Report and Suggestions from IPEDS Technical Review Panel #53: Evaluating Distance Education Elements in the IPEDS Data Collection

SUMMARY: The Technical Review Panel discussed the collection and reporting of distance education in IPEDS and considered potential changes to improve information for stakeholders. This summary provides feedback on how changes would affect data quality and reporting burden for institutions. Comments from interested parties are due to Janice Kelly-Reid, IPEDS Project Director at RTI International, at ipedsTRPcomment@rti.org **by September 9, 2017.**

On June 20 and 21, 2017, RTI International, the contractor for the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) web-based data collection system, convened a meeting of the IPEDS Technical Review Panel (TRP) in Washington, DC. Meetings of the IPEDS TRP are conducted by RTI to solicit expert discussion and suggestions on a broad range of issues related to postsecondary education and the conduct of IPEDS. The TRP is designed to allow the public to advise and work with RTI to improve IPEDS data collection and products, data quality, and user-friendliness. The TRP does not report to or advise the U.S. Department of Education.

RTI's specific purpose for TRP 53 was to discuss the distance education elements in the IPEDS data collection and consider how potential changes would impact stakeholders including institutions, consumers, researchers, and the Department of Education. The panel consisted of 50 individuals representing institutions, researchers, state governments, the federal government, higher education associations, and other experts.

Background

Since 2012, the IPEDS data collection system collects data on distance education in three survey components: Institutional Characteristics (IC), Completions, and Fall Enrollment (EF).[1] The purpose of these data is to provide useful and meaningful information on distance education offerings and enrollments for consumer, research, and transparency purposes. For example, distance education data are used by institutions, researchers, and policymakers to help inform broad questions about distance education as a service delivery model and provide consumers with information about the availability of programs that can be completed entirely through distance education.

The National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC)[2] commissioned a research paper[3] to examine the current landscape of postsecondary distance education and assess the extent to which the distance education data elements collected in IPEDS adequately reflect the landscape. The authors presented their findings to the panel and this summary includes information from the paper and the subsequent panel discussion. Distance education, particularly online education, has evolved with the advent of new communication and educational technologies and increasing demand for flexible learning opportunities. Distance education offerings can range from individual courses to full degree

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[1] Although the IPEDS distance education data collection is relatively new, the postsecondary landscape is constantly changing due to advanced and improved technologies.

[2] NPEC was established by NCES in 1995 as a voluntary organization that encompasses all sectors of the postsecondary education community including federal agencies, postsecondary institutions, associations, and other organizations with a major interest in postsecondary education data collection.

[3] Miller, A., Topper, A.M., Richardson, S., *Suggestions for improving IPEDS distance education data collection* (NPEC 2017). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Postsecondary Education Cooperative. DRAFT June 2017.

programs. Institutions use a wide spectrum of technologies to deliver instruction through a variety of delivery modes—completely distance education, traditional or in-person instruction, and a combination of technology and traditional instruction, often referred to as "hybrid" or "blended" instruction. Additionally, the term "distance education" may not have clear lines that delineate instruction from physical distance because institutions offer online courses to students living on campus as well as to those separated by distance (e.g., across state lines).

As noted in the 2017 NPEC preliminary paper *Suggestions for Improving IPEDS Distance Education Data Collection,* the rapid growth of distance education and technological advances necessitates regular assessment of data collection to ensure the landscape continues to be accurately captured. The results of this exploratory research indicate that the data elements currently collected in IPEDS adequately reflect the distance education landscape without imposing excessive burden. Predicting advances and enrollment changes is challenging. In addition, proposed changes to the data collected must account for potential future developments and maintain longitudinal comparisons with past data collections.

RTI convened this TRP to engage the postsecondary community in a discussion about how IPEDS can best capture information related to distance education to improve stakeholder information. The TRP was asked to review the recommendations from the NPEC paper, consider potential changes to the current distance education data elements in the IPEDS collection, and explore opportunities to add new items to fill information gaps. Suggestions for data collection changes take into account the need for flexibility and uniformity, while also considering the potential burden placed on data reporters.

Discussion Item #1: Defining Distance Education

As postsecondary distance education offerings continue to expand, multiple published definitions and categories are emerging. The panel considered whether changes are needed to the IPEDS definitions related to distance education to better calibrate the collection. IPEDS definitions of distance education programs and courses specify that all instructional content must be delivered exclusively via distance education (meaning all instructional content is provided exclusively via distance education for distance education courses, and the required coursework for program completion can be completed via distance education courses). Courses that combine distance education and traditional teaching methods ("hybrid" courses) are not considered by IPEDS to be distance education. Although external definitions of distance education are more inclusive than IPEDS' definition, there is no universal agreement on the percentage of instructional content that must be delivered through distance education for a course or program to qualify as distance education.

Distance education courses. Panelists noted that adding percentage thresholds for distance education content would likely increase distance education enrollment estimates in IPEDS. Additionally, panelists raised concerns that a standard federal minimum threshold would impose an arbitrary measure and would affect alignment with existing definitions used by states, institutions, accrediting agencies, and other external datasets. They suggested that IPEDS should retain its current definitions of exclusively online coursework to maintain longitudinal comparisons with past data collections and should emphasize in the instructions that hybrid courses are not considered by IPEDS as distance education.

Distance education programs. Panelists also raised concerns that the wording of the current IPEDS definition of distance education programs seems to conflate program design and execution (i.e., whether the program is intended to be completed exclusively via distance education versus whether a student is able to stack up a combination of courses offered as distance education courses to eventually get a degree). They pointed out that distance education programs are generally approved by accreditors and suggested adding language to the question to clarify that all programs are *designed* to be completed via distance education. This would eliminate confusion between distance education indicating course-taking practices versus distance education describing the program being offered. They also suggested that NCES review the definitions of distance education programs used by accrediting agencies and consider adopting similar language.

Discussion Item #2: Collecting Distance Education Data in the IPEDS Institutional Characteristics Survey

The **Institutional Characteristics** (IC) survey component includes the following questions related to distance education opportunities:

- Does your institution offer distance education courses [yes/no]?[4]
- If yes:
    - Are all the programs at your institution offered exclusively via distance education programs [yes/no]?
    - Please indicate at what level(s) your institution offers distance education opportunities (courses and/or programs) [undergraduate/graduate/ this institution does not offer distance education opportunities]

Distance education levels. A new question in 2017-18 data collection will clarify the existing questions on distance education opportunities by collecting distance education course and distance education program offerings in separate categories. This change was based on feedback from the IPEDS Help Desk and is intended to decrease repetition and clarify the question. The panel was asked to consider additional improvements to this question and suggested changing the question to ask at what level(s) the institution **does or does not** offer distance education courses and/or distance education programs, with a new category to collect the level at which no distance education is offered, as shown in Figure 1. (This change would entail reformatting the response option "the institution does not offer distance education at the undergraduate or graduate level" from a row to a column and relabeling it to "does not offer distance education."). Panelists noted that this proposed change clarifies the question without increasing burden and suggested it should be implemented for the 2017-18 collection cycle.[5]

Figure 1. Proposed format for IPEDS Institutional Characteristics distance education questions, 2017-18

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[4] This screening question was added to the 2016-17 collection.
[5] The current authorization for IPEDS expires February 29, 2020 (OMB No. 1850-0582 v.20) and covers activities through the 2019-20 collection.

Please indicate at what level(s) your institution **does or does not** <u>offer</u> distance education courses and/or distance education programs. Check all that apply.			
	Distance education courses	Distance education programs	Does not offer distance education
Undergraduate level	☐	☐	☐
Graduate level	☐	☐	☐
Are ALL of the programs at your institution offered exclusively via distance education programs? (Yes/No).			

Exclusively distance education programs. Institutions are identified as completely distance education if all their programs are offered exclusively via distance education programs. Panelists noted that the current yes/no response option does not distinguish between undergraduate and graduate program offerings and suggested collecting the level(s) at which exclusively distance education programs are offered (undergraduate, graduate, this institution does not offer exclusively distance education programs) to provide more detail for benchmarking and consumer information purposes.

The items in this component determine the applicability and version of the remaining IPEDS survey components. Further study is needed on the order, placement, and workflow of the two distance education questions to eliminate unnecessary repetition. RTI encourages additional comments on this topic, particularly with respect to question format and terminology.

Additional data elements. Common elements of distance education definitions include the use of technology, the concept of separation, and interaction between students and the instructor synchronously or asynchronously. The panel considered the following additional data elements:

- **Telecommunication systems.** Panelists discussed whether IPEDS should collect data on the type of technology used to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor. For example, an option would be to add a list of telecommunication methods that can be used to deliver coursework and ask institutions to check all that apply. Panelists questioned the stability of the categories, citing the changing landscape of distance education and the potential for further change; NCES would need to continuously update the list as new technologies emerge. Panelists also questioned the value of this level of detail for consumer information purposes and noted that students would likely be more interested in the availability of programs offered that can be completed via distance education rather than the type of technology used to deliver the instruction. In general, they agreed there was no compelling reason to begin collecting detail on telecommunication systems.

- **Delivery modes.** Technology now allows for virtual meetings and synchronous instruction, meaning that the lecture or discussion between the instructor and students takes place live, rather than being recorded and used asynchronously. Panelists noted that clarifying the timing of distance education as asynchronous, synchronous, or a combination of the two would be helpful for consumers to better understand the requirements of their coursework (e.g., for students to know they would be expected to log on and virtually attend a class or lecture scheduled for a specific date and time); however, they pointed out that the mode of delivery varies by course section and collecting this information at the institution level would not be feasible.

Discussion Item #3: Collecting Distance Education Data in the IPEDS Completions Survey

The IPEDS **Completions** component collects whether the institution offers the full program (as defined by the Classification of Instructional Programs [CIP] code system) and award level through distance education. If more than one program is offered under a CIP code by award level, institutions are instructed to check "yes" to the distance education question if any of the programs are offered as a distance education program. Panelists noted that a constraint of the current format is the inability to identify the number of programs offered as distance education programs if more than one program is offered under a CIP code. They considered several options for categorizing exclusively distance education programs in ways that are better aligned with how institutions organize their programs.

Collect data for each program reported under a CIP code and award level. Panelists considered whether IPEDS should collect data for each program if more than one program is offered under a CIP code. For example, if more than one program is offered under the CIP code and award level, the institution would list the programs and indicate whether each program is offered as a distance education program. In general, when taking burden into consideration, panelists did not view collecting program data at the sub-CIP code level as necessary for an institution-level data collection in the Completions survey.

Collect data on whether programs are offered in traditional (in-person), online, or hybrid/blended settings. Panelists considered adding a sub-checkbox to collect data on the delivery mode of the program. For example, in addition to the checkbox currently in place to indicate whether the program is offered as a distance education program, add a sub-checkbox to collect delivery methods available (traditional, online, hybrid). Panelists noted that CIP code is not aligned with modality or delivery mode, and collecting this level of detail would not address whether the program is designed specifically to be offered as distance education.

Collect data on the number of programs that are available via distance education. Panelists considered removing distance education indicators from the Completions component and adding an item to the IC component to collect data on the number of programs offered at the institution and the number of programs offered as distance education programs (at the institution level, as opposed to the CIP code level). Some panelists expressed an interest in capturing the number of programs offered via distance education. Although this would impose less burden than having to report the number of distance education programs for each CIP code, the intent of the distance education program indicator is to help students find specific programs of study that are offered as distance education programs through the CIP variables. It is then up to the student to go to the school's website to get more detail on the program offered as distance education.

After weighing the burden of collecting the additional data with the benefit it would provide to the public, panelists did not strongly favor modifying the Completions component question about programs offered via distance education.

Discussion Item #4: Collecting Distance Education in IPEDS Enrollment Surveys

The **Fall Enrollment** (EF) component collects data on the number of students (1) enrolled exclusively in distance education courses, (2) enrolled in some but not all distance education courses, or (3) not enrolled in any distance education courses, by student level and undergraduate degree-seeking status. Students enrolled in exclusively distance education courses are further reported

according to student residence location relative to the institution (i.e., in the same state or jurisdiction as the institution, in a different state or jurisdiction as the institution, outside the U.S., or unknown). The panel considered possible changes to the current collection and suggested the following.

Clarify terminology. Panelists suggested relabeling the category for "enrolled in some but not all distance education courses" to "enrolled in at least one but not all distance education courses" to reduce misunderstandings about "some" distance education coursework on the EF component to mean hybrid courses.

Collect distance education enrollment in the 12-month Enrollment survey. Currently, distance education enrollments are only collected on the EF component (Academic reporters report enrollment as of October 15, or as the institution's official fall enrollment date; program reporters report enrollment during the 3-month period of August 1 to October 31). However, panelists noted that completely distance education institutions are more likely to enroll students continuously throughout the year and would benefit from reporting distance education enrollments on the 1**2-month Enrollment** (E12) survey component. The resulting data would more accurately reflect the total institutional enrollments, which in some cases are nearly double those of the fall.

- **Unduplicated headcount.** Questions would need to be added to the E12 component, which collects enrollment counts by level of student (undergraduate or graduate), gender, and race/ethnicity. Panelists suggested that if distance education enrollment counts are added to the E12 component, data should not be collected by race/ethnicity and gender, given the substantial increase in burden. They also recognized that race/ethnicity and gender distributions may vary by program (e.g., nursing programs may be composed primarily of women). Distance education programs that are also skewed toward a demographic group (e.g., an online nursing program) could appear as having a disproportionate demographic skew for online programs, with the gender differential concentrated within a small number of programs. Panelists suggested keeping the enrollment categories as they are in the EF component (enrolled exclusively in distance education courses, in at least one but not all distance education courses, or in no distance education courses—by student level and undergraduate degree-seeking status) and adding the same categories to the E12 component to more accurately represent populations at institutions that enroll students continuously throughout the year. Panelists noted that the E12 collection could benefit from clarification with respect to categorizing students whose distance education enrollment status changes over the course of the 12-month reporting period (e.g., a student is enrolled exclusively in distance education courses in the fall and enrolled in at least one but not all distance education courses in the spring).

- **Instructional activity.** Instructional activity is used to calculate the full-time equivalent (FTE) count of students based on the institution's reported calendar system. To calculate a total distance education FTE student estimate, institutions would need to either report on undergraduate distance education contact and credit hour activity plus graduate credit hour activity to arrive at IPEDS-calculated FTE estimates *or* provide their own estimates of undergraduate distance education FTE and graduate distance education FTE.

  Panelists did not reach agreement on the value of collecting distance education instructional activity or calculating distance education FTE estimates, given the high burden and questions about who would benefit from these data. Panelists suggested that NCES review information on instructional activity required by accreditors to further assess the burden and feasibility of collecting data on distance education instructional activity.

Discussion Item #5: Collecting Data on Hybrid/Blended Courses

IPEDS does not collect data on hybrid courses, but doing so may provide a more complete picture of the current distance education landscape. However, panelists noted that institutions' multiple definitions and many varieties of hybrid courses present a challenge to collecting uniform data across institutions. For example, hybrid courses are often faculty-defined (i.e., determined by faculty, not at the institution level) and collecting the percentage of online instruction time in each course is difficult. At institutions that do not currently track hybrid courses, institutional representatives would need to reassess and identify every course section which are hybrid and which are not. Panelists also noted that some institutions are transitioning to rely more heavily on open education resource initiatives, providing freely accessible materials that can supplement some in-classroom time, which may make determining the percentage of technology use even more difficult.

In general, panelists voiced opposition against attempting to use percentage thresholds to define what a hybrid course is and instead suggested using the following definition as a framework for the discussion: hybrid courses are courses that can be taken through some distance education technology that replaces in-classroom seat time. Panelists suggested collecting the number of students enrolled exclusively in hybrid courses, in at least one but not all hybrid courses, or not enrolled in any hybrid courses, by student level and undergraduate degree-seeking status, to mirror the "all, some, or none" format for collecting enrollment in distance education courses.

A panelist also noted that the concept of seat time is not applicable to competency-based education courses, in which the outcome rather than the seat time is the focus, and discussed implementing an exception, or specific instructions, to guide institutions on how institutions should report competency-based education courses.

In general, panelists supported collecting hybrid enrollment in both the EF and E12 components, but RTI encourages additional comments on this topic, particularly with respect to burden on affected institutions.

Discussion Item #6: Collecting Additional Distance Education Data

With the exception of the Fall Enrollment component, IPEDS data elements on distance education are limited to yes/no indicators related to course and program offerings. The panel was asked to weigh the possibility of adding a new, optional survey component to IPEDS for collecting and reporting consumer-focused distance education information. For example, the panel considered an approach that would focus on attributes related to each CIP code and award level to collect the data for search tools for prospective students. For example, such attributes to be collected could include:

- Program can be completed online
- Program can be completed onsite
- Program has onsite requirements in the evenings
- Program has onsite requirements on the weekends
- Program requires an onsite experience (2 weeks or less of seat time)
- Program requires an onsite experience (more than 2 weeks but less than 1 month of seat time)
- Program requires an onsite experience (greater than 1 month of seat time)
- Distance education as a supplement for onsite classes

- Program allows for competency-based assessment in lieu of classes
- Asynchronous
- Synchronous
- Self-paced

The purpose of this optional component would be to provide a federal forum for a standardized collection to better inform consumers—especially those unable to attend postsecondary institutions in-person—of the distance education offerings available to them. Panelists acknowledged the value gained by providing consumers with more detailed information on program-level attributes, but they also raised concerns about adding an optional component to IPEDS. Panelists cited concerns about a perceived need for institutions to complete the component to maintain parity with other institutions, as well as programmatic changes and the ability for an optional federal collection to keep up with changing requirements (not only at the program level but also across the industry). Thus, there is a risk that the data could become rapidly outdated for consumers. Should this optional distance education component be pursued by IPEDS, panelists suggested using consumer focus groups to help identify what data elements are most useful to consumers and doing a scan of the current literature on program attributes. Additionally, panelists suggested integrating the data from the optional survey component with an open application program interface (API) to make the data accessible and allowing for the development of new applications and tools by outside organizations.

Next Steps

Once the TRP summary comment period has closed, RTI will review the comments and will outline recommendations for NCES based on the outcome of the TRP meeting and subsequent public comment period. NCES will review the recommendations to determine next steps and submit proposed burden estimates to the Office of Management and Budget for information collection clearance. The current collection expires in 2020.

Comments

RTI is committed to improving the quality and usefulness of IPEDS data as well as strategies that might be helpful in minimizing additional reporting burden. We encourage interested parties to send any comments or concerns about this topic to Janice Kelly-Reid, IPEDS Project Director, at ipedsTRPcomment@rti.org by September 9, 2017.