Dear Technological Community,

For those interested in using federal government data to build consumer-facing products for students, parents, and school counselors, the U.S. Department of Education released a treasure-trove of information last September. Along with a newly revamped College Scorecard, a tool to help prospective college students with their college search, ED released an Application Programming Interface (API) that makes all of the data used to build the Scorecard – plus additional data elements – publicly accessible. In all, the API’s data set includes 1,953 separate data points.

Many in the press and the field of higher education have already started building new college rankings and tools based on these data, including the Brookings Institute, ProPublica’s Debt by Degrees, Georgetown University Center for Education and the Workforce, and the New York Times. As policy experts, we believe there is room for even more innovative tools that appeal to students. In particular, we encourage the development of tools that serve low-income students and focus on the particular data points that are crucial to their decision of where to attend college.

Low-income students are more likely to be the first in their family to go to college and to attend a high school with a high student-to-counselor ratio. For these reasons, they oftentimes do not have the same information and supports available to their higher income peers. The newly released data, coupled with technological solutions, can help to bridge this divide.

There are many factors to consider when working with this population. Mobile devices are the primary avenue for low-income students to connect to the Internet, so tools should be available from mobile responsive websites and applications. Language must be student-friendly and not assume a high level of familiarity with higher education terminology. In some cases, multilingual tools will allow non-English speaking parents to engage more thoroughly in the college choice process. Pairing college search tools with links to financial aid tools, standardized test prep tools, and others will be beneficial. Finally, developing a tool with a component for counselors/advisors to use will create maximum impact.

As policy experts and representatives of students and practitioners, the following is our advice to those seeking to use the College Scorecard data to aid students, targeted to those who are students of color, from low-income families, or are the first in their families to attend college.

**Recommendations for Tool Development:**

1. Use a web-based site with a mobile option to meet students’ needs while also enabling counselors/advisors to work with students on the tool.
2. Be mindful of context. Tools must be mobile accessible, but in an effort to meet this goal, do not remove all context. Students will need help with definitions and advice on what criteria to consider. For example, keep the definitions of key terms integrated through links to a glossary if information cannot all be included on one mobile app page or use an icon that opens and collapses when clicked.
3. Build a companion piece for advisors/counselors to use with the tool as they meet with students, but keep in mind that not all students will have an opportunity to meet with a counselor.
4. Build a suite of applications or tools that work together and link to one another. This will keep any one app or tool from being too complicated, but also will help students to know all areas of
information to explore. Considering partnering or building upon existing applications or websites to manage the scope of work.

   a. Variation: build a suite of tools to use based on the age of the student, as a sophomore in high school needs different information than a senior.
   b. Build a completely different suite of tools for adult or returning students, who need different guidance entirely.
   c. Include any information available on certificates and sub-associate’s degrees where possible, even though this information is not on the Department’s student-facing Scorecard tool. Data on these institutions are available in the Scorecard data set and API.

5. Include the option (but not requirement) for students to create a login so that searches can be saved. Required logins may deter student use; if one is required, it should include the option to sign in through a social media account.

6. Accommodate students’ expected response time. For tools that provide interaction with an advisor, counselor or mentor, the ability to receive a prompt response is key. Proactive nudges to students (such as reminding them to complete a form) can work, but must be paired with a quick response if the student acts on the nudge.

7. Utilize search engine optimization when tagging college search/advising tools so that both broader terms that students are more likely to use and technical terms that professionals use, such as “college advising,” are included.

8. Consider user-testing the tools with students in the target audience. Partner with non-profit organizations, such as those co-signed here, which work directly with students as one possible resource.

9. Clearly communicate how the students’ information can be used and shared. Do not sell users’ information without their informed consent.

10. Provide a disclaimer that third-party tools are not affiliated with the U.S. Department of Education.

**Items of Interest Related to the Data:**

1. Be aware of data definitions – in many cases, Scorecard API data only include students receiving financial aid, while in other cases, the data include all students, not just graduates. These are complicated issues to explain to students, but the definitions provide necessary context for understanding the results.

2. Workforce outcomes are key, but higher education is more than just a pathway to earnings. Any tool for students should explain that higher earnings are not the only benefit of a college degree and should include at least general information on other benefits, such as the ones outlined in College Board’s Five Ways Education Pays.

3. Because much of the Scorecard data for community colleges are suppressed, these figures should be carefully explored in order to provide the most fair and accurate representation of these institutions. Additionally, tools should address the context surrounding community college data. For example, students may not know that, by design, some community colleges focus on transfer in addition to completion.

4. A few data points that can be especially helpful as students make their college decisions include:
   a. Graduation rates disaggregated in a way that students can answer the question, “What are the chances that a student like me will graduate here?”
      i. Examples include: students of color and students are who are veterans
ii. Additional disaggregation: students who complete on time, within 150% of program time, and students who transfer out before completing 50% of the program
   b. Net price disaggregated by income level
   c. Post-college earnings—median earnings and the percentage of students earning more than a typical high school graduate
   d. Student loan repayment rate, particularly when paired with the college’s borrowing rate
   e. Median student loan debt of graduates
5. Data points to use with caution:
   a. Pell Grant Recipient Graduation Rates: It is important for low-income students to know how institutions serve them, but the Pell Grant specific data in the API come from an older data set that is incomplete.
   b. Graduation Rates including Part-Time and Transfer Students: Similar to above, these rates are either incomplete or unreliable because of limited available data.
   c. Transfer Rates: It is important for students to know their likelihood of transferring, especially at community colleges, but the data are currently incomplete.
6. Developers should make use of the current caution flag used in the College Scorecard but make note that there are several limitations to that flag, as it does not capture the full range of possible heightened regulatory scrutiny. This means there could be some schools students should be cautious about that are not currently flagged.
7. Other Data Sources to Consider:
   IPEDS, National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), State Longitudinal Data Systems

The undersigned groups hope that this letter serves as a resource for those looking to design tools to serve students. For any follow up questions, please reach out to any of those included.

Sincerely,

Data Quality Campaign (DQC)
The Education Trust (Ed Trust)
Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce
Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)
National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA)
National College Access Network (NCAN)
The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS)
Workforce Data Quality Campaign (WDQC)
Western Interstate Council of Higher Education (WICHE)