for academically talented, low income students, which would have been impossible without employing unit record databases in a number of states.

To provide all the benefits described above, it is necessary to collect and analyze data on individual students, while safeguarding the privacy of individual records. These student data systems incorporate multiple safeguards to assure privacy. First, the databases are secure from non-authorized access, using essentially the same tools and procedures employed in confidential employment, bank, health care, and governmental databases. Second, the databases are used not to study individuals, but to analyze the aggregated experience of groups of students with similar characteristics. Third, and most importantly, these databases are not designed to be comprehensive. While they often include many data elements, they are much less comprehensive than the individual student records schools and colleges normally require and retain on individuals.

The more extensive personal data on students contained in the files of schools and colleges are employed by instructors and counselors who work directly with individual students. In order to serve individual students well, teachers and counselors often need access to sensitive personal information that has no relevance to policy development or institutional performance. While it seems clear that the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) was written primarily to safeguard students from inappropriate disclosure of the sensitive personal records retained by schools and colleges, the safeguards described above hold state level postsecondary data systems to the same high standards of privacy protection.

Among the report's key findings:

- Forty-five states (including the District of Columbia) have at least one student unit record (SUR) system (a total of 59 systems). Twenty-nine states have between two and five systems.
- Nineteen states collect data from independent, nonprofit institutions.
- Seven states collect data from for-profit institutions.
- All 45 states collect student demographic and postsecondary enrollment data.
- Of the 23 states that collect K–12 data elements, 20 have access to that data via a relationship with the state education agency (K–12); the other 3 collect these data directly from the students.
- Of the 26 states where the postsecondary agency/entity has a relationship with the state labor/workforce agency, 23 have access to workforce data elements and 3 provide postsecondary data to the workforce agency.
- There is great similarity among states in definitions and code structures for 15 data elements, most of which are demographic in nature.

States have come a long way in developing these systems and using them for improving education. And while they provide a strong foundation for future progress, we must continue to enhance and expand educational information systems and use them effectively to accelerate educational attainment in the United States.

Hard copies of the report are available for purchase for \$10 each. Bulk rates are negotiable.

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Strong Foundations updates and expands on *Critical Connections: Linking states' unit record systems to track student progress*, prepared in 2007 by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems and funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education.

The State Higher Education Executive Officers, the national association of the chief executives of statewide governing boards and coordinating boards of postsecondary education, works to assist its members and the states in developing and sustaining excellent systems of higher education.

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