MLDE Issue Brief

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Building a Multistate Governance System

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 series[1] 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

Multistate efforts designed to pursue a shared agenda can be very rewarding. Establishing and coordinating multistate efforts, however, are complex activities. Organizers must develop systems and structures that work for various stakeholders and state agencies, a process that often requires navigating the different regulatory and political contexts of each state. To succeed, a process of collaboration must occur that yields agreed upon procedures for decision-making as well as a uniform set of rules and agreements with regard to data collection, data protection, and data use.

This brief explores that process and the stages of developing a governance system for a multistate state-data exchange project, the Multistate Longitudinal Data Exchange (MLDE). The MLDE is designed to help states and regions develop a more holistic view of education and employment pathways, which in turn helps to inform practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. The MLDE enables analysis of the linkages between education and employment trajectories; how these trajectories cross state lines; and how best to improve policies and programs serving students and workers. This brief explores the process and stages of developing a governance system for the MLDE, the challenges that arose, and how WICHE and the multistate team adapted to meet those challenges. The brief is based on research and evaluation activities conducted over the past five years by Rutgers' Education & Employment Research Center (EERC), which included over 40 interviews with state leaders and WICHE representatives, observations of user group meetings, surveys, and MLDE document analysis. It is one in a series of MLDE briefs developed by EERC.[1]

Building Toward a Governance System: Growing Complexity in the MLDE

Initially, the goal of the MLDE was to assess whether states were willing and able to exchange individual data from their K-12, postsecondary education, and workforce agencies.[2] In 2010, to determine "proof of concept," WICHE launched the MLDE pilot in four states (Hawai'i, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington) to examine the feasibility and utility of an exchange. This pilot also sought to identify the benefits that might accrue from data analysis, including whether the resulting data could help inform state policy and practice. Meetings during the pilot enabled state representatives to renew prior relationships and to forge new ones that established a collaborative culture with strong working relationships among WICHE and its state partners. The pilot resulted in some meaningful improvements in state-data collection as well as "more sophisticated and comprehensive data about workforce outcomes and swirl spanning the education and labor sectors."[3] For example, the pilot-participating states' exchange of data enabled them to fill in gaps about the workforce outcomes of their associate-degree-and-higher graduates and each state was able to add to their accounted for percentages after data sharing (13 percent for Washington; 19 percent for Oregon; and 28 percent for both Idaho and Hawai'i).[4]

With state partners enthusiastic about the interstate exchange of data and its potential, the decision was made to launch the MLDE as a multistate data exchange. The pilot states recognized that an expanded exchange would face some regulatory and political hurdles, but they believed the hurdles were surmountable.

In 2014, with the pilot's success in hand, the MLDE entered a five-year expansion phase that developed and tested systems and began to recruit to scale across multiple states and regions. WICHE was aware that as it grew the MLDE, the network would become more complex and challenging to operationalize. New partners would not necessarily be regionally linked as were the four pilot states, and there would be fewer pre-existing relationships on which to build. WICHE also recognized that the scaling of the MLDE into an expanded network would take several years. It would require strategic planning and continuous assessments to facilitate the most effective collaborations, to ensure the integrity of the data collection and use, as well as to sustain the network. It was clear from the pilot that expansion necessitated greater formalization of partnerships, new procedures, and a different architecture for the expanded data exchange.[5]

From the beginning, WICHE's goal was to build a system that could sustain itself without external funding and over which stakeholders would feel ownership. From the beginning, WICHE emphasized the issue of ownership, identifying the importance of putting decision-making in the hands of the stakeholders, and the need to make sure that states and sectors participated in the MLDE decision-making processes. However, the early articulation of this insight did not make acting on it easy. WICHE had to foster a community of trust and collaboration across a complex set of partners from many different states and state agencies, as described in this brief: wiche.edu/key-initiatives/multistate-longitudinal-data-exchange/mlde-issue-brief-building-trust/. Further, many expected (and some unexpected) challenges arose that the participants had to tackle. Chief among these were the need to address legal issues about sharing data and data security; to determine exactly how the data could be used by policymakers, practitioners, and researchers; and to think through sustainability concerns. A formal governance system was key to ensuring these issues were addressed and collaborative relationships were developed and maintained.

The development of a governance model has been a multi-year, multi-step process that has been an essential component of the evolution of the MLDE. In fact, state leaders indicated in interviews that the time they spent working together to create the governance structure was just as important as the actual decisions they made about the MLDE. It was during those meetings when state leaders got to know each other and learned about one another's data systems and the processes they used, their interest in and goals for the MLDE, and their ideas for potential data use. Their experience, expertise, and investment created an important community of practice that facilitated the MLDE's implementation and helped to place the network on the road to a sustainable future.

The Evolution of the Governance System

The next sections look at the two major stages in the development of the MLDE's governance structure: the establishment of working groups and the subsequent creation of a board of directors. The progression from one to the other involved a great deal of work and many players, including state partners (and agencies within states), WICHE, and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), which provided consultation on the structure of the governance system and proposed a plan for the MLDE.

Phase I: Working Groups

The first step for formalizing and expanding the MLDE was the establishment of three working groups: the Governance and Sustainability group (Governance), which looked at issues of governance, management, and sustainability; the Data Exchange Architecture and Design group (Technology and Design), which was created to address technology issues; and the Data Use and Reporting group (Data Use), which examined the use and reporting of data derived from the exchange.

Each working group was made up of representatives from interested states, including those that had participated in the pilot phase as well as states that were actively considering entering the MLDE. This mix had two important benefits. Pilot states had the opportunity to share their knowledge and experiences with the earliest iteration of the exchange, and states with the potential to become new MLDE members had the opportunity to actively engage and influence the development of the larger exchange. The working groups included representatives typically associated with either their state longitudinal data system (SLDS) or one of their state agencies providing data (K-12, postsecondary, or workforce). State data structures and governance models vary across states, so the MLDE sought to include perspectives from each.

WICHE supported the working groups on a basic level, such as through materials development, but empowered each group to develop policies and finalize materials. As the exchange was built, the working groups played a critical role, collectively emerging as an early governance structure. In the following sections, we focus our attention on the work of the Governance group.

Given that the MLDE is intended to complement SLDS, a strategic decision was made to fill the seats on the Governance group with the SLDS leader from each participating state whenever possible. The Governance group primarily focused on creating permanent structures, policies, and procedures for the MLDE, with the goal of sustainability always front and center.

In the first two years of the MLDE expansion phase, the Governance group was very active, meeting once a month virtually and biannually in a physical location. The group reviewed and approved a detailed governance plan developed by NCHEMS. This plan included the establishment of a board of directors as well as two supporting committees that would have decision-making authority for the MLDE and would consist of a group of leaders representing all states and sectors in the network (see below).[6] The Governance group also worked with WICHE staff to develop and approve a sustainability plan during this time. The sustainability plan focused on continuing governance, use of exchange data, and funding for the exchange. As part of this work, the Governance group estimated the long-term cost of running the MLDE and developed a pricing structure for partner states that could support the ongoing management and maintenance of the network and data system. They also discussed how often to exchange data; the process for reviewing and approving data requests; the types of research questions the MLDE might address; and the process for reviewing and responding to aggregated data publication.

Memorandum of Agreement (MOA)

Arguably one of the most important tasks accomplished by the Governance group was the development of a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) that established key elements of the MLDE's governance and was required to be signed by all participating partners.

The MOA outlined the context of the exchange (background, purpose, scope, justification, and authority). It described the kinds of data that would be exchanged, the processes for its storage and transmission, as well as security and privacy policies (access, use, and physical safeguards). The MOA also stipulated that a federated data model – with data staying with providers wherever possible rather than being centralized in a "warehouse" with all data from all participants – would be used for data collection

and utilization. The Governance group chose this model for the MLDE expansion because it provided more flexibility with the data processing, which would enable the states to define their own cohorts for analyses. In addition to these administrative and structural elements, the Governance group also wanted to set the stage for thinking about how states could use the MLDE data. It therefore suggested some preliminary research questions for the first year of the expanded MLDE (see below), fully anticipating that these questions might be modified and added to by the other working groups (specifically the Data Use group) and, over time, by the participating states.

1. How effectively are education and workforce programs preparing students for successful completion of postsecondary education and careers?

2. Across states, what are the patterns of mobility, secondary and postsecondary enrollment, and employment of:
   - Current and former high school students?
   - Current and former postsecondary students?
   - Current and former participants in workforce programs?

3. By more fully accounting for individual mobility across state lines, to what extent does sharing data among states supplement existing state data resources available for conducting evaluations leading to policy and program improvements?

In sum, the MOA helped to define the procedural aspects of participation in the exchange as well as what the MLDE was and could be. It also described the structure and processes of data delivery from the states and the ways data would then be used to build and test the network. The MOA got down to the nuts and bolts of how the actual exchange of data would work, ensuring safe and stable operation.

Phase II: Board of Directors

After the initial two years of planning and developing systems to launch the testing phase of the MLDE, the Governance working group transformed into the Board of Directors. Thus, the board, from its inception, has been composed of representatives from established MLDE-participating states and representatives from states seriously considering

joining the exchange. The board has also been served by two supplemental committees. One committee is tasked with developing and advising the board on policy decisions. The other is responsible for advising the board about technical issues related to the MLDE's operations and use.

In interviews with EERC, state leaders and members of the board discussed their work on the board and committees, and how the focus of their work has evolved over time. They spoke of establishing a quality data-sharing agreement, creating strategies to manage project workflow, and refining the MLDE's governance processes and procedures. Asked about their overall experience with the MLDE, some board members spoke about the importance of the board in clarifying procedures and articulating the direction and the utility of the MLDE for participating states. Several others said the board was essential to maintaining the momentum of the project. One respondent commented that the board and the governance structure had been critical in launching the MLDE and enabling such a multistate data exchange to work.

> "I'll bet this would not work if 20 states tried to communicate independently with each other. I think a centralized governance area is necessary."

Interviewees also indicated that the board provides critical structure, enabling new states to quickly get up to speed and participate fully as partners with more established states. For many, the board has also been key to creating an atmosphere of collegiality and collaboration.

Building Relationships, Building Sustainability

In addition to the above functions and activities, the board acts as a linchpin for the growing number of state partners – fostering trust not only in the MLDE but also in relationships among states and state partners. Members of the board indicated in interviews that their trust-building and information-sharing roles were extremely important to the growth and longevity of the MLDE. They took seriously the responsibility they had taken on as board members to ensure that each partner state would be successful in adopting and using the MLDE.

Board meetings are seen by members as useful opportunities to communicate with other states about data infrastructure and to share and use data. Several respondents commented that they

appreciate the collaborative spirit of the board, noting an atmosphere in which participants openly share information and experiences and are very willing to help one another solve problems. As one respondent observed: "[The board] *helps us understand what's going on in other states. We can help other states navigate pitfalls*." Another respondent expressed the hope that the cooperation among MLDE participants would eventually reach a level where research studies are shared between states, adding to the overall value of the exchange.

Many of those to whom EERC spoke attributed the positive atmosphere and congeniality of the board and its working committees to the members themselves, but they also specifically stated that WICHE, as the convener, had played a critical role in creating a trusting and helpful environment. They emphasized that WICHE's leadership and staff had, from the outset, worked hard to ensure that all members were respected and that a multitude of voices and ideas were heard. They appreciated WICHE's consistency of vision and practice to establish, as soon as viable, a governance system that would work for all participating states as well as states considering membership. They also recognized WICHE's organizational culture, wherein relationship building, of paramount importance in all its initiatives, is developed both formally through meetings and conferences as well as informally through coffee breaks and pre- and post-meeting dinners.

Conclusion

Developing and formalizing multistate data efforts is challenging and takes time. Bringing all voices to the table (including even those who are not yet on board) and tasking them with decision-making creates a collaborative and trusting community that feels a sense of ownership. These are the ingredients for a successful transformation into a formalized governance structure. If developed with these considerations, a multistate governance board will serve as the locus of trust and communication will help inform policy and practice.

Endnotes

[1] The other briefs in this series include: *Building Trust for Inter-Organizational Data Sharing: The Case of the MLDE, 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 wiche.edu/key-initiatives/multistate-longitudinal-data-exchange/.

[2] Brian T. Prescott and Peace Bransberger, *Building Capacity for Tracking Human Capital Development and its Mobility Across State Lines* (Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2014), accessed on 10 June 2020 at wiche.edu/info/publications/PI-150105-MLDE-Policy Insights.pdf.

[3] Brian T. Prescott, Beyond Borders: *Understanding the Development and Mobility of Human Capital in an Age of Data-Driven Accountability. A Report on WICHE's Multistate Longitudinal Data Exchange Pilot Project* (Boulder, Colorado: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2014), accessed on 10 June 2020 at wiche.edu/longitudinalDataExchange.

[4] Prescott, *Beyond Borders*, 22.

[5] Prescott and Bransberger, *Building Capacity*.

[6] Note that the MLDE still exists under WICHE and is not its own organization. Here, Board of Directors does not imply separate 501c3 status.

References

Prescott, Brian T. *Beyond Borders: Understanding the Development and Mobility of Human Capital in an Age of Data-Driven Accountability. A Report on WICHE's Multistate Longitudinal Data Exchange Pilot Project*. Boulder, Colorado: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2014. Accessed on 10 June 2020 at wiche.edu/longitudinalDataExchange.

Prescott, Brian T. and Peace Bransberger. *Building Capacity for Tracking Human Capital Development and its Mobility Across State Lines*. Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2014. Accessed on 10 June 2020 at wiche.edu/info/publications/PI-150105-MLDE-Policy Insights.pdf.

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.