

WORKING DRAFT

Using Administrative Records for Enhanced Policy Research

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There have been a number of major efforts to link existing administrative records—data created for reporting and other purposes—to support longitudinal policy research and evaluation since the late 1970s. Among the earliest of these was the Continuous Wage-Benefit History Project, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor, which created Unemployment Insurance (UI) employment, earnings and claims files to support longitudinal research. Subsequent efforts turned more toward evaluation uses in the 1980s, as academics and research firms began accessing state UI wage and benefit records as well as welfare data to augment labor market and related outcomes data on participants and comparison and control group members collected via follow-up surveys as part of evaluations of job training² and welfare-to-work program interventions.³

I directed several large research projects involving linked administrative data files at the Ray Marshall Center since the late 1990s that are the main focus of this paper: the Administrative Data Research and Evaluation (ADARE) Consortium (the Texas portion); the Central Texas Student Futures Project; and the Texas Workforce Data Quality Initiative (WDQI). I led and was involved with a number of others dating back to the mid-1980s as well; I'll examine these first. This paper focuses largely on the use of these data for enhanced policy research. Policy researchers have been writing about this topic for decades.

Early Administrative Data Research Projects

After several years working as a researcher in what was then the Center for the Study of Human Resources (now the Ray Marshall Center) and as the person in charge of research, demonstration and evaluation for the Job Training Partnership Act and the Texas State Job Training Council within the Texas Governor's Office, I returned to the Center in 1985 to continue my research on workforce, education and social programs. Having spent the early 1980s, testing various methods for obtaining reliable post-program outcomes data for training participants, welfare recipients, and other target populations and using these data for research, I became quite interested in more cost-effective mechanisms for accessing program and outcomes data over time. Importantly, the relationships and trust I had established during my time in government service provided me a degree of credibility among state agency heads, who needed to grant access to these data.

Over the next decade, I designed and led research projects that made extensive use of confidential longitudinal administrative records, including the following:

Texas Welfare and Labor Market Dynamics Research, 1987-1988. Interest in better understanding the dynamics of welfare receipt, program participation, and movements between welfare and employment was high in the policy and policy research community in the mid-to-late 1980s. Researchers had conducted

² For example, see Bloom (1990).

³ MDRC reports and King et al. 1992.

influential studies of some of these issues using national datasets (e.g., Bane & Ellwood, 1983; Ellwood, 1986, 1988). At the time, little had been done to take advantage of rich administrative records potentially available for similar research at the state level, data that did not suffer from small sample sizes and very thin cells when disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender or other variables. With very modest funding from the Texas Department of Human Services, a team of researchers at the Center secured and linked individual-level data for multiple years for caretakers with the Texas Aid to Families with Dependent Children program to state UI wage records data from the Texas Employment Commission to estimate spells and duration of welfare receipt and work and earnings patterns in Texas (see King & Schexnayder, 1988b).

Services to the Vocational Education Target Populations, 1987-1988. The Carl D. Perkins Act of 1984 identified a number of target populations for vocational education services. At the time, little was known about how these groups—including single-parents, minority and others—were being served and how effectively. Center researchers linked job training, UI wage and other records to conduct initial analysis of services and labor market outcomes for these populations (see King and Schexnayder, 1988a).

Texas Welfare/Training Program Coordination Study, 1989-1992. Along with the interest in welfare dynamics, legislative analysts and others in the Texas policy community were becoming increasingly interested in how—and how well—welfare recipients were being served in the state’s workforce training programs, adding a “rider” mandating a study of the topic by the Center into the appropriations bill. Center researchers spent several years linking welfare, training program and UI wage records for employment and earnings and conducted analysis of the longer-term outcomes (not impacts) of program participation augmented by field studies of the type and degree of welfare/training program coordination in a number of sites across the states (see Schexnayder et al., 1991; and King & Schexnayder, 1992). Among other results, they found that welfare employment programs that were better coordinated—though not necessarily as measured by the usual trappings of coordination (e.g., MOUs, regular meetings)—were associated with substantially better labor market and other outcomes.

Feasibility of Using UI Records for Texas Community and Technical College Labor Market Follow-up, 1989. For many years, UI wage records were reported by covered employers on either a quarterly or an as-requested basis; however, by 1989, all states were mandated to implement quarterly reporting by covered employers. JTPA programs were actively considering substituting UI wage records for their established telephone follow-up system for capturing labor market outcomes to support post-program performance standards. There was growing interest in accessing these records for community and technical college labor market outcomes as well. Center researchers, in collaboration with North Harris County Community

College District, conducted a pilot in four colleges⁴ to demonstrate the feasibility of using UI wage records to measure post-program labor market outcomes and found that the primary limitation to doing so was the poor quality of records at the postsecondary institutions, not the difficulty with accessing the UI files (Gula & King, 1989).

ADARE

The ADARE consortium was launched in 1998 at the initiation of Dr. David Stevens, director of the Jacob France Institute at the University of Baltimore, with five states having “a common capacity to respond to immediate welfare-to-work policy questions posed by the Office of Policy Development, Evaluation and Research in the Employment and Training Administration of the U.S. Department of Labor” (www.ubalt.edu/jfi/adare/). Stevens is one of the pioneers and continues to be a leader in the use of linked administrative records data for policy research and evaluation, having launched any number of related projects in the 1970s while a professor of economics at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Charter ADARE state members (and their point person), in addition to Maryland, included Florida (Jay Pfeiffer), Georgia (Julie Hotchkiss), Missouri (Peter Mueser), and Texas (myself). Over the ensuing decade or so, the consortium expanded to as many as twelve states at one point in the late 2000s, including Illinois (1999); Washington (2002); California, Ohio (2004) and others.

ADARE’s early focus reflected the Nation’s concern with welfare reform and ongoing questions about the connections between welfare and work as an alternative to welfare. So, ADARE partners spent the early years of the consortium conducting research on welfare-to-work program participation and outcomes, including welfare receipt, employment, earnings and UI claimant history. In addition to issuing and presenting a series of working papers on longitudinal welfare program participation and labor market outcomes, the project supported analyses of welfare-work patterns in six large urban areas: Atlanta, GA; Baltimore, MD; Chicago, IL; Ft. Lauderdale, FL; Houston, TX; and Kansas City, MO. With additional grant support from the W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, another ADARE partner, Christopher King and Peter Mueser published *Welfare and Work: Experiences in Six Cities* (Upjohn Institute Press, 2005), contributing substantial empirical understanding to the debate on the effectiveness of welfare reform strategies, which then were focused largely on immediate labor force attachment. Among, other results, we found that (King & Mueser, 2005, pp. 169-170):

“American welfare reform has met many of the primary goals of its supporters, and avoided the dire predictions of its severest critics. We have made major strides in terms of reducing welfare caseloads and promoting employment among former and potential welfare

⁴ Amarillo College, Alvin College, North Harris County Community College, and Texas State Technical College participated.

recipients.... Our work also highlights the poor earnings and unstable employment of former recipients and others at the bottom of the earnings distribution in six large urban areas. The success of welfare reform has resulted in most former recipients joining the ranks of the working poor and introduced them to the daily stresses that all single parents must face when juggling work and family demands.”

Beyond the initial focus on welfare-to-work patterns, ADARE also conducted extensive research in the following areas, relying on linked administrative records at various geographic areas and for differing target populations in widely varying programs:

- *Workforce Investment Act effectiveness*, leading and contributing to the two major quasi-experimental WIA evaluations that informed the Congressional reauthorization of the program in the summer of 2014 (Hollenbeck et al., 2005; Heinrich et al., 2008);
- *Understanding the operations of and service delivery via WIA One-stop Career Centers* (see King & Stevens, 2003; Mueser & Stevens, 2003);
- *WIA performance measurement* (see King & Stevens, 2003; Mueser et al., 2007);
- *Career and technical education performance indicators* (Stevens, 2006); and
- *The role of child support and earnings in welfare and poverty dynamics* (Schroeder et al., 2003).

As documented in Stevens (2012), ADARE researchers also made numerous presentations of their research to audiences of policymakers and researchers in their home states, as well as to policy research conferences in the U.S. and Europe. In many ways, although ADARE’s potential as a quick-response policy research entity using state-based longitudinal records wasn’t fully realized, starting up as it did near the end of the Clinton Administration and not having enjoyed strong support through the Bush Administration and early years of the Obama Administration, in many ways it laid the groundwork and demonstrated the feasibility of creating such capacity with linked administrative records. This then served as part of the impetus and ultimately the funding for the multi-state, multi-year Workforce Data Quality Initiative, which began in 2010 (see below).

Central Texas Student Futures Project

Another important research effort that contributed in part to the launch of both the WDQI and the State Longitudinal Data Systems grants that were targeted to state education agencies building linked, longitudinal datasets to support research was the Central Texas Student Futures Project. The Student Futures Project was initiated by the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce in partnership with the Ray Marshall Center and Skillpoint Alliance as part of a policy research project led by Deanna Schexnayder, Dr. Hannah Gourgey and myself with a group of Masters of

Public Affairs students at the LBJ School of Public Affairs. Some background is in order before characterizing the project.

The Greater Austin Chamber has a long history of engagement in workforce and education policies and programs in Central Texas, having played a significant role in fostering and supporting school-to-work efforts in the region since the late 1980s, in no small part due to the efforts of Dr. Bob Glover, a longtime Center researcher. After its incubation at the Center, the Chamber served as the parent and host for Skillpoint Alliance. In fact, the Chamber's Senior Vice-President for Education and Talent Development also wore the hat as President of what was then called the Capital Area Training Foundation. In the mid-2000s, the Chamber was becoming increasingly concerned that Austin was "losing its competitive edge" to other metro areas that were doing a better job of cultivating their human capital and had been actively involved in efforts to foster more college enrollments. They were quite frustrated about the difficulty with getting timely, accurate data on what the region's high school graduates were doing right after high school, whether enrolling in public or private, two- or four-year, in- or out-of-state colleges, just working or both. They approached me about engaging a group of students to research best practices for accessing and analyzing such information and crafting an approach for deploying it as part of a highly engaged continuous improvement model in partnership with region's independent school districts (ISDs).

In August 2004, we recruited twenty students to join the PRP, which was funded by the Greater Austin Chamber and the Texas Education Agency.⁵ The research team examined leading-edge practices for linking administrative and survey data to link, analyze and use student education, labor market and other outcomes data over time across the country. Among these efforts were: Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies long-running project surveying the post-high school experiences of Boston high school students (www.northeastern.edu/clms/); the well established state Florida Employment and Training Program Improvement Project, or FETPIP (<http://www.fldoe.org/fetpip/pubs.asp>); the University of Texas at Dallas education research project (www.utdallas.edu/research/tsp-erc/), which is now one of two state-designated Education Research Centers in Texas, the other being at the University of Texas at Austin); the Texas Automated Student Learner Follow-up System operated by the Texas Workforce Commission's Labor Market and Career Information Division (www.cdr.state.tx.us/researchers/workforce_and_education_reports.asp); and the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (<http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/>). With the exception of the Chicago Schools Consortium, which was just getting underway at that time and had little experience to go on, none of the efforts had all the components we and our partners were looking for.

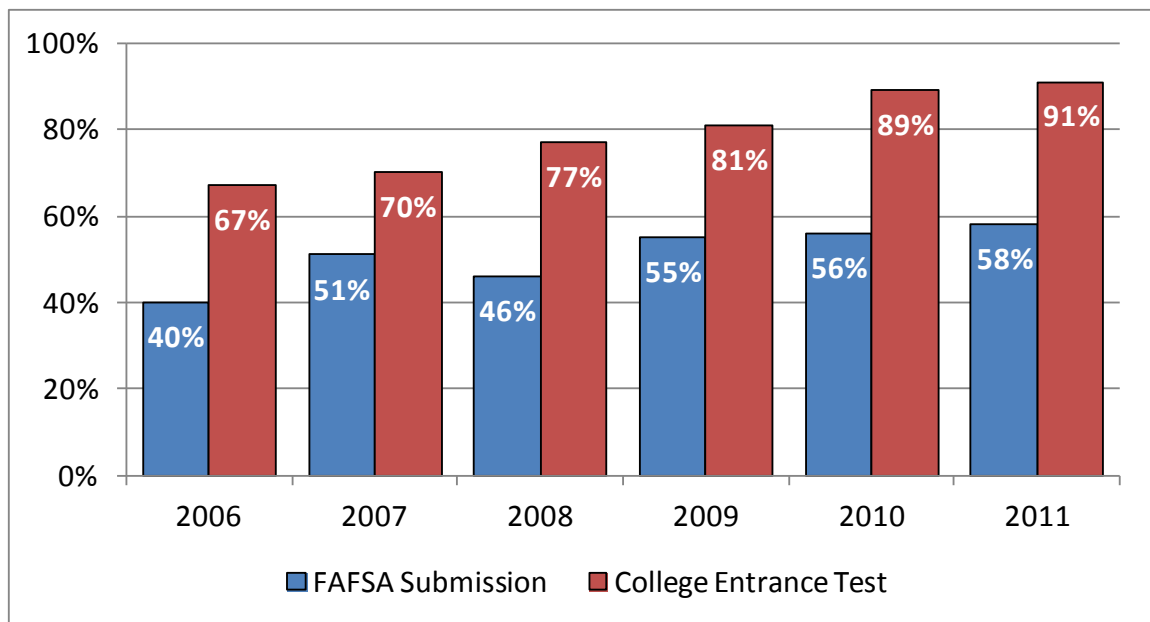
Some of the more important features the Center and its partners were interested in were:

⁵ For more detailed description, see King et al. *Beyond the Numbers* (2006).

- Timely information so that those with responsibility for improving postsecondary transitions and college and career readiness could be expected to take informed action.
- Accurate, complete information on both postsecondary education and labor market results for students.
- Relatively inexpensive information gathering.

The Student Futures Project has produced some interesting results since its inception in the mid-2000s that have both informed and led to improved local practices regarding postsecondary transitions. A few examples are illustrative. First, in some of our early research linking student exit survey data with direct-to-college enrollment data, we found that graduating seniors who were uncertain about how they were going to pay for college and/or had not filled out a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) were much less likely to enroll in college in the fall following graduation (King et al., 2007). This led to an extended discussion with school superintendents, high school counselors and Chamber leadership and the launch of a Financial Aid Saturdays effort manned by volunteers and led by the Chamber. FAFSA applications jumped more than 18 points (almost 50%) as a result, which is particularly important given the steady increase in the share of low-income students in Central Texas (Figure 1). A similar finding on the relationship between college entrance test-taking and enrollments was followed by a push on that end and a 28-point increase in college entrance test-taking (also shown in Figure 1).

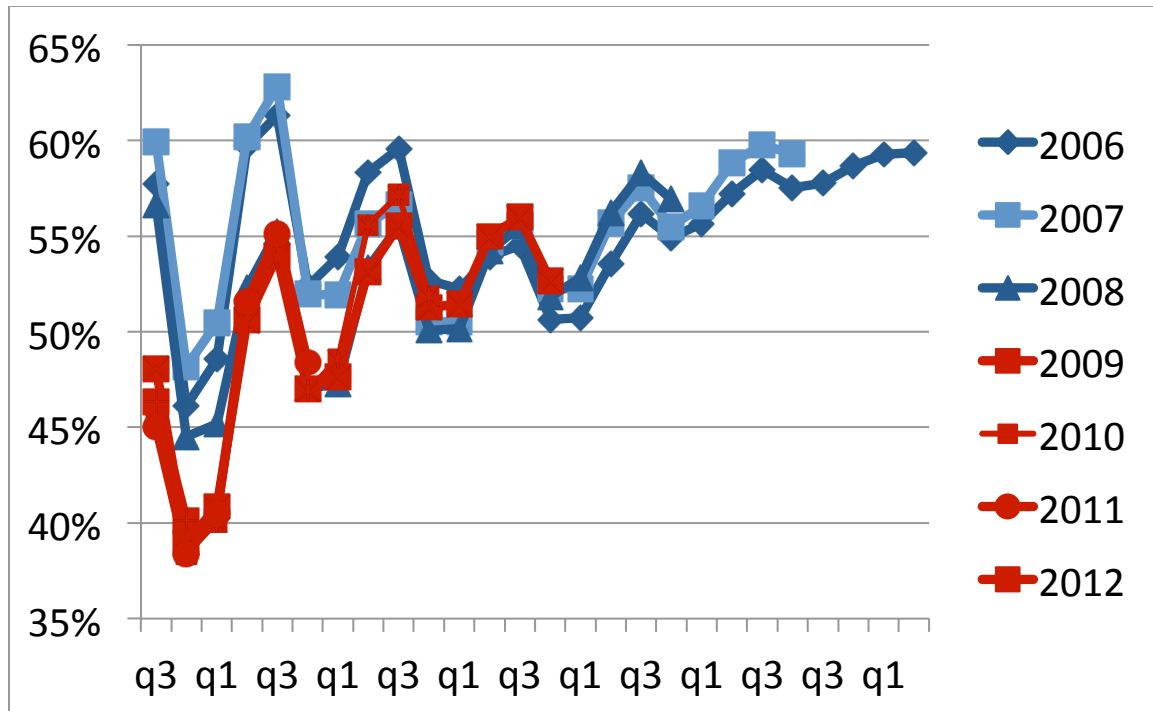
Figure 1. Participation in College Preparation Activities, Central TX, 2006-2011



Source: Central Texas Student Futures Project.

Second, the Great Recession of 2008-2009, while not as damaging to the Austin labor market, clearly was felt by high school graduates as measured by UI wage records: succeeding classes were posting declining employment rates in the quarters immediately following graduation although the effects did seem to persist (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Employment After High School Graduation, Central TX Classes of 2006-2012



Source: Central Texas Student Futures Project.

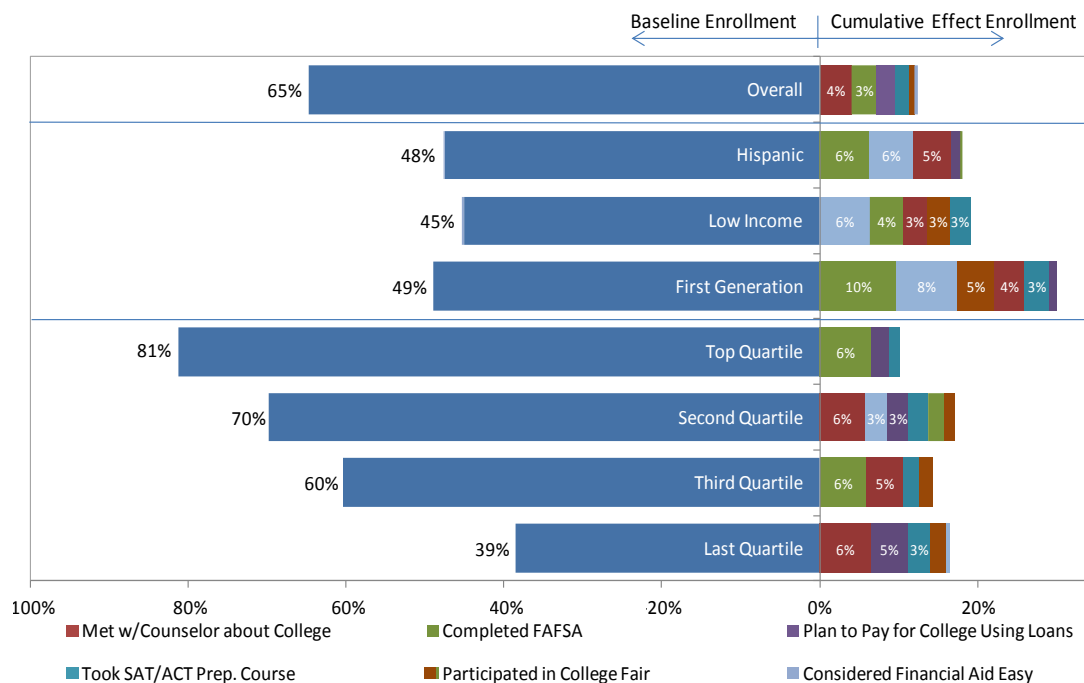
Third, we found that various college preparation activities had differing effects on the direct-to-college enrollment experience depending on which group was pursuing them (Cumpton et al., 2012). As Figure 3 shows, enrollment effects vary widely by first-generation status, ethnicity, and high school class rank. High schools are tailoring their college preparation advice and planning accordingly.

These are just a few examples of how linking administrative and survey data have helped to inform and shape college and career readiness practices in Central Texas. In the ensuing decade, the Ray Marshall Center has maintained an active partnership with the Chamber and area ISDs, in what has become a full-fledged “collective impact” model⁶ with the Austin Chamber serving as the “backbone organization” and the Center as the research arm. More recently, the Center, the Chamber and some of the participating ISDs have collaborated with additional

⁶ For more on collective impact models, see Kania and Kramer (2011).

research partners⁷ to implement and evaluate the effectiveness of various strategies involving texting and counselor support to counteract what is now referred to as “summer melt,” the phenomenon of high school graduates who indicated acceptance to college in late spring not enrolling the following fall (Castleman & Page, 2014). The effort remains a focus on continuously improving postsecondary outcomes for the region’s high school graduates through the use and analysis of linked administrative and survey data over time. It is noteworthy that the Student Futures Project also served as part of the impetus for WDQI.

Figure 3. Predicted Cumulative Effects on College Enrollment, Central TX



Source: Central Texas Student Futures Project.

Texas WDQI

The U.S. Department of Labor issued the initial Solicitation for Grant Applications for WDQI in May 2010 (SGA/DFA PY 09-10) to encourage State Workforce Agencies to develop or improve their longitudinal workforce data systems; to enable workforce and education data matching; to improve the quality and breadth of longitudinal workforce data; to use such data to improve operations and evaluate the performance of education and training programs; and to provide user-friendly information to workforce consumers to help them make informed choices. The SGA

⁷ Professors Ben Castleman at the University of Virginia, Lindsay Page at the University of Pittsburgh, and Laura Owen at Johns Hopkins University.

explicitly referenced both ADARE and the Center's Student Futures Project research and encouraged State Workforce Agencies to partner with university researchers in their applications. The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), the State Workforce Agency for Texas, partnered with the Ray Marshall Center in its successful application for WDQI funding, proposing a mix of applied research projects, some of which were conducted by TWC staff and others by Center researchers.

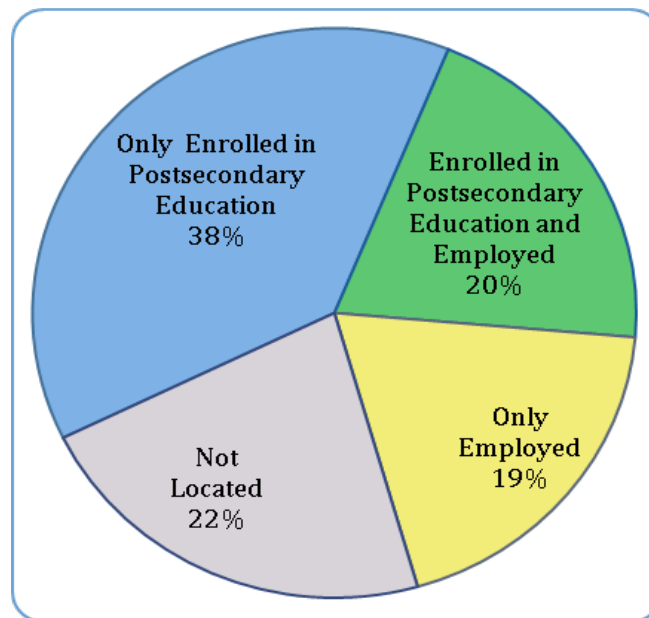
TWC staff created the Texas Consumer Resource for Education and Workforce Statistics (www.theccb.state.tx.us/apps/txcrews/), an interactive dashboard tool providing comparative wages and student loan information about Texas public 2- and 4-year postsecondary institutions. The tool is designed to assist parents and students make informed decisions about college so they can get the best return on their educational investments. Center researchers performed additional research expanding on the Central Texas Student Futures Project by linking longitudinal public and postsecondary education data with workforce training and labor market outcomes files to support enhanced analysis of student outcomes on an array of policy-relevant topics.⁸ They also conducted an online survey of 9,280 employers across the state who had hired 20,348 recent graduates from three sources: the Texas State Technical College System, the University of Texas System, and TWC workforce programs to determine the training-relatedness of their employment as gauged by employers (Chen et al., 2014).

Postsecondary Education and Employment. The sample for the WDQI research on Central Texas high school graduates included 23,809 graduates from the 2008 and 2009 graduating classes followed through December 2011 (Ray Marshall Center, 2014). The sample was predominantly White (48%) or Hispanic (31%), with smaller shares of Black (11%), Asian (5%) and other/unknown ethnicity students (5%). It was evenly split by gender. About a quarter of the sample received free or reduced lunch in school. We focused on two common but not mutually exclusive choices that high school graduates make in the fall immediately following graduation: enrolling in postsecondary education or working. We continued to follow the choices these students made in each semester thereafter, uncovering common pathways that they took in the years after leaving high school.

In the fall immediately following graduation, over half of the sample was enrolled in postsecondary education: 38% were enrolled-only; another 20% were employed *and* enrolled (Figure 4). One in 5 graduates was employed-only (in Texas). Another 22% were not found, i.e., they were not located in any postsecondary education or workforce dataset we were able to access for this research.

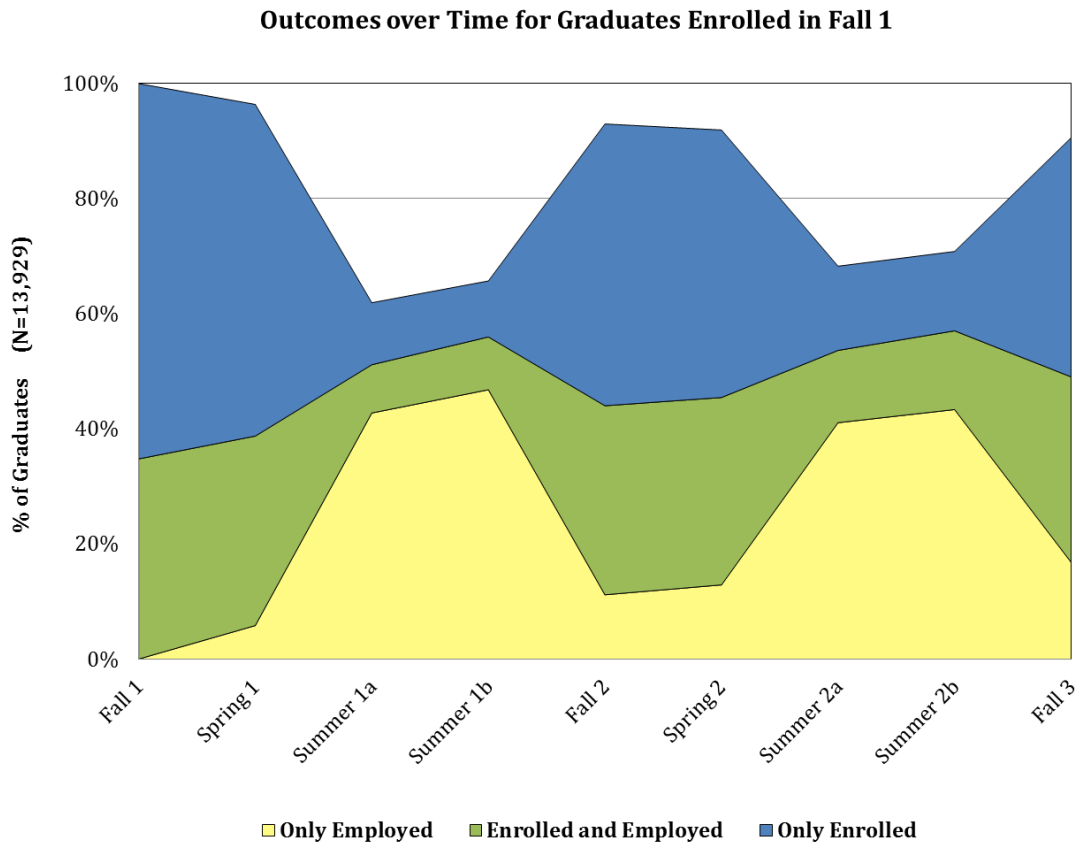
⁸ The Texas WDQI also provided support to researchers at the LBJ School and the Economics Department who used linked records to analyze topics including: the effects of college readiness on college enrollment (Farber, 2014); the effects of institutional inputs on time-to-degree (Cullinane and Lincove, 2014); the impact of exit exams on long-term student performance (Polson, 2014); the effects of work-study aid on community college outcomes (Polson & Weisburst, 2014); and others. Texas WDQI research reports and briefs can be accessed on the Ray Marshall Center website at: www.raymarshallcenter.org/.

Figure 4. Share of 2008 and 2009 Central Texas High School Graduates Enrolled, Employed and Not Located



One common pathway taken by high school graduates is the *traditional college pathway*, which begins with students enrolling in postsecondary education in the fall immediately following high school graduation (Fall 1) and continues with the student enrolling in school in each subsequent period examined. Figure 5 below shows the status of 2008 and 2009 graduates over a 2+ year period, beginning with the fall semester after graduation. Three mutually exclusive statuses are displayed: employed-only, enrolled-only in postsecondary education, and both employed and enrolled in postsecondary education. A fourth status, neither employed nor enrolled in college, is represented by blank space.

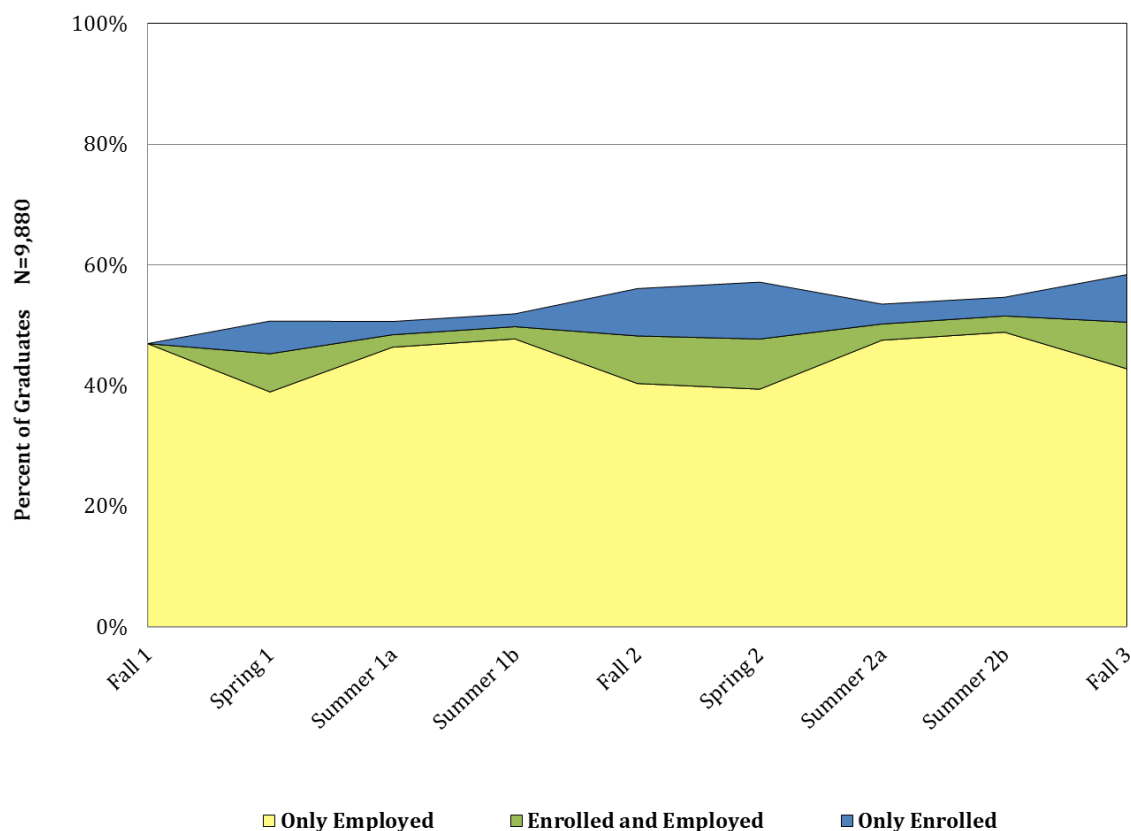
Figure 5. Outcomes over Time for Graduates Enrolled in Fall 1



Among graduates on the traditional college pathway, 65% were enrolled-only in the fall after graduation (shown in blue), while a substantial minority (35%) was both employed *and* enrolled (shown in green). Over time, the proportion of the only-enrolled group only e fluctuated from highs in the fall and spring to lows in the summer, but never again reached the high share that was enrolled-only in Fall 1.

Other students followed the *delayed college pathway* where the student did not enroll in postsecondary education in the fall after high school but did enroll in at least one semester in the following spring or later. Roughly 18 percent of Central Texas graduates not initially enrolled were enrolled in Spring 2. Unlike the large seasonal changes in enrollment and employment for those who initially enrolled in college, the rates of employment are relatively stable for those who did not initially enroll in college (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Outcomes over Time for Graduates not Enrolled in Fall 1



High school graduates who enrolled in postsecondary education in the fall immediately following graduation were overwhelmingly likely (98%) to either continue in school or intermittently enroll in school. On the other hand, high school graduates who did not enroll in postsecondary education in the first fall after graduation were much less likely (31%) to ever enroll in school over this period.

Workforce Program Participation. We also explored the extent to which high school graduates participated in a variety of workforce development programs, statewide and by region, as part of WDQI.⁹ In Texas, recent high school graduates might be eligible for and participate in a number of workforce programs. Workforce programs with data available for this research included those funded through the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Employment and Training (TANF Choices), and Supplement Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) to list the major ones.

⁹ More details will be provided in a forthcoming report from the Ray Marshall Center.

Recent high school graduates do not tend to participate in workforce services, particularly when labor market conditions are strong: no more than 1% of the class of 2008 participated in any of these services statewide in the fall following high school graduation. However, beginning in the spring of 2009, after the start of the recession, a larger share of 2008 graduates, up to 2% from some regions, utilized these services. However, this phenomenon was not widespread: no more than three regions—mainly along the Texas-Mexico border—experienced workforce program utilization rates above 1% for the first two years following graduation.

Administrative Records Issues

Ray Marshall Center research utilizing linked, longitudinal administrative records has spanned three decades, encompassed a wide range of programs and target populations, and has been geared toward varying audiences of policymakers and program administrators. Not surprisingly, a number of issues have surfaced in carrying out this research, many of which have been identified and discussed at length before.¹⁰ Because privacy and data confidentiality concerns have occupied so much attention in recent years, I will not dwell on them. Some of the issues I want to highlight here are: quality; access; and comprehensiveness.

Quality. By definition, administrative data are collected for purposes other than research; they are mainly collected for program's to use for eligibility determination, service documentation, performance tracking and other purposes. This means that they may not meet the same standards as data collected purely for research by well-trained data collection staff concerned about their use for evaluation or basic research for publication in reports, books, or peer-reviewed journals. That said, it is clear from decades of experience that the more researchers access and use these data for research that feeds back to policymakers, program administrators and staff, the more their quality improves over time.

Access. As interest in and reliance on administrative records have grown in recent decades, researchers have begun encountering increasing resistance by state agency administrators and their legal counsel to allowing private (non- and for-profit) and university-based researchers access. While there are valid reasons for concern—not least among them being highly publicized identity theft by ever-more sophisticated hackers—this resistance is throwing up real barriers to research while driving up its cost in an era of tighter funding to support the research and increased demands for rigorous research and evaluation relying on them.¹¹ Despite federal encouragement and funding for research (and evaluation) using such data (e.g., SLDS and WDQI) and new federal rulemaking that's more supportive (e.g., the

¹⁰ See especially earlier papers by King (1989) and King & Schexnayder (1998, 1999). In addition, an entire volume of the National Research Council (Hotz et al., 1998) explored many of these issues as has the Workforce Data Quality Campaign now led by the National Skills Coalition (WDQC, 2014).

¹¹ The U.S. Department of Labor's five-year employment and training research and evaluation plan (Van Horn et al., 2011) discussed the access problem as well.

new FERPA regulations), some states have instituted new procedures that all but preclude access.

For example, the Oklahoma Department of Employment Security, which traditionally has been quite restrictive regarding researcher use of UI wage records per Oklahoma law—actually requiring active consent for all treatment and comparison/control group members in evaluations—recently changed its policies to align them with new state legislation that requires notarized consent forms for records release to be submitted to the agency within 90 days of signature; in addition, records requests now will only be accepted for *past* records, not future ones. These changes will dampen researcher and evaluator interest in Oklahoma, despite the state having highly innovative, early childhood, two-generation and other programs. Alternatively, it will push the research community to rely far more on costly, less reliable survey-based approaches. This is unfortunate, particularly in an era with a growing appetite for evidence-based solutions. And, this is not an isolated situation. We hear new tales of state resistance to data access every day.

Comprehensiveness. The difficulty involved with accessing individual-level employment and earnings data nationally for research is an area of particular concern. The Wage Records Interchange System (or WRIS) was devised to address the need for national labor market outcomes data to enable WIA programs around the country to get appropriate credit for program performance in cases where their participants secured employment out of state. Most states participated in this federal-state initiative. As Zinn and Dorrer (2014) indicated (p. 2):

“WRIS is not a national database of earnings information. UI wage records remain in separate state databases, but WRIS offers a process for states to share them. Terms of sharing data are specified under the WRIS Data Sharing Agreement....”

WRIS2, which started up in 2010 and now counts 28 states as active participants, was modified to expand access to such aggregate labor market outcomes data for other federal programs (e.g., Perkins).

However, WRIS2 data are not terribly useful for researchers looking to plug complete labor market outcomes information into their estimation models for many reasons, among them the lack of individual-level files, prohibitions in the existing agreement on their use for research and evaluation without specific state consent, and non-coverage for certain groups, e.g., federal employment, military, U.S. Postal Service (Zinn & Dorrer, 2014, p. 5). The Federal Employment Data Exchange System, or FEDES, hosted by the Jacob France Center at the University of Baltimore (www.ubalt.edu/jfi/fedes/) was intended to remedy part of this coverage gap, but, like WRIS2, FEDES is quite limited in what it can provide to researchers rather than program administrators. It is encouraging that WDQC is now advocating for a new WRIS3 that would begin to address some of these shortcomings for researchers. FEDES should be included in the scope of these efforts as well.

Concluding Observations

Our collective success with linking administrative records longitudinally and using them for rigorous research as well as evaluation is remarkable. Our track record is a long one spanning at least four decades, and its breadth and depth are noteworthy. Policymakers and the research community no longer question whether researchers can tap this rich data source for solid research to help understand program service delivery, outcomes and impacts as well basic labor market dynamics at many levels. I have been privileged to be part of this field for much of my career and to have such great collaborators in it. But there's much more to be done.

It is important to note again the distinction between program and research uses of linked, longitudinal administrative records. Many of the ongoing advances made as a result of the workforce quality initiatives of the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Labor and foundation supporters are real contributions to the field.¹² But, while many of these advances (e.g., multi-program dashboards, WRIS2 expansion) are helpful mainly to program administrators interested in tracking progress overall and determining the share of their former participants employed out of state, they are not going to do much to enhance our understanding of the ways in which these programs are contributing to their success: doing so typically requires *individual-level data* that WRIS2, for example, does not provide. Researchers will be precluded from conducting important types of analysis without them.

¹² WDQC's 2014 *Blueprint Report* provides a useful state-by-state summary for example.

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