

Heather McKay, Sara Haviland, and Suzanne Michael
Rutgers' Education & Employment Research Center

Building Trust for Inter-Organizational Data Sharing: The Case of the MLDE

The Multistate Longitudinal Data Exchange (MLDE) facilitates data sharing between states from K-12 education, higher education, and labor agencies. Its goal is to provide practitioners, policymakers, and researchers with a comprehensive data source to understand educational and career trajectories, including how these trajectories can cross state lines, to improve policies and programs serving students and provide better consumer information. The exchange, begun as a pilot in 2010, is a collaboration between the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) and state agencies that house education and work data in multiple states and has been largely funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The Education & Employment Research Center (EERC) at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, has conducted research and evaluation on the inaugural years of the MLDE. This EERC brief is one of a series¹ that explores the development of the MLDE and details the lessons learned about building and using longitudinal multistate data systems for policy and practice.

Introduction

In today's data-driven environment, decision-makers and the public seek information that is relevant, reliable, and complete as they assess the efficacy of policies and programs already in place and consider new policy options. Public agencies are often called upon to provide the needed information, even though on their own they may lack access to all the data required to paint a complete picture.

There is increasing interest in sharing data across agencies and even between states that was once siloed in separate agencies. Driving this is a need to better understand how people experience education and work, and their pathways through each. A data-sharing approach offers many possible advantages, allowing states to leverage pre-existing data systems to conduct increasingly sophisticated and complete analyses. However, information sharing across state organizations presents a series of complex challenges, one of which is the central role trust plays in building successful data-sharing systems. Trust

building between organizations is therefore crucial to ensuring project success.²

This brief examines the process of building trust within the context of the development and implementation of the MLDE. The brief is based on research and evaluation activities conducted by Rutgers' Education & Employment Research Center (EERC) over the past five years, which included 40 interviews with state leaders and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) staff, observations of user group meetings, surveys, and MLDE document analysis. It is one in a series of MLDE briefs developed by EERC.

The Foundation of Data Sharing

Data security, the protection of individual anonymity, and the appropriate use of data are the cornerstones of public data policy. Individual agencies are tasked with keeping their data safe, subject to federal and state laws, and accountable to the public. The MLDE is a voluntary exchange; there is no direct mandate for



School of Management
and Labor Relations

Education and Employment Research Center



states to participate. Data professionals in each state must make the case to their governing bodies that it is worthwhile to join and that data will be secure, their citizens' privacy will be protected, and data analysis will be used for the public's best interest.

As such, state leaders and their educational and workforce agencies must believe that any data they share will be treated with the same care they would apply and only utilize in a set of narrowly defined and mutually agreed upon research and evaluation purposes. In short, trust is the foundation of any data-sharing agreement between agencies, and data professionals depend on their counterparts in other states to cooperate with a shared set of standards and values – even if they have not worked together in the past. As demonstrated by the MLDE expansion process, trust between organizations can be built using active strategies such as inclusive collaboration in the development of the structures of the exchange and continuous quality assurance efforts that give voice to all members of the exchange. This process of involvement and inclusion mirrors similar processes in intrastate data sharing and development of State Longitudinal Data Systems.

Inclusive Collaboration

Early in the process of expanding the MLDE to more states, WICHE assumed a role as facilitator rather than dictating the terms of the expansion. To ensure that states had an opportunity to help develop the exchange to meet their needs, three working groups were formed:

- The *Data Exchange Architecture and Design group* addressed issues around exchange infrastructure.³
- The *Governance and Sustainability group* developed a detailed structure to oversee and manage the process, including processes that invest ongoing decision-making authority for the MLDE in an efficient group of leaders that represents all states and sectors in the exchange.⁴ Governance of a complex exchange is as important (if not more) as the technical infrastructure. The proposed governance of the exchange is detailed in an additional brief here: wiche.edu/key-initiatives/multistate-longitudinal-data-exchange/mlde-issue-brief-governance/
- The *Data Use and Reporting group* focused on the development of a Memorandum of Agreement

(MOA) and the potential uses and publications that might derive from the exchange.

The working groups were comprised of data professionals from states already in the exchange as well as individuals from some states intending to participate. Involving non-committed states early on ensured that multiple state systems were considered in the development process. It also gave actual and potential exchange participants opportunities to get to know one another, and for the newer states to learn from the experience of those who had participated in the original four state pilots. In addition, non-committed states had the chance to share both their visions and concerns, thereby helping to shape the formalization of the exchange and its protocols. As a result, the products of the MLDE working groups are detailed, mutually agreeable, and include plans on how future decision-making will be handled.

The above collaborations created a well-defined governance structure as well as policies that clearly detail how and where data are stored and how data can be used. In practice, this means that states must develop detailed protocols about their own data collection, storage, access, and security, and be open to sharing this information with others. The sharing of data-related information has created a transparent system, which has helped to build further trust between current collaborators. In addition, it has set the stage for new states to join a culture of cooperation, teamwork, and trust.

Further, WICHE and the members of the working groups created and disseminated materials expressly designed to communicate and explain these structures and processes in a clear and understandable format. This transparency has been another important part of the process of building a “culture of trust,”⁵ especially among new and potential member states that were not part of the initial collaborations. In addition, WICHE created opportunities for working-group members to socialize together through in-person gatherings and over dinners throughout the project period, which helped to develop a sense of camaraderie.

Continuous Quality Assurance

Quality assurance (QA) is another tool WICHE has used to facilitate trust between itself and state partners, making transparency and collaboration the cornerstone of the MLDE. From the beginning

of the four-state pilot phase, WICHE has made a point of disclosing the results of all technology and data-sharing tests conducted throughout the MLDE's development. As a result, the pilot phase informed the expansion phase, and the testing done during the expansion phase – the soft launch of summer 2017 – informed the process of formalizing the MLDE. The feedback that emerged out of each stage enabled current and potential participants to better understand how the MLDE operates while they were actively engaged in the development of mutually acceptable policies and procedures. This has strengthened the trust of stakeholders and increased buy-in about the value of the MLDE.

Finally, throughout the development of the MLDE, WICHE solicited feedback from current and potential stakeholders via anonymous surveys and interviews conducted by EERC in its role as the MLDE's third-party evaluators. These evaluation data have helped WICHE identify and address additional issues or concerns and to alter certain aspects of the exchange in ways that made it more responsive and useful to the states. For example, the EERC found that some states wanted to know more about how the state data contained in the MLDE might benefit them specifically. In response, WICHE modified its recruitment strategy to focus on certain regions where meaningful connections could be made. This recruitment approach was discussed in meetings with the larger coalition of partners and potential joiners.

Conclusion

The building of trust across multiple states and organizations requires a commitment from the beginning to be transparent, collaborative, and respectful. In fact, the paradigm or model used to develop a new entity must mirror the culture best suited to its long-term survival. With regard to trust building, then, it is necessary to engage actual and potential stakeholders in developing mutually agreed upon policies as well as a governance structure that both enables and encourages input and decision-making from stakeholders. Continuous feedback loops, including the use of external evaluators, are also necessary to ensure that stakeholder concerns can be identified and addressed in a timely manner. Such responsiveness further enhances a sense of trust and ownership in the created organization and bodes well for its ongoing success.

Endnotes

¹ The other briefs in this series include: *Building A Multistate Governance System*, *Diffusion of an Innovation: Lessons from the Multistate Longitudinal Data Exchange*, *Designing the Architecture of a Multistate Data Sharing Model*, and *Documenting the Value of Non-Degree Credentials: The Potential Role of the Multistate Longitudinal Data Exchange*. Available from the WICHE website at www.wiche.edu/key-initiatives/multistate-longitudinal-data-exchange/.

² J. Ramon Gil-Garcia and Djoko Sigit Sayogo, "Government Inter-Organizational Information Sharing Initiatives: Understanding the Main Determinants for Success," *Government Information Quarterly* 33 (2016), 572–582. Wioleta Kurshaska, "Relationships Between Trust and Collaborative Culture in the Context of Tacit Knowledge Sharing," *Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management and Innovation* 13, no.4 (2017), 61–78.

³ Rutgers' Education and Employment Research Center, *Designing the Architecture of a Multistate Data Sharing Model* (Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, forthcoming).

⁴ Heather McKay, Sara Haviland, and Suzanne Michael, *Building a Multistate Governance System* (Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2020).

Gil-Garcia and Sayogo, "Government Inter-Organizational." Kurshaska, "Relationships between Trust."

References

Gil-Garcia, J. Ramon and Djoko Sigit Sayogo. "Government Inter-Organizational Information Sharing Initiatives: Understanding the Main Determinants for Success." *Government Information Quarterly* 33 (2016), 572–582.

Kurshaska, Wioleta. Relationships Between Trust and Collaborative Culture in the Context of Tacit Knowledge Sharing. *Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management and Innovation* 13, no.4 (2017), 61–78.

McKay, Heather, Sara Haviland, and Suzanne Michael. *Building a Multistate Governance System*. Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2020.

Rutgers' Education and Employment Research Center. *Designing the Architecture of a Multistate Data Sharing Model*. Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, forthcoming

For further information about the MLDE, please contact Patrick Lane at plane@wiche.edu, or visit the project website: <https://www.wiche.edu/key-initiatives/multistate-longitudinal-data-exchange/>. The five briefs in this series include: *Building a Multistate Governance System*; *Building Trust for Inter-Organizational Data Sharing: The Case of the MLDE*; *Designing the Architecture of a Multistate Data Sharing Model*; *Diffusion of an Innovation: Lessons from the Multistate Longitudinal Data Exchange*; and *Documenting the Value of Non-Degree Credentials: The Potential Role of the Multistate Longitudinal Data Exchange*.

For further information about evaluation research in data sharing or workforce development, please contact Heather McKay, director of Rutgers' Education & Employment Research Center, at hmckay@rutgers.edu, or visit the Center's website: smlr.rutgers.edu/eerc.

© October 2020 by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education
3035 Center Green Drive, Suite 200, Boulder, CO 80301-2204
Publication Number 4a500124

This brief is based on research funded in part by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.