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ABSTRACT

The lack of comparable information for prospective students can and has resulted in wrong decisions about college choice, which are costly to the student, institutions, and society. A strong possibility exists that outside agencies will soon impose additional standards of comparability on postsecondary institutions. Such externally imposed standards may promote homogeneity, may be costly, and may give a distorted picture to prospective students unless institutions initiate cooperative actions. Institutions of similar types need to agree on some reasonably uniform definitions and methods of collecting, presenting, and qualifying particular items of information appropriate to valid educational decisions. (Author/MSE)

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PROVIDING COMPARABLE INFORMATION
TO
PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS
ISSUES, PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
Oscar T. Lenning, Joan S. Stark, and Patricia Wishart
National Task Force on Better Information
for
Student Choice

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PROVIDING COMPARABLE INFORMATION TO PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS:

ISSUES, PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Oscar T. Lenning, Joan S. Stark, and Patricia Wishart

The relatively recent establishment of federal and state programs to assist students with educational costs has brought the American dream of equal access to education beyond high school closer to reality. Although sufficient funds are still not available to provide full opportunity for all, only better communication about both available assistance and the diverse types of postsecondary opportunities can assure the eventual achievement of free choice as well as equal access.

In order to choose among postsecondary options, prospective students must be able to compare schools and programs in light of their needs and interests. Studies of student choice indicate that cost factors are of primary importance. (Kohn et al., 1974; Christensen, Medler and Weisbrod, 1972; Davis and Van Dusen, 1975). Thus, it is essential to help students assess accurately the net costs of college attendance. Less is known about other criteria students use in choosing colleges, but it is clear that the importance of other elements, such as parental influence, student ability, curricular programs, location, college environment, and perceived educational quality, differ for different students. A wide range of comparable information is necessary to facilitate choice by a diverse group of prospective students.

In part, this need for comparable information has been met by a proliferation of guidebooks for the prospective student. Editors of such guidebooks have attempted to provide similar information about each institution. The major purpose of the guides, however, is to help

students narrow the list of alternative institutions, rather than to guide the final choice. The final choice from among the selected "possibles" depends upon more detailed information supplied directly by the institution and by other sources of counsel such as peers, parents, counselors, students attending the college, and alumni.

Student decision making in the final stages of selection is believed by many to have been hampered because comparable information is not supplied by the institutions themselves. Information that utilizes common terminology arrived at through consistent procedures is lacking. For reasons to be discussed shortly, the higher education community has supported the comparison of information by guidebook publishers¹ but has done little to develop acceptable techniques for adequate comparison at the institutional level. Although college administrators are aware that students will compare the information they receive, there have been few attempts to cooperate in developing consistent content or style. Currently, some state and federal agencies have become concerned about the comparability of information. Institutions have been called upon to develop procedures that will facilitate comparison.

Recent Attempts at Comparability

Although earlier suggestions for presenting comparable information went largely unheeded,² four participants in the National Task Force on Better Information for Student Choice³ have recently attempted to determine.

¹Such guidebooks have, however, been criticized for not ensuring that the same procedures and definitions were used in gathering information at each school.

²The College Board's Commission on Tests discussed such matters in 1968.

³The National Task Force, supported by The Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, worked between 1975 and 1977, and involved eleven demonstration institutions and four resource agencies.



if techniques for gathering and presenting comparable information could be developed with cooperating groups of institutions. The four attempts to compare information differed considerably in scope, in the techniques used, and in the range of institutions involved in the effort.

The College Scholarship Service focused on what is sometimes referred to as "access" information of the most critical type. They attempted to develop comparable information about costs and financial aid opportunities at a wide range of schools.

The Associated Colleges of the Midwest, a consortium of liberal arts colleges, focused on aspects of institutional "outcomes," namely, post-college employment and rates of admission to graduate and professional schools. The project attempted to demonstrate that already existing national sources can be utilized to provide built-in comparability.

The Syracuse University Department of Higher/Postsecondary Education was concerned with describing educational "processes" in which a student would participate during the years of attendance. The researchers examined existing academic and career planning services and attempted to write comparable descriptions for nine diverse institutions.

The fourth agency, The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, included all three types of information -- access, outcomes, and processes -- in its work. This project explored what information, potentially available on campuses but not currently provided to prospective students, is useful for students in making comparisons, and tested some alternative methods of presenting the identified information.

Insights about comparability gained in these four efforts, as well as in some of the eleven demonstration projects associated with the National Task Force, may be of value to others. Therefore, the relevant findings are discussed in this paper in five categories:

(1) alternative views about comparability of information; (2) consideration of past and current reluctance of institutions to assist efforts toward comparability of information; (3) professional obligations to provide comparable information to students; (4) accomplishments and problems encountered by the Task Force members; and (5) recommendations for the future.

ALTERNATIVE VIEWS OF COMPARABILITY

Two conflicting views exist concerning the use of information about two or more institutions for comparison purposes. One view, which we have termed the "comparable information bits" approach, holds that true comparability requires direct one-to-one comparisons among institutions on specific items of information, such as indices or statistics.

Exactly the same items of information must be obtained for each school; all basic pieces of data that are included in the information item must be defined identically for each school, must be collected during the same time frame using the same techniques, and must be combined in the same way to constitute the information item. Similarly, in this view, all information items must be presented in the same format for each institution to facilitate direct comparison.

The opposing view is that one can only compare "whole pictures." In this approach, each institution should independently gather and present

in the most appropriate contextual manner all information needed to describe the institution. Then the "whole picture" formed in the student's mind for one institution can be compared to the "whole picture" for other institutions under consideration. The picture most attractive to the student -- that which comes closest to meeting his/her perceived needs -- is thus selected. In this view, there is no concern for the information provided to students by other institutions. The sole concern is with conveying to prospective students the essence of a single institution and its programs in order to accurately answer questions from prospective students and their advisers. One rationale for this approach is that institutional comparisons depend greatly upon the interactions between student values and their perceptions of the institution. As acknowledged by Lawrence, Weathersby, Curry and Eden (1971) "... comparability like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder."

A problem with the "comparable bits" view is that while a particular information item may accurately describe a given aspect of one institution, it may distort the same aspect for another institution. For example, comparison of the percentage of entering students who graduate may be misleading when community colleges are compared with universities since (1) many vocational-technical students get attractive job offers prior to graduation and it is to their advantage to drop out; (2) some students who plan to attend four-year colleges and universities transfer at the end of the first year; (3) many part-time students work full time and take two or three times as long to graduate; (4) a significant number of students have no intention of graduating--their goal is merely to take certain courses of interest.



Another problem with the "comparable bits" view is that it focuses attention on specific aspects of the institution in isolation from other important aspects. For example, a focus on "financial aid awarded according to students' family income" ignores the fact that determination of financial need commonly involves direct consideration of up to forty more distinct factors. A focus on job placement rates ignores the many other desirable outcomes of a college education.

The "holistic" approach has its problems, too. It is extremely difficult to compare complex "wholes" without considering how selected parts of each whole compare to one another. It is difficult to get a good feel for the whole picture at one such complex institution, let alone for several of them being compared. For example, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems project staff spent nearly a week at each participating campus visiting with dozens of people and examining available information materials. They felt they had a picture of each campus sufficiently valid to allow comparisons. But, in comparing the campuses after the visits, the discussion necessarily dealt with one sector or component of each campus at a time. Nevertheless, knowledge of the surrounding context on each campus made discussion of particular information items more meaningful.

Another valid criticism of the "whole picture" approach is that some types of information presented for one college may not be available for others, thus the student may compare "apples with oranges" without being aware that this is so. For example, one institution may discuss the backgrounds, teaching experiences, and teaching philosophy of its instructors as a group; another institution may give a short background

capsule summary separately for each instructor (but omit his teaching philosophy); and a third institution may list only the names, degree credentials and subjects of each instructor. When whole pictures are compared, each picture may be more or less complete or presented in such different ways that institutional comparisons in regard to a particular factor is hindered and the prospective student must work much harder. It is also more difficult for students to verify information that is given in summarized, narrative form.

The experiences of the Task Force members suggest that the desired approach to presenting information for comparability is an approach between the two extreme positions that have been presented.⁴

The institution can supplement a data base of information with additional unique information for a better and more complete self-description.

Complete comparability requires compatible data -- consistency from one institution to another in the definitions and procedures through which data are developed -- and totally compatible data are rarely if ever available because data collection involves human judgment. Nevertheless, useful data compatibility can be approached through "establishing a fixed structure and data definitions while recommending [to institutions] a set of flexible procedures for collecting data" (Gamse and Service, 1976). Such a plan will allow both comparisons of discrete types of information and the development of the entire picture.

⁴The same has been shown to be true of an analogous information exchange program at NCHEMS that has attempted to develop formats and procedures to help institutions share administrative planning and management information. The initial approach to sharing management information was similar to the "comparable bits" approach, but NCHEMS learned early that direct comparisons must be limited in number.

DO INSTITUTIONS OBJECT TO PROVIDING COMPARABLE INFORMATION?

Colleges already provide for the publication of many kinds of comparable data. Regardless of sponsorship, the various reputable guides to colleges depend upon institutional cooperation in furnishing the information. The American Council on Education's massive compendium, American Colleges and Universities, The College Entrance Examination Board's College Handbook, the American College Testing Program's College Search/Planning Book, many commercial guides, and state-sponsored or for-profit computerized information services all exist only with institutional cooperation. Furthermore, although many of these guides, year after year, have presented "traditional" bits of information about colleges, some of them now venture to present "new" kinds of information deemed useful to prospective students, including information on attrition rates, percent of students with financial need whose full need is met, minority group enrollments and even some student outcome measures. Higher education institutions, whether enthusiastically or reluctantly, continue to meet the demands for ever more complex types of comparable data to be used by students at the first or screening stage of college choice.

Undoubtedly most institutions share a reluctance to provide long lists of data items when, as is sometimes the case, the relevant definitions are unclear, the time and cost factors are significant, and there is no check on the veracity of the information supplied by competing institutions. Why then, are institutions willing to participate in these outside ventures?

A wide variety of explanations are possible. Since the higher education community itself has notably failed to establish its own procedures, some institutions may feel the line of least resistance lies in complying with demands from outside providers. Others are convinced that the legitimate need of students for comparable information supercedes concerns over methodology. Again, some institutions may be apprehensive that their credibility might suffer, or they might be overlooked, if they were not included in the guidebooks. For still others, looseness of definition and control and even lack of comprehensiveness in current guides may seem advantageous: an institution can put its best foot forward, avoiding possibly damaging comparisons that might result from a more structured situation.

Finally, for many institutions the present two-step system, imperfect as it may be, is still regarded as perhaps the best to be expected and one that preserves important areas of institutional autonomy. There is at least the possibility that if a wider range of information were provided by guidebooks or other first-step means, the second-step interaction between prospective student and institution might be reduced. Not surprisingly, most institutions would regard such a development as retrogressive, threatening even greater depersonalization of the admissions process. Institutions tend to resist any surrender of their responsibility for providing information about themselves directly to prospective students and the opportunity it presents for stressing their best features.

A review of admissions literature reveals that almost never does an

institution include comparisons with other institutions in its own material. Indeed, to do so is regarded in many circles as unprofessional. Yet, most schools recognize an ethical and professional obligation to provide certain types of comparative data as aids to student decision making. Presently, the college handbooks are the primary vehicles available for the discharge of this responsibility. Thus, they receive widespread support.

The question we face, then, is not whether institutions object to providing comparable data, but whether they might be expected to object to production of different types of comparable data and to providing at least some of this information at the local level for use in the final stages of decision making. Regardless of the way these data are defined -- whether as "new," "better," "more useful," "more comprehensive," -- a certain amount of skepticism should be anticipated from the educational community. Institutions of postsecondary education can be expected to resist attempts to pressure them into accepting changes. Even if they are involved in the formulation of new types of information, they will not quickly agree upon what information is "new," "better," or "more useful," nor on consistent means of gathering and presenting them.

It is for such reasons -- not general intransigence -- that many of the recommendations made over six years ago by the College Board's Commission on Tests (1970) are still unrealized. One specific recommendation was that information prospective students receive should include (among

other items):

such items as statistics on test-score distributions of entering freshmen; the socioeconomic and geographic origins of entering freshmen; the number of students who drop out and transfer in each year and their reasons for doing so, including the proportion of entering freshmen who complete college in the normal period; the number of each type of degree awarded; the proportion of graduates going on to professional schools, graduate schools, and various types of occupations . . .

Six years later, demonstration institutions on the National Task Force have begun to provide and present some of these recommended types of information. Yet even among these pioneering schools there was no firm conviction that the information should be provided in a comparable manner and relatively little effort was made to do so. Indeed, many Task Force members opposed a requirement of comparability for the "new types" of information. Each demonstration institution discovered that it is sometimes costly and time-consuming to produce such information individually. In their perceptions, if a comparability requirement were added, the additional comparability, definitional, and verification problems would increase these costs or duplicate them. Other concerns expressed by institutions, both Task Force members and others, include:

1. Potential acceleration of the trend toward decreased diversity among institutions and loss of uniqueness (There was also a recognition that the exact opposite effect is possible as institutions are compared.)
2. Potential sacrifice of descriptions of many of the aspects of the institution that are not quantifiable to an undue

- emphasis on those that are.
3. Potential improper interpretation or incorrect inferences from isolated bits of information supplied without proper safeguards. (Again, there was recognition that improper inferences are possible with present information materials.)
 4. Reluctance to become involved with comparability that might provide another avenue for additional poorly conceived bureaucratic requirements that may or may not facilitate desired results.

THE PROFESSIONAL OBLIGATION TO PROVIDE COMPARABLE INFORMATION

Many institutional concerns about misinterpretation and misuse of comparative information are justified. Yet, two pressing considerations demand a concerted, if belated, effort by institutions themselves. First and foremost is the obligation to act on the knowledge that lack of comparable information at the final decision stage can, and has, resulted in poor student decisions, that are costly to the student, to the institution, and to society. Second, the possibility that outside agencies will soon develop standards of comparability and impose them on the postsecondary education community is real.

In regard to the educational necessity for comparable information, Task Force members found considerable evidence that students depend heavily on information from friends and parents. This may be true, in

part, because students find information provided by institutions to be irrelevant, difficult to interpret, and lacking in comparability. Most advice from friends and parents is given and received on the premise that the advisor possesses information that allows him or her to correctly infer that the type of education offered at a given school is appropriate for that student, or is of "good" or "poor" quality for students in general. The advice may be wrong as often as right. Thus, in the current two-step process of college choice, the final and most important decision often is based on unidimensional rankings by uninformed parties rather than on either an advantageous presentation by the school of its merits or the careful consideration of the many factors important to an individual student.

Institutions of postsecondary education have long opposed published "quality" rankings on the grounds that each school has unique features easily overlooked by raters, or on grounds that it is impossible to measure educational outcomes accurately. Yet, by abdicating responsibility for comparable information, unidimensional and even biased ratings by both for-profit guide services and well-meaning parents and alumni are encouraged.

Indeed, unidimensional ratings, whatever their source, are inappropriate today for the diverse group of students and institutions that comprise postsecondary education. It is impossible to rank institutions intended to serve different purposes and clienteles on the same scale, or even to rank institutions with somewhat similar missions on a scale pertinent to the educational needs of all students. While the public has acquired notions of which colleges are "good" and which are "second rate," such global images are of little value for today's students. Further, in a rapidly changing postsecondary

scene, the accepted stereotypes may no longer be valid. Colleges have a strong professional obligation to encourage students to avoid invalid judgments.

During the last few years, federal agencies have moved rapidly to establish guidelines for comparable data. State agencies, concerned about federal intrusion on a traditional state responsibility, are beginning to follow suit. The educational community itself can be more widely involved in the conceptualization and practice of providing more appropriate information standards if some reasonably uniform definitions and methods of calculating data can be devised. Similar types of institutions should seemingly be able to find common ground for at least partial standardization of items, in the same way that they have been willing to fill in questionnaires for the various college guides. As diverse requirements are introduced by outside agencies, and as more institutions adopt varying complex management information systems, the task will become increasingly difficult and more costly.

With comparability of information as a goal, there should be an investigation of already existing instruments that might supply built-in comparability. Those data that can be standardized with only the loss of administrative convenience should be gradually made uniform; those that cannot be compared without violence to the mission of the institution and those that need special interpretation should be carefully preserved from standardization. Unless institutions that are concerned with preserving institutional autonomy begin to

attack some of the simpler problems, the war may be lost although the battle is won.

DEVELOPING TECHNIQUES FOR COMPARABILITY

The efforts of the National Task Force agencies were made in this context of general reluctance of institutions to provide comparable information, mitigated by a growing recognition that, for both professional and expedient reasons, the time for educators to act had come. None of the agencies had authority to demand comparable data from the institutions that agreed to cooperate; little or no funds were provided to institutions that participated in the research. All participants were free to withdraw from the deliberations at any time and some did so.

Resource agencies either gathered data themselves and conducted field tests using samples of students or provided the participating institutions with a framework for data gathering and field testing. In the field tests, students were asked to judge the comparable information presented to them and to provide feedback about what was most useful in terms of their own characteristics and needs, and in terms of making comparisons salient to them. In attempting to test the utility of comparable data, the resource agencies deliberately eschewed an evaluative role. No judgments were made of whether information that could be provided by the cooperating institutions might cause prospective students to infer that an institution ranked "high" or "low" on any scale. No attempt was made to construct quality rankings -- either unidimensional or multidimensional.

Using these guidelines in testing the utility of comparable information, the resource agencies paid considerable attention to inferences that could logically and effectively be made from comparative data as well as the inferences students attempted to make. Similarly, much thought was given to the interpretations necessary both for students to utilize the information to maximum advantage and to accommodate differences among institutions. Some generalizations that emerged from these experiences are summarized under two main categories: (1) efforts to structure comparable information, (2) barriers to comparability.

Structuring Comparable Information

The College Scholarship Service project developed a Truth-in-Aiding Statement that attempts to establish the minimum information that should be communicated to students about costs and financial aid opportunities.⁵ The statement has three levels. The first level describes in nontechnical terms the basic qualifications and award conditions for students seeking aid from federal and state programs. Such items would include: citizenship, unit course load requirements, class level requirements, maximum awards, minimum awards, duration of awards, institutional eligibility for participation in federal programs, and application source. Such a statement could be distributed by federal and state governments as a basic source of information about their programs.⁶

⁵ The statement has been refined slightly by the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators and may be recommended for national adoption.

⁶ Federal law now requires that institutions participating in federal assistance programs distribute this information to students.

The second level is a statement to be provided by the postsecondary institutions participating in federal student financial aid programs.

It would include the preceding information and in addition:

- a. a description of any limitations that the institution places on eligibility for federal aid programs (such as minimum unit course load, academic progress, renewal conditions, institutional maximum awards):
- b. a description of all groups and categories of students that are not aided by the institution from federal funds (such as students seeking a second bachelor's degree, unclassified students, participants in continuing education programs); and
- c. a description of the six basic budgets used by the institution in the award of aid and directions for how to obtain other budgets used by the institutions beyond the basic six types.

This information was suggested for distribution to every potential or present student who applied for or inquired about financial aid.

The third level of information is a recommended statement describing comparable information about awards made under state and institutional student aid programs. Included would be data about the number of aid applicants, the number of aid awards, the institutional aid packaging policies, and so forth.

These recommendations are reflected in a number of the National Task Force prospectuses, for example, those developed by Barat College, Mountain Empire Community College, Macomb Community College, and the University of California at Irvine.⁷ It appears, however, that the

⁷ The latter two institutions won a national award from the College Entrance Examination Board and Aetna Casualty Company for their excellent financial aid information.

development of guidelines for good practice and the implementation of good practice are separate processes. The goal of the project has been to urge the student to look beyond gross costs to the net expense of a particular form of education and to recognize that the aim of financial aid programs is not only to increase access but to introduce parity among different opportunities.

This exploratory project has demonstrated that it is necessary to have good communication lines between the person preparing the information for prospective students and the appropriate individual in the financial aid office if adequate comparable data are to be provided. The language of financial aid is extremely technical and therefore difficult to communicate responsibly. Further, the changes in the availability of financial aid from year-to-year require either very frequent up-dating of information or additional hedges against unavailability of money. In general, however, the project was successful and a structure has been created through which institutions can present comparable data about financial aid.

The Associated Colleges of the Midwest sought to demonstrate that comparable data on aspects of graduates' employment, earnings, and career patterns can be collected through one or the other of two different methods: (1) by using a common survey instrument, or (2) by using existing public and quasi-public data sources.

For a survey of the graduates of the class of 1975, representatives of eleven of the Associated Colleges designed a questionnaire subsequently mailed to all the 1975 graduates at each college. The same procedure was followed for a second questionnaire, sent to graduates of the classes of 1970, 1965, and 1960 (each college surveyed two of these classes).

A selected list of Dictionary of Occupational Titles was included in the questionnaire, along with space for write-in titles that were later coded following the same definitions. Similarly, the questionnaire provided a choice of income categories and types of employer. By and large, these methods appear to have resulted in a high level of comparability, although had there been a pilot study, certain occupational titles that proved to be popular for liberal arts graduates could have been included, reducing the number of write-ins. The survey instrument is applicable to all types of colleges for self-study and comparability purposes.

Although the surveying and data analysis were performed centrally, the results are presented by individual college as well as for the entire group, so that each college can compare the responses of its alumni with those of other colleges.

In another demonstration of comparability, the Associated Colleges chose to present data on the attainment of the Ph.D. degree by graduates over a six-year period and had expected to present a similar analysis for admission to medical and law schools. To do this, the ACM Colleges turned, with varying success, to information collected and presented by outside organizations. The most complete easily obtainable data are those on the Ph.D. degree collected by the National Academy of Sciences and supplied in computer print-out form. At the time the ACM figures were obtained, the print-out shows all Ph.D. degrees awarded in the years 1968-73 by the colleges of undergraduate origin of the candidates. Subsequent figures have now been released for doctorates obtained in 1974. Because these figures are available for all undergraduate institutions, varying kinds of comparison are possible. ACM chose to relate Ph.D.'s

obtained by graduates of each undergraduate college to the baccalaureate degrees awarded by that college.

In the case of medical and law school admission, the situation is by no means open to the public gaze. There is no computer print-out where one may discover the record for graduates from specific undergraduate colleges. And neither the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) nor the Law School Admissions Program of the Educational Testing Service can supply data over time, even if requested to do so by a college. The AAMC, however, had published in the October 1974 issue of the Journal of Medical Education a table showing medical school admissions rates by selected undergraduate institutions. They very kindly agreed to supply similar data for ACM colleges that had not been included originally. The Associated Colleges were thus able to produce a table showing this comparable information.

Since that time in 1975 when the ACM colleges first made their request, the AAMC has revised its procedures. Now any college can, upon payment of a \$15 fee, receive a "Roster of Applicants" showing the characteristics of its own applicants to medical schools. At the end of the roster, there appears a summary of the admissions actions taken by medical schools and by the candidates themselves. The Associated Colleges of the Midwest feels that the requests they -- and undoubtedly other institutions -- made may have facilitated the inauguration of this new service. Colleges can in turn, release such summary information to prospective students if they choose to do so, and it will be comparable with that of other colleges that use the summary report.

The Law School Admissions Program of ETS does not now offer such a service. ACM, in the course of trying to obtain comparable information, urged that the law schools consider such a development, and was assured that our suggestions would be given consideration at various future program committee meetings. To test out the comparability of present information, ACM requested and paid for a trial hand tabulation of whatever information was available about law school applications from students at ACM colleges. The resulting tabulation was marred by the fact that many of the participating law schools do not report back to ETS the ultimate disposition of wait-listed and other candidates. It is to be hoped that law schools may recognize the merit of improving their data and offering a service similar to the one supplied by the Association of American Medical Colleges.

The Associated Colleges of the Midwest has demonstrated that prospective students can be supplied with meaningful cross-institutional comparisons of the careers and earning patterns of graduates, at least for institutions of a similar type, and in particular for private liberal arts colleges like those in ACM. There is a wealth of published data available or actually on the campus, which presumably needs only to be put into a comparable form useful to prospective students and their parents. It is deemed essential, however, that institutions, prospective students, and their parents be made fully aware of the proper and improper inferences that can be drawn from the data presented.

The Syracuse University Department of Higher/Postsecondary Education
compiled comparable "prospectus-type" information from nine diverse

postsecondary institutions. The prospectuses focused on two major educational processes -- individualized academic programming and career planning -- as seen through pertinent institutional policies and practices. Data were collected through interviews with administrators, faculty, and students, as well as through detailed analyses of college publications. Because the colleges were assured of anonymity in the field tests later conducted, the investigators were free to write reasonably candid descriptions of actual practice. The researchers took particular care not to make quality judgments about institutions when writing descriptions. It was, however, necessary to make decisions about what represented reality since all personnel on a given campus seldom contributed identical data and interpretation.

After struggling with several methods of presenting the information it was acknowledged to be unwise to construct a chart that noted each institution as offering or not offering a given service. Such a structured format would necessitate frequent use of "not available" or "not applicable" for smaller schools. Many institutions had little or no data on the extent to which students availed themselves of college services or pursued available academic and career planning options; therefore charts and graphs were not useful modes of presentation. Long narratives were judged unsuitable because of the risk of researcher bias in writing. The question and answer format was finally chosen as most clear, fair, and comparable. Nevertheless, attempts to compare decentralized policies with scarce documentation while maintaining accuracy made the comparative descriptions sound vague and nebulous. Fairly detailed questions were necessary to allow description of those schools with the most elaborate options; consequently, answers often seemed repetitive for

smaller schools or those with a limited focus. Proprietary institutions were difficult to fit into the question and answer format since the terms used and the mode of operation in these institutions differed radically from non-profit schools.

It was not possible for every important deviation from official policy to be noted. An illustrative example is a statement that commonly appears in college documents: "Faculty are expected to issue warnings at mid-term to students who are doing work below passing quality." As stated, this is a perfectly accurate policy statement in many institutions. It may be more meaningful to the student, however, to know whether most faculty fulfill this expectation. Participating schools rarely had statistics of this sort, nor did they know how many students received such warnings. They were helpful in giving best estimates. True comparability for students seems to imply that the institution make explicit not only its philosophy and policy in such matters but some idea of how the policy actually operates.

Four descriptions, which remained unidentified, were tested with enrolled college students and college-bound juniors from three high schools. One finding is that students who perceive themselves as having specific needs are likely to view information pertinent to those needs as particularly important. For example, students uncertain about career choice viewed career counseling information as particularly important when responding to a checklist of information items. But they were not necessarily more likely, when making a hypothetical choice among the institutions described, to select an institution that offered such services.

Local school atmosphere was inferred from the descriptions by the students in the field test. Thus, a "holistic" view was formed from the question and answer data. But different students placed different emphases on the factors that constitute school atmosphere. Some students placed heavy emphasis on quality of teaching, while others were more interested in flexible rules or the social environment. Further, motivations for seeking the same information differed. For example, two groups of students desired to know about academic standards on the campus -- one group sought to be associated with an academically serious group of students, the other group desired to avoid a high pressure academic situation. Thus, while other Task Force projects have stressed subgroups based on age, ethnicity, and geographic origin as needing different types of information, the Syracuse researchers found evidence that student motivation is also a factor in the information perceived as important.

Students made inferences that went far beyond what could be legitimately inferred. They attributed variance in institutional climate and esprit to statements of policy and procedures in the prospectuses. In discussing a school that provided detailed policies and procedures, some students interpreted this as evidence of fair practice toward students, others as evidence of high academic pressure, and still others equated detailed policies with institutional rigidity. The results of the study indicate that while comparability of educational processes, as described by policies, procedures and student behaviors, is possible, some of the uniqueness of each school may be lost in the

descriptions and students may make unwarranted inferences. It is not known, of course, what inferences the same student would make from traditional information material currently supplied by each institution.

The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS)

gathered over 3300 responses to a College Information Needs Questionnaire from high school students, college students, parents and counselors. In addition, over 500 of these people and various college officials were interviewed. Considerable consistency was found among these groups regarding the information perceived as necessary for college choice. In the survey, 29 items were considered either important or very important by the majority of respondents in all groups, and 20 other items were considered to be important by significant numbers of respondents. Most of the important items clustered into five general categories: instruction and instructors, admissions/transfer information, financial aid, outcomes, and information relating to program major. Least important was information about enrolled students.

In working with five of the participating institutions, NCHEMS found that except for outcomes information and student ratings of services and instruction, the information considered most important by the audiences participating in the survey was generally available. Further, institutions said that they were generally willing to release these items of information to prospective students.

The NCHEMS project also sought to examine the effects on understanding and on comparability of different ways of presenting the various information items that had been rated as especially important. This was done through

administration of a Rating Ways of Presenting Information questionnaire. Actual case data were presented in the questionnaire for twelve of these information items, separately for two colleges, A and B, using each of five presentation formats: (1) tables of statistics, (2) tables with cartoons or caricatures, (3) script paragraphs, (4) question and answer, and (5) charts and graphs. Several hundred new freshmen at five quite different colleges in different parts of the country responded to the alternative presentations for each item separately in terms of two criteria: "Which way of presenting this information is most understandable and meaningful to you?" and "In which way of presenting this type of information is it easier to compare College A and College B?" This was only a preliminary exploration using a small sample of students, and no attempt was made to have the sample representative (each college was asked to choose a diverse sample), but the results are instructive.

The form of presentation most often used by colleges in their materials, script paragraphs, was judged poorest for both meaningfulness and comparability. Surprisingly, the highest ratings for most of the items on both meaningfulness and comparability were given to tables. For several of the items of information, there were clear indications that graphs would definitely aid comparability, and the students definitely seemed to prefer bar graphs over line graphs. There were also indications that different types of students preferred different presentation formats -- both with regard to meaningfulness and comparability, each format had its advocates for all twelve items.

The NCHEMS results suggest that an institution can, on its own,

improve the comparability of its information to that of other institutions. The results also suggest that factors other than content and format are crucial. For example, defining important terms used, and having the information piece well organized are important criteria.

There are consistent types of information that students feel would be helpful and attempts to compare these types of information should receive first attention from colleges. Unfortunately, many of the items rated most important, such as ratings of instructors and instruction, are also the materials that seem likely to pose the greatest difficulty on the campus, both politically and because of potential misinterpretation. Few of the National Task Force demonstration institutions attempted to introduce comparability on such items.

Although comparability was not their major focus, National Task Force demonstration institutions conducted cooperative activities that promoted comparability across the information materials being developed. Every three to five months at Task Force meetings, project coordinators compared problems, information under consideration for collection and presentation to prospective students, the composition of potentially useful indices, definitions of terms, organization of materials, indexing techniques to facilitate information use, desirable formats for different types of information, and so forth. They also discussed problems and issues related to comparability with resource agency representatives. Influenced by these discussions, some similarities in techniques, format, and content were introduced into a number of the eleven prospectuses.

It should be emphasized that, in many instances, concerns about providing clearer and more meaningful information, rather than concerns with trying to make data comparable, led to improved comparability across prospectuses. This is made clear in a Task Force resource paper by Loeb (1976):⁹

... Similarly, sex and student ability level affect such outcomes as academic and voluntary dropout, and salary level, on the one hand, and retention, graduation, exiting test scores, and graduate school admission, on the other. Where reports have been blocked on variables such as these, the motivation has typically been to provide a clearer picture to the institution's students. While a certain degree of interinstitutional comparability is the result, we believe that to subdivide reports only to provide comparability will have a negative effect on the student. For example, to make the participating institutions' attrition reports potentially comparable would require subgrouping of all of them by full- versus part-time, ability level, academic program, and readmitted versus continuous. Such subgrouping would be tremendously confusing to any reader, in addition to suffering from small sample sizes. We conclude, then, that standardized definitions and reports should not be sought except for items of known and major comparative value to students. While supporting the goal of cross-institutional comparability, we believe local student and institutional needs should govern information selection and format.

Overall Task Force experiences suggest that there are a number of generally available information items that can be compared in a straightforward and valid manner, even for dissimilar institutions. These include head-count enrollments (subdivided into full- and part-time categories), sex, age distributions, racial/ethnic distributions, geographic distributions of students, percentage of freshmen receiving financial aid of various types (and average awards), typical financial aid packages, grade point average distributions, entrance test score

⁹ It should also be noted that some Task Force members disagreed with the view presented by Loeb, expressing the view that it will not be possible to determine which items can be meaningful to students when presented in a comparable manner until such an experiment is tried and student decision making studied.

distributions, tuition and other costs, type of community in which the institution is located, available housing, available student services, institution-wide requirements, rules, regulations, and policies.

Other institution-wide items should probably only be compared across similar institutions. These include percentage of students transferring to different types of institutions prior to graduation, percentage of those graduating who go on to follow-up schooling of different kinds, and percentage who get jobs of various types.

A college's rank among a standard and representative (normed) group of their type on data like the ACE freshmen survey can also be a useful information item on which to make direct one-to-one comparisons.

However, it is important that the population bases for these ranks (and this also applies to other student data distributions mentioned earlier) be specified in an obvious, understandable, and clear manner.

For distribution data from standardized tests to be meaningful to a prospective student, it may be necessary to relate the data to the type of institution, to the particular program within the institution, and to incoming student abilities, aspirations, and goals, so that the input differences in student and program characteristics are taken into account. Thus, if the student compares Graduate Record Examination scores for the department of business at College A to those for the department of business at College B, in the context of other information about the two departments, their students and their institutional environment, this base item of information will more likely be interpreted correctly. Direct comparisons of such data can only be really meaningful if they are made across similar programs in similar institutions, or across similar institutions with similar students and programs.

Heald College and the University of California at Los Angeles both developed profiles of incoming students that were based on the American Council of Education's annual surveys of college freshmen. Both of these profiles can be meaningful and useful to prospective students, and for comparative purposes, when it is realized that Heald College provides a "highly focused program of study" designed to train students for a specific job in a short period of time, while UCLA's undergraduate program is largely designed to prepare students for advanced professional positions and graduate or professional school.

Except for items applicable only to an entire institution, the NCHEMS project interviews suggested that it might be useful to students who have narrowed their choice of a program if the types of information already mentioned were available separately by program for cross-institutional comparison. Similarly, it would be useful to major subgroups of students (older students, major racial/ethnic groups, part-time and full-time students, and by sex) if student distributions like those cited earlier were made available separately by subgroup. For example, Educational Opportunity program counselors and minority students reported that comparisons on their type of student are particularly useful.

Even relatively straightforward information items can be misleading for some institutions if the basic information is not put in context whenever the institution being described feels that the information could be misinterpreted. The emphasis on particular information items in this discussion should not be construed to contradict the value of combining a "comparable bits" approach with a "holistic" approach.

Barriers to Comparability

The barriers to comparing information that Task Force agencies encountered are not new or unexpected, and some of them have already been mentioned. In fact, most have been readily cited by campus administrators in their negative reactions to federal attempts to impose standard information requirements for students receiving federal financial assistance. The work of the resource agencies did, however, delineate many of these problems more clearly, and thus, some positive steps to improving the situation may be suggested. The barriers fall into four main categories: (1) those inherent in the organizational structure of higher education; (2) those due to lack of available information; (3) those due to diversity among institutional types and missions, as well as diversity among students; and (4) those due to inadequate bases for interpretation of information.

Organizational Structure Postsecondary institutions, particularly non-profit schools, differ in significant ways from other business and service organizations in American society in the relative autonomy accorded the professionals who are employed within them. Not only are faculty members relatively autonomous and free from administrative control in the way they conduct their teaching and research, but they are also closely involved in institutional governance. The degree of autonomy and policy-making involvement differs in different types of institutions; it is a prominent characteristic of research universities and highly selective liberal arts colleges and less prominent in public community colleges and proprietary institutions.

Barriers to comparability are inherent in this decentralized governance system. Specifically, the autonomy of individual faculty

members and of the lowest organizational unit, the academic department, results in a diversity of operational policies and practices throughout the campus and often in the lack of systematic data collection characteristic of a loosely structured administrative system. For example, in attempting to write comparable descriptions of academic policies in nine institutions, the Syracuse University resource agency found that:

- * The policies concerning a given procedure varied widely even within a single institution, making it difficult to state a clear institutional policy that a student could compare with that of another institution.
- * The mechanisms through which policies actually are carried out are frequently informal and do not coincide with officially stated policies. Thus, clear statements of institutional policies may actually be misleading to prospective students.
- * Single purpose institutions (such as vocational schools) are more likely to have clearer policies and operational mechanisms than are comprehensive institutions. This is related to their more centralized system of control as well.
- * Institutions that see their role as individualizing education for the student are less likely to be able to state specific policies. Thus, ironically, the institution that intentionally gives more attention to the individual student may appear, in a comparative sense, to have nebulous policies or even fewer services when it is described in terms of its stated practices.
- * Comparability is more easily possible regarding topics, such as

dismissal standards, where, because of past legal vulnerability, the institution has formulated clear statements and centralized authority.

Lack of Adequate Data Lack of adequate data is clearly one of the greatest obstacles to comparability encountered not only by the resource agencies but also by the demonstration institutions associated with the National Task Force. Institutions possess little statistical data about many of their activities, particularly those related to the development and achievement of their students. Even fewer data are available about the activities of faculty and staff in contributing to student outcome goals. Recent pressures have been toward accumulating data relevant to financial decisions, not to curricular or student development decisions.

Yet all the resource agencies pointed the way toward the use of already existing information: colleges and universities do not need to reinvent the wheel. NCHEMS found that much of the information students claimed they needed was available on its participating campuses, having been collected for use in administrative decision making. The ACM used a commonly available standardized data source to compare graduate and professional school admissions and achievements. The College Scholarship Service discovered that information officers were not always in communication with financial aid officers and that this hindered publication of aid information already available. And Syracuse discovered that, while much data of the type they were seeking had not been collected, the deficiency resulted from lack of concern with the processes under

consideration rather than cost or difficulty in getting the information.

Among the demonstration institutions too, similar data were available on several campuses. Most notable are the results of well-known environment surveys: the ACE freshman survey, the Educational Testing Service's Institutional Goals Inventory and Institutional Functioning Inventory, and results from the College Student Questionnaires and the College and University Environment Scales, among others. Even now, colleges and universities frequently publish selected statistics from one or more of these surveys in their student newspapers or alumni magazines, often in connection with national norms, to show how their institution compares with others. Similarly, small groups of institutions share information confidentially to compare their standings and progress. Examples of such sharing include the former College Research Center, an ETS-based organization which conducted institutional research for groups of small colleges, the Council for the Advancement of Small Colleges, the Ivy League universities, the women's college consortium, and groups of land-grant universities in certain areas. In many states, data concerning all public institutions are available in a central data bank. The next and logical step is to make this information available to prospective students.

Diversity of Institutions and Students. The American system of postsecondary education is very diverse. In spite of claims that institutions have tended to become too much alike in their philosophies, purposes, governance structures, and methodologies, the amount of diversity is staggering even within a single type of postsecondary institution. Just as the purposes of institutions are diverse, the

purposes of students in attending a given institution also range widely. The outcome measures appropriate for a liberal arts college may be just as clearly inappropriate for a community college. And yet, these areas overlap: some vocationally oriented students do attend liberal arts colleges and some students intent on broadening their cultural horizons do attend community colleges. Even apparently homogeneous prospective student groups as "adult students," "Black students," and "Chicano students" are composed of important subgroups each of which has unique educational needs as well as unique information needs.

Three of the resource agencies produced evidence based on subgroups of students: NCHEMS examined many subgroup responses to its interviews and questionnaires; CSS specified six different standard financial aid budgets but admitted that individual circumstances might require as many as fifty different budgets in making aid decisions; Syracuse found that students with different perceived needs valued different information in college choice.

Although because of expense, tradition and politics, data bases also vary from institution to institution (and some are firmly entrenched), it would seem possible for institutions of similar type to formulate several typical student types on the basis of available data. Information about previous student successes and outcomes could be geared to those basic types, although each student will still consider individual factors in making decisions. Presently, information disseminated by institutions is aimed primarily at the "typical" student, but a demarcation of six to eight well-founded types might be more appropriate.

Interpretation of Information. Even if valid, accurate and comparable information is provided, students using the information may misinterpret it or interpret the same information in different ways. Several of the Task Force projects, for example, found that common terms in postsecondary education are often misunderstood or misinterpreted by prospective students. To illustrate, many high school seniors interviewed in the NCHEMS project thought that class size referred either to classroom size or to the numbers of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Other colleges found that students did not understand a college major.

Terms can be easily defined once they are identified. Other problems are more complex. Earlier, we mentioned a number of information variables that we considered to be "relatively straightforward and valid to compare directly." These items, however, are probably not as crucial to student choice as other, more difficult to interpret information, which needs special qualification by the institution. Attrition data, mentioned earlier, is a good example. Many institutions do not record or report how many graduates are re-admitted students ("stop-outs") who were considered drop-outs at an earlier time. Similarly, graduation rates by program may count those who changed majors as drop-outs. If such information is properly qualified it could be quite useful to students.¹⁰

Other information items that require interpretation include:

¹⁰ Difficulties in interpretation may explain why students, counselors and others tended to downgrade the importance of attrition data in several of the Task Force surveys.

changes in major, library adequacy, grading practices, and fiscal stability. These information items should not stand by themselves, but should have clarifications in obvious view.

Types of information that need even more interpretation than those in the preceding paragraph include: attrition rates, quality of teaching, number of graduate students teaching, almost any kind of a calculated index other than simple percentages (faculty-student ratio, total FTE credits, cost per credit hour, etc.), and much of the quite specific, detailed information that several Task Force institutions found that prospective students desire: faculty philosophies and workload breakdowns, the "real" bases and cut-off points on which students are accepted or rejected. These types of information come closest to needing the "whole picture" presentation. And, perhaps even more than with other items, these descriptions should probably only be given for similar programs in similar institutions.

Another serious problem, related to interpretation, is "information overload." If several institutions that a student is considering provide an abundance of clarifying information about a particular index, and the clarifications lead in different directions for each institution, the student is likely to become confused and frustrated. Institutions need to be selective, brief and simple in clarifying the information they provide.

DELIVERING COMPARABLE INFORMATION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Published guidebooks give prospective students a variety of information about postsecondary institutions across the country. Similarly, computerized information systems can help students to narrow their institutional options quickly and easily. In general, such books and computerized systems supply a limited number of traditionally accepted information items for a large number of colleges. The information they contain is most useful in the first stages of college choice for screening purposes. Currently, each separate guidebook service collects its own information so that colleges and universities are bombarded with requests from proprietary companies, non-profit service agencies and professional associations, as well as agencies of state and federal government. Seemingly, a first step to more adequate attention to better information for students and increased efficiency for colleges would be to collect all information through one agency that would make it available to the others.

It is clear from Task Force studies that students have additional information needs of great importance, which surface at a second or final selection stage of the college choice process. Once the student has used guidebooks, a computerized system, or other methods to narrow down the institutions to be considered, more detailed and in-depth comparable information is needed for the final choice. The extensive and varied information distributed annually by institutions is often inadequate in content or form and varies markedly from institution to institution. Students, parents, and counselors find it difficult to

most useful to prospective students, specify data from existing instruments that could be utilized, and conduct research and exploration into problems and issues of comparing information. The information should be up-dated regularly, be made available to students in a timely fashion, be partitioned for important sub-groups of students for each college, and be stored in disaggregated form so that it can be arranged and packaged in a multitude of ways to serve the needs of other agencies.

Since educational community would assume leadership, based on its traditions of voluntarism and self-regulation, such an agency could lay the groundwork for retrieving from testing, regulatory, governmental and commercial agencies the responsibility for providing information to students and institutions.

2. The new agency could also provide a neutral critiquing and referral service for colleges. Specialists would be available to critique any information materials for students that a college wished to send them, suggesting how the publication might be improved. The agency could also make staff members available at cost for on-site consulting with colleges or by sending them a list of consultants in their area who have been trained and certified by the agency as qualified to assist. These services could be provided for a small fee or free of charge, depending upon funding arrangements.

3. The new agency should publish a college guidebook which will

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3. The new agency should publish a college guidebook which will

demonstrate new types of comparative data for student use.

It would provide, for the first time, a comprehensive, comparative view of the American student experience at identified institutions.

The guide would include any institution that agreed to furnish designated types of information, particularly that concerning the nature of the student body, the educational and social processes and student outcome measures. Such items might be selected from existing national surveys, supplemented by a common career or vocational instrument for graduates from each type of institution. Funds should be available to institutions demonstrating a serious commitment to this voluntary effort, but daunted by the costs involved. While only a few hundred institutions might participate in the first year, the numbers would likely increase with each subsequent edition of the guide.

It is also recommended that the states use the data base from the new agency to develop and distribute well-organized and effective handbooks that will provide potential students with information they need about relatively local opportunities. States could also usefully develop cooperative relationships with other states in their region to supply a handbook for local students who are considering a regional institution. State commitment to and support of such an endeavor would enable the information to reach each prospective student in an inexpensive and manageable form for use at home as well as in schools and counseling agencies. It is also recommended that the states develop appropriate computerized information systems for vocational and educational

decision making based on the models developed in the U.S.O.E. pilot project new underway in eight states. The computer terminals for this system, as well as the student handbooks discussed above, should be available in public locations in addition to high schools.

5. In order to develop adequate information for the second stage of decision making, colleges and universities will need both assistance and added incentives. Governmental agencies and other funders should support the development of comprehensive information by institutions, either through commissioned studies or through the agency suggested earlier. Guidelines and suggestions for colleges, beyond what have already been produced by the National Task Force, are needed.

Institutions unquestionably need some incentive system to reinforce their professional obligation to help students compare. While other motivational techniques may be preferable, monetary competitions to select institutions that best typify ideals of comparable information might be used. Student insistence on more comprehensive information, possibly resulting from guides which help students ask the right questions, can also be effective. While students can become the most important (and the most natural) source for ensuring that institutions provide the information needed by prospective students, regulations from agencies external to post-secondary education that mandate compliance in inflexible ways are the least desirable motivational technique.

The lack of comparable information for prospective students can and has resulted in "wrong" student decisions, which are costly to the student, the institutions and society. Therefore, the strong possibility exists that outside agencies will soon impose additional standards of comparability on postsecondary institutions. Such externally imposed standards may promote homogeneity, may be costly, and may give a distorted picture to prospective students -- the precise situation institutions hope to avoid -- unless institutions initiate cooperative actions. Building upon the beginning efforts of the National Task Force on Better Information for Student Choice, institutions of similar types need to agree on some reasonably uniform definitions and methods of collecting, presenting, and qualifying particular items of information appropriate to valid educational decisions.

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CHOICE is A Center for Helping Organizations Improve Choice in Education, located in the Department of Higher/Postsecondary Education at Syracuse University and supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education.

The goals of CHOICE are:

- * to gather and disseminate to institutions current knowledge about the content and process of improving information for prospective students.
- * to provide technical assistance to institutions seeking to review and/or improve the current information they provide to prospective students.
- * To evaluate the impact of more comprehensive information dissemination on student decision-making and institutional operations.
- * to facilitate the involvement of institutions in the development of information policy alternatives for use by both governmental and nongovernmental groups.

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Among the longest-established programs of its kind in the country, Higher/Postsecondary Education at Syracuse prepares professionals for a wide variety of leadership careers in postsecondary education, including positions in colleges and universities, federal and private agencies and foundations, state boards, consortia, and educational research settings.

The Department currently offers the M.S., Ed.D. and Ph.D. although most of the eighty enrolled students are studying for the Ph.D. Academic programs include courses from many departments and other schools and colleges of the university, including the Maxwell School of Citizenship, and the Schools of Public Communication, Law, and Management, as well as specialized work in higher education administration and research. The faculty includes members of the University administration and full time scholars in the field. In addition to teaching, faculty often have grants for research and development projects, such as Project CHOICE, in which students participate.