



Board of Trustees of the Nebraska State Colleges

Meeting Date: **September 10, 2026**

Agenda Item: **5.2**

ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION AND ACTION:

Committee: **Chancellor Informational Items**

Information **Strategic Data Partnerships (CI)**
Only:

This session is designed to provide the Board of Trustees with an overview of four research projects selected through the inaugural NSWERS–Harvard Strategic Data Leadership Network supported through a partnership among Nebraska Statewide Workforce & Educational Reporting System (NSWERS), the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University, and the Susan Thompson Buffett Foundation.

The Strategic Data Project (SDP), an initiative of Harvard University’s Center for Education Policy Research, partnered with NSWERS to establish a statewide fellowship network focused on expanding institutional research capacity and strengthening the use of longitudinal education and workforce data to support institutional planning, student success, workforce alignment, and evidence-based policymaking across Nebraska. The inaugural cohort formally launched in April 2026 and includes 27 fellows representing Nebraska’s public and tribal postsecondary institutions, including the Nebraska State College System, the University of Nebraska System, Nebraska’s six community colleges, and Little Priest Tribal College. Fellows were nominated and selected based on their demonstrated commitment to using data and research to improve postsecondary and workforce outcomes across the state.

As part of the initiative, each participating institution was invited to submit strategic research proposals utilizing NSWERS data resources to address institutional priorities and key student outcome indicators. Four projects from across the Nebraska State College System (System Office, Chadron, Peru, and Wayne) were selected to participate in the inaugural statewide cohort. The fellowship kickoff convening was held April 12–14 in Lincoln and brought together institutional project leads, research staff, NSWERS leadership, and assigned Harvard SDP faculty advisors. Since that time, institutional teams have been working collaboratively with Harvard research partners to refine project scopes, establish methodologies, and begin preliminary analysis activities utilizing NSWERS longitudinal education and workforce datasets. Over the course of the two-year fellowship, participants will engage in:

- In-person and virtual professional development workshops
- Ongoing technical assistance and research coaching
- Cross-institutional collaboration activities
- Strategic project development aligned to institutional and statewide priorities
- Applied data analysis utilizing NSWERS workforce and educational outcome data

Projects within the inaugural cohort focus on a broad range of strategic policy, institutional effectiveness, and student success questions to better inform decision-making across Nebraska’s postsecondary system. Research efforts are examining postsecondary persistence and graduation outcomes, student transfer and completion patterns, and workforce and employment outcomes following graduation. Additional projects are exploring

course-taking behaviors associated with delayed completion or student withdrawal, as well as the relationship between student engagement activities and retention outcomes. Collectively, the projects are intended to provide participating institutions with deeper insights into student progression, barriers to completion, workforce alignment, and the effectiveness of institutional interventions designed to improve student success and long-term educational outcomes.

The overarching goals of the initiative include:

- Expanding institutional research and analytical capacity across Nebraska postsecondary institutions
- Increasing utilization of NSWERS longitudinal education and workforce data
- Supporting evidence-based institutional and statewide decision-making
- Strengthening collaboration among higher education sectors and national research partners
- Informing policy, planning, and resource allocation decisions
- Developing a sustainable statewide model for strategic data leadership and applied research

During the retreat session, the Chancellor and each College President will provide the Board with a brief overview of their respective fellowship projects, including the research focus, strategic rationale, anticipated outcomes, and potential implications for institutional planning and policy development. Updates will continue to be provided throughout the fellowship period as research findings and recommendations emerge.

The selected projects include:

- Chadron State College — Chadron State College Recruiting and Retention Analysis
- Peru State College — The Impact of Student Group and Athletic Participation on Retention and GPA (PSC)
- Wayne State College — Pathways to Persistence: A Lifecycle Model for Retention and Degree Completion Equity
- Nebraska State College System Office — Developing a Statewide Financial Aid Analytics Framework to Improve Student Persistence, Completion, and College Going (see Attachment I as an example of the proposal to NSWERS)

This discussion is intended to provide trustees with additional context regarding how NSWERS partnerships and longitudinal data analysis are increasingly being leveraged to support institutional agility, workforce alignment, student success initiatives, and long-term statewide postsecondary planning efforts.

Informational Item.

ATTACHMENTS:

- Strategic Data Partnership - Attachment I

SDP Nebraska Data Fellowship – Capstone Project Proposal

Developing a Statewide Financial Aid Analytics Framework to Improve Student Persistence, Completion, and College Going

Across the State College System, financial pressure is consistently cited as the primary reason students stop out or withdraw prior to completion. While institutions distribute significant federal, state, and institutional aid each year, there is currently limited system-level capacity to evaluate how different combinations, timing, and amounts of financial aid influence persistence and graduation outcomes.

This challenge is increasingly urgent as institutions face declining traditional-age demographics, rising student need, and constrained state and federal resources. Without the ability to analyze aid effectiveness longitudinally and across institutions, decision-makers must rely largely on historical practice rather than evidence-informed strategy.

In addition, statewide K-12 data indicates that more than 2,500 Nebraska students with ACT scores between 18 and 28 do not enroll in any postsecondary institution following high school. This represents a significant opportunity gap, particularly for low-income and first-generation students, and underscores the need to better understand how financial aid policy influences college-going behavior as well as persistence after enrollment.

This project directly supports postsecondary persistence and graduation by examining how financial aid structures, award levels, and aid composition correlate with student retention and completion outcomes. By integrating NSWERS financial aid and enrollment data, the analysis will



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inform strategies that more effectively target limited resources to support students at the greatest risk of stopping out.

The available data will be studied to correlate and compare the retention (and subsequent graduation) rates of students who have received financial assistance versus those who have not.

Primary objectives include:

- Developing system capacity to upload, standardize, and analyze critical financial aid data within NSWERS.
- Evaluating the relationship between total financial aid, aid mix (federal/state/institutional), and student persistence and graduation.
- Creating simulation and predictive outcome tools to support future financial aid policy decisions.
- Informing strategies to improve college-going among academically prepared students who currently do not enroll.

Central research questions include:

- Does the total amount of financial aid received have a statistically significant correlation with first year retention and longer-term persistence?
- Are certain types or combinations of aid (grants vs. loans vs. institutional awards) more strongly associated with positive outcomes?
- Are there identifiable thresholds where additional aid produces diminishing or increased returns?
- Can predictive modeling identify students most likely to benefit from targeted financial interventions?

Key audiences include system leadership, campus financial aid administrators, enrollment management teams, and institutional researchers. The intended student outcomes include increased retention, improved completion rates, reduced financial-related stop-outs, and expanded access for low-income and first-generation students.



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If possible, and if time permits, I would like to research ways to determine whether allocated funding is not being claimed and, if so, identify students who might be eligible to apply for or receive it. This analysis would support proactive outreach strategies and help ensure that existing resources are fully utilized before additional funding is requested.

Planned analytic methods include:

- Descriptive and trend analysis of financial aid distribution and outcomes.
- Comparative analysis across institutions and student subgroups.
- Equity gap analysis for low-income, first-generation, and rural students.
- Multivariate statistical modeling to isolate the impact of aid while controlling for academic and demographic variables.
- Predictive analytics to model persistence likelihood under varying financial aid scenarios.
- Simulation modeling to test potential policy adjustments prior to implementation.

Data sources will include:

- NSWERS postsecondary enrollment, retention, and completion data.
- NSWERS financial aid datasets (federal, state, and institutional aid).
- Institutional student information system data, where appropriate.
- Statewide K–12 to postsecondary pipeline data to evaluate college-going behavior

Additional data access or technical support may be required to support standardized financial aid uploads, variable definitions, and longitudinal linkage across systems.

Key stakeholders include:

- Nebraska State College System leadership.



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- Campus presidents and senior leadership teams.
- Financial aid directors and enrollment management staff.
- Institutional research and data analytics staff.

The project is supported by system leadership, who recognize the need for stronger data-informed financial aid strategy and improved use of statewide longitudinal data to guide policy decisions.

Proposed timeline:

- Months 1–3: Data access, variable definition, and framework development.
- Months 4–9: Core analysis of financial aid and persistence relationships.
- Months 10–12: Predictive modeling and simulation development.
- Months 13–15: Validation, interpretation, and stakeholder review.
- Final phase: Development of reports, dashboards, and policy recommendations.

Support needs include:

- Guidance on advanced statistical and predictive modeling approaches.
- Technical assistance related to NSWERS data structure and longitudinal linkages.
- Support in translating analytic findings into actionable dashboards and policy tools.
- Assistance interpreting public funding sources and statewide financial aid policy context.

Intended deliverables include:

- A comprehensive analytical report on financial aid and student outcomes.



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- Interactive dashboards displaying aid usage, persistence trends, and predictive risk indicators.
- Simulation tools allowing campuses to model the impact of alternative financial aid strategies.
- Policy recommendations to guide future allocation of limited state, federal, and institutional resources.
- These products are critical to shifting financial aid decision-making from historical practice toward evidence-based, student-centered strategy.

Longer-term impacts include:

- Improved targeting of financial aid for low-income and first-generation students.
- Stronger alignment between financial aid policy and student success outcomes.
- Increased college-going among academically prepared high school graduates.
- Sustainable, real-time analytic capacity within NSWERS to support ongoing decision-making.
- A scalable model that can inform statewide higher education funding and access strategies.

Students are the primary beneficiaries through improved access, persistence, and completion outcomes. Ultimately, this project aims to help ensure that limited public and institutional resources are used as strategically and equitably as possible to support student success.