

Report and Suggestions from IPEDS Technical Review Panel #62: Capturing Noncredit Enrollment and Activity in the IPEDS Surveys

SUMMARY: The Technical Review Panel discussed ways in which the IPEDS surveys might be improved to better capture noncredit enrollment and activity. Before making immediate changes, panelists suggested revising and improving the current instructions and reporting guidance to ensure accurate reporting. 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 March 8, 2021.

On October 20 and 21, 2020, 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) using videoconference technology. RTI conducts IPEDS TRP meetings to solicit expert discussion and suggestions on a broad range of issues related to postsecondary education and the IPEDS collection. As the postsecondary education industry evolves, IPEDS TRP meetings are increasingly critical in addressing changes to ensure that IPEDS data remain relevant, informative, and on the forefront of industry advancements and legislative needs. To this end, IPEDS TRP meetings are designed to foster public discourse and enhance IPEDS data collection, products, data quality, and system user-friendliness. The TRP does not report to or advise the U.S. Department of Education.

RTI's specific purpose for TRP #62 was to discuss opportunities to improve the utility of IPEDS data by collecting additional data on noncredit enrollment and activity that the postsecondary community and IPEDS stakeholders consider important, while balancing burden for data reporters. Fifty-one panelists represented institutions, the research field, state governments, the federal government, higher education associations, and other experts.

Background

IPEDS enrollment data are based on students enrolled *for credit*. To be considered enrolled for credit, a student must be enrolled in an instructional activity that can be applied toward the requirements of a degree, certificate, or other recognized postsecondary credential, regardless of whether the student is seeking a degree/certificate or the course is Title IV eligible. Students taking remedial courses are also included in IPEDS enrollment counts if the student is considered degree-seeking for financial aid purposes. Noncredit enrollment data are not collected in IPEDS. This is of interest for two primary reasons:

- **Lack of data.** A wide range of education and training activities at postsecondary institutions occur outside of traditional credit-bearing coursework. Noncredit activities may reflect a range of educational, career, and personal offerings that can play an important role in supporting local workforce needs, preparing students for higher level coursework, and providing additional enrichment to the broader community. Noncredit activity is offered by all types of institutions but is more prevalent across some sectors or types of institutions. These institutions may view noncredit activity as an important function and part of their institutional missions. However, information on noncredit enrollment and related activities is

not collected in any publicly available national data collection, resulting in significant gaps in what is known about the scope or scale of noncredit activity at the national level.

- **Limitations of IPEDS metrics.** IPEDS enrollment data do not capture large populations of students and activities at institutions with significant noncredit enrollment. Not only does omitting noncredit activity disproportionately affect some sectors or types of institutions that have significant noncredit activity (most often 2-year public institutions), but it also affects the accuracy and comparability of key IPEDS metrics derived using full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment of students. IPEDS metrics derived using FTEs of students exclude noncredit enrollment but include instructional staff, revenues, and expenses associated with noncredit activities. This coverage gap leads to inaccuracies in ratios of per-FTE revenues and expenses and student-to-faculty ratios.
 - **Limitations #1 and #2:** Revenues per FTE and expenses per FTE result in inflated estimates. Revenues and expenses for noncredit activities are included in the numerator, but noncredit enrollments are not included in the denominator.
 - **Limitation #3:** Student-to-faculty ratio includes only students enrolled for credit and instructional staff teaching credit courses. Although the Human Resources (HR) survey component collects the number of instructional staff teaching exclusively noncredit courses, noncredit enrollments are not collected in Fall Enrollment (EF) or 12-month Enrollment (E12) surveys.

The National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC)¹ commissioned a research paper² to examine the prevalence of noncredit activity in postsecondary education, the extent to which data are collected and used by stakeholders, and potential changes to the IPEDS data collection for consideration by the TRP. This research included a high-level review of literature related to the topic; an analysis of IPEDS data and other sources; and interviews with stakeholders. The findings of this exploratory research highlight the lack of national, publicly available data on noncredit activity and suggest a framework for the collection of noncredit enrollment data in IPEDS.

A March 2008 meeting of the IPEDS TRP on Collecting Data on Noncredit Instructional Activity (TRP #22) also provided background on this topic. TRP #22 suggested adding a new screen to the E12 survey component to collect noncredit activity by instructional hours, duplicated headcount, and unduplicated headcount. Suggestions from this TRP were never implemented, in part because of the timing of the Higher Education Opportunity Act in 2008. The work from TRP #22 provided a starting point for the TRP #62 discussion.

RTI convened the TRP to engage the postsecondary community in a discussion about how IPEDS could clarify or expand data on noncredit activity to improve the value of IPEDS metrics. The TRP was asked to review the findings and recommendations from the NPEC paper and consider potential changes to address gaps, inconsistencies, or measurement errors in the data; better align noncredit enrollment data with metrics that pertain to instructional staff (e.g., student-to-faculty ratio) and

¹ NPEC was established by the National Center for Education Statistics (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.

² Erwin, M. (2020). *Noncredit Enrollment and Related Activities* (NPEC 2019). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Postsecondary Education Cooperative. Retrieved October 20, 2020, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.

institutional revenues and expenditures (e.g., finance ratios); and keep pace with emerging trends in higher education. Although the collection of data on noncredit enrollment is not statutorily required, a review of the appropriateness and applicability of IPEDS data elements could help ensure that particular sectors or types of institutions are not disproportionately affected by the data collected. Panelists were asked to provide feedback on the most important and feasible changes to prioritize for implementation while also considering potential increases in the burden on data reporters.

Discussion Item #1: Limitations of IPEDS Metrics

As noted previously, key IPEDS metrics affected by not collecting information on noncredit enrollment or activity in IPEDS include revenues per FTE, expenses per FTE, and student-to-faculty ratios. Panelists acknowledged the current limitations of the IPEDS metrics and suggested that, as a first step, IPEDS should offer additional guidance to inform data users of the current limitations of IPEDS metrics. Panelists agreed that users of the data should be aware of limitations and how the data are derived to prevent inaccurate or misleading conclusions about institutions (particularly, certain sectors or types of institutions) and the higher education community at large. Although collecting information on noncredit activity or enrollment could help to improve the value of IPEDS metrics for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers, panelists noted support for a slow and deliberate approach to implementation.

Discussion Item #2: Defining Noncredit Activity and Enrollment

Panelists agreed that terminology and definitions are key to reflect current trends and ensure common reporting. Panelists noted that collecting data on noncredit instruction and activity would enhance understanding of the role of noncredit education in workforce development and community education. However, terminology and definitions should reflect current trends and ensure consistent reporting. Although noncredit activity and instruction are common, data collection and definitions are not universal among postsecondary institutions, systems, or states.

The IPEDS glossary currently defines a “noncredit course” as “a course or activity having no credit applicable toward a degree, diploma, certificate, or other recognized postsecondary credential.” This definition implies a distinction between a course and an activity, both of which can be considered “noncredit.” Panelists noted the broad nature of the word “activity,” pointing out its function as a general umbrella term that would include both noncredit “courses” and other content that may not be considered a course (e.g., a visiting speaker delivering a seminar or registration for an intramural sport).

While discussing content that may not be considered coursework, panelists offered possible ways to define a noncredit “course,” one of which was by using a threshold of a minimum number of clock hours. Panelists noted concerns with this concept: certain programming may not fit with that approach to measurement (e.g., modular and competency-based content), and there would be no clear way of determining where to appropriately set that threshold. Panelists acknowledged that, although noncredit activity comprises much more, for purposes of collecting detailed data in IPEDS, the definition should focus on the core activity of delivering instruction. Panelists suggested defining “noncredit” in simple subcategories such as

- career/technical,

- foundational skills/college readiness, and
- personal/enrichment.

Panelists did not reach consensus on the specific naming of each category and instead suggested continued research and exploration to determine the most appropriate labels. For example, some panelists recommended the term “occupational” rather than “career/technical,” some preferred terms such as “precollege” or “remedial” to “foundational skills/college readiness,” and some suggested adding a “career” component to the term “personal/enrichment.” Panelists acknowledged that, although the suggested terminology may not cover all aspects of noncredit instruction, it eliminates the distinction of contracted training. This approach aligns with panelists’ suggestion to start slowly and deliberately and thus not impose undue burden, while also identifying the data needed to answer priority questions.

Panelists agreed that, although these categories may not encompass every single type (e.g., court-mandated instruction), they would account for most noncredit activity. Panelists considered distinguishing between sponsored and non-sponsored career/technical activity but ultimately decided against it because the distinction is not always clearly defined enough to warrant separate categories.

Discussion Item #3: Institutional Characteristics

The Institutional Characteristics Header (IC-Header) and Institutional Characteristics (IC) survey components currently capture limited information about noncredit activity or instruction. For example, in the IC-Header survey component, the list of education offerings includes options for “recreational or avocational (leisure) programs” and “Adult basic or remedial instruction or high school equivalency.” In the IC survey component, the option for “Remedial services” is included among a list of student services offered by the institution.

Panelists considered whether the IC and IC-Header surveys should be modified to capture more detail about noncredit activities. Panelists noted that the IC survey component could serve as the first capture point for noncredit activity. Because this information would most likely be captured via simple checkboxes, collecting a modest amount of additional detail about these noncredit offerings would be manageable without a substantial increase in burden.

Panelists suggested that NCES consider reorganizing and possibly combining the questions on the IC and IC-Header, and noted that survey instructions should provide guidance on how to handle situations in which institutions offer both credit and noncredit versions of the same content. Panelists also agreed that, if revised, the new formats of the IC and IC-Header should align in structure and level of detail to the extent possible with any changes made to other IPEDS surveys.

Discussion Item #4: Finance

Institutions currently report revenues and expenses related to both credit and noncredit activities in the IPEDS Finance survey. However, the specific amounts of revenues and expenses are combined rather than collected separately for credit and noncredit activities. As a result, it is not possible to determine the amounts of revenues or expenses that are attributable to noncredit activity.

Panelists discussed whether data collected in the Finance survey should be disaggregated and reported separately for credit and noncredit activity and instruction. Panelists agreed that, given the

expanding role of noncredit activity in the postsecondary landscape, more detailed data on the costs and returns associated with providing this instruction would be valuable to stakeholders. However, panelists pointed out numerous complexities with collecting this level of detail in IPEDS, as well as the substantial burden on institutions.

For example, certain programming may be offered for credit to some students, while other students—possibly even in the same class with the same instructor—may consume the same programming without receiving credit. In these situations, disentangling the financial amounts associated with the for-credit portion from the noncredit portion would be challenging or even impossible for institutions.

Another complicating factor noted by panelists was the fact that institutions report financial data differently according to which accounting standards they are required to follow. Most public institutions use standards established by the Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB), and most private institutions use those set by the Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB). Issues related to the differences between GASB and FASB reporting and comparing data between the different types are already quite complex, so adding additional detail in the Finance survey with a credit/noncredit distinction would further complicate the survey and its data.

Panelists agreed that collecting specific revenue and expense amounts attributable to credit and noncredit activity would introduce substantial burden for institutions, which would outweigh the benefits. However, panelists did raise the possibility of adding a screening question to the Finance survey that would ask institutions to indicate whether their total revenues and expenses include noncredit activity. Doing so would provide a flag with additional information that might be useful for data users when comparing between institutions and therefore add some value to the data without placing unnecessary burden on institutions.

Panelists suggested further exploration of the Finance survey and noncredit enrollment and activity, perhaps through additional discussions in financial work groups and a future TRP meeting dedicated to the Finance survey component related to noncredit activity.

Discussion Item #5: Human Resources

The IPEDS HR survey currently collects limited information about staff teaching noncredit courses. Degree-granting institutions with 15 or more full-time staff are required to report the number of full-time and part-time instructional staff by faculty status in each of the following mutually exclusive categories: exclusively credit, exclusively not-for-credit, and combined credit/not-for-credit.

The HR survey instructions, which provide guidance on which staff should and should not be reported, indicate that “staff in workforce development training programs and Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs” and “adjunct instructional staff” should be included. The instructions do not provide additional guidance on how staff in workforce development training programs and ABE programs pertain to credit and noncredit instruction. They do, however, explain that adjunct instructional staff should include staff teaching courses for credit as well as those teaching remedial, developmental, and English as a second language (ESL) courses, regardless of whether they are credit bearing, but should exclude “appointees who teach non-credit courses exclusively.” The instructions provide further guidance on other groups that should be excluded from the HR survey,

including “staff whose services are contracted by or donated to the institution (e.g., volunteerism)” and “casual staff (hired on an ad-hoc or occasional basis to meet short term needs).”

Panelists discussed how the current HR survey and its instructions may be introducing confusion in multiple areas with regard to the treatment and inclusion of noncredit instructional staff. For example, the instructions do not specify that faculty teaching noncredit offerings in workforce development and ABE should be included. Furthermore, institutions are instructed to exclude casual staff and volunteers, two groups that often contain staff teaching noncredit instruction, which is likely resulting in underreporting of noncredit staff based on current IPEDS guidance. Panelists also pointed out that institutions are likely interpreting the survey guidance in different ways, especially with regard to definitions of certain staff categories (e.g., casual staff), further exacerbating the inconsistencies in reporting.

Panelists agreed that modifying the HR survey instructions would clarify which noncredit staff should be included and help ensure more consistent interpretation of the survey guidance among institutions. Specifically, in the “Who to Include” guidance, panelists suggested adding language to specify that staff in “for-credit or noncredit” workforce development training, avocational, and precollegiate programs should be included. Furthermore, in the “Who NOT to Include” guidance, panelists suggested adding an exception to the “casual staff” exclusion to specify that casual staff who teach noncredit workforce development training or avocational programs should indeed be included.

In addition to clarifying the instructions, panelists considered whether to further expand the HR survey to collect additional data about staff such as gender, race/ethnicity, and salary outlays for staff in each of the three categories (exclusively credit, exclusively noncredit, both credit/noncredit). Panelists quickly pointed out significant complications in collecting these data. For example, institutions may not collect race/ethnicity data for certain staff (e.g., casual staff), which makes reporting difficult and could skew metrics. In addition, variance in the salary data for these types of staff would likely be so great that the data would lack utility. Another issue that institutions may face is that staff could be employed in another capacity at the institution in addition to their teaching assignment, in which case it would be difficult to attribute only a certain portion of their salary to the instruction. Panelists agreed that, although additional data on gender, race/ethnicity, and salary of noncredit staff may hold value for data users, the burden placed on institutions in reporting them would be too great to justify changes to the HR survey at this time.

Finally, because the existing IPEDS student-to-faculty ratio represents only for-credit enrollment and instruction, the TRP considered whether an additional student-to-faculty ratio metric should be created that would include data on noncredit activity. Panelists pointed out that the type of information and the level of detail that would be required of institutions to develop this measure would be exceedingly burdensome. Panelists suggested this topic be explored further in a future TRP dedicated to the HR survey.

Discussion Item #6: 12-Month Enrollment

The IPEDS E12 survey does not currently collect any specific information on noncredit enrollment. Institutions are instructed to report all students enrolled for credit, but students enrolled in certain categories of noncredit courses may be reported in IPEDS enrollment surveys as degree-seeking.

These include students who are enrolled in remedial and ESL courses that are not creditable toward an award but who have been admitted into an eligible Title IV program and receive Title IV aid, as well as co-op students enrolled in courses that are not creditable toward an award but are required for award attainment.

The TRP discussed whether the E12 survey should be modified to collect noncredit enrollment data, and if so, what should be collected and the implications of doing so. As described in the “Defining Noncredit Activity and Instruction” section of this report, panelists had previously agreed on three general categories that would be appropriate for classifying and collecting instructional activity and enrollment for the purposes of IPEDS:

- career/technical,
- foundational skills/college readiness, and
- personal/enrichment.

Panelists agreed that collecting additional information on noncredit enrollment would enhance the value of IPEDS data and that collecting the information in these three categories in E12 was the most appropriate approach.

During this discussion, panelists debated whether noncredit enrollment activity should be collected in these categories by student head count or by a measure of clock hours. Panelists pointed out that capturing detailed head counts for noncredit enrollment would be challenging. For instance, institutions do not always track enrollment in noncredit programming using unique identifiers, so determining the specific students in each category would not be straightforward, and in fact, some students would likely fall into more than one category.

Instead, panelists generally agreed that a more manageable undertaking would be to collect the number of instructional clock hours broken out by the three categories—and also collect an overall head count of noncredit students that are represented as a whole across those categories. This approach would enable data users to calculate a total number of hours and provide the total number of participants that are associated with that total.

Discussion Item #7: Future Considerations

In general, panelists agreed that a “start small and build upon later” approach would be most appropriate to increase the amount of data collected about noncredit enrollment and activity in IPEDS. In implementing substantial modifications to IPEDS, it is important to thoughtfully consider the burden for institutions asked to report additional information that they may not have readily available (or even collect at all). Furthermore, future changes to federal legislation (e.g., potential reauthorization of the Higher Education Act or passage of the College Transparency Act) could dramatically impact the data that institutions would be required to report, reinforcing the prudence of a cautious approach.

Panelists did discuss theoretical possibilities for incorporating noncredit information into other surveys (i.e., Student Financial Aid, Outcome Measures, and Completions) in the future, and consistent with the philosophy of a gradual progression, suggested NCES incorporate these considerations into future TRPs dedicated to those surveys.

Panelists also noted that, even though additional noncredit information may not be collected more widely in other IPEDS surveys until later, it would be important for institutions to understand that NCES is thinking ahead about the topic to aid their future planning. Panelists suggested NCES consider incorporating informational discussion into future programming such as training sessions, conference presentations, and other avenues for reaching members of the IPEDS community, including disseminating information through national or regional associations.

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 approval extends through the 2021-22 data collection.

Comments

RTI is committed to improving the quality and usefulness of IPEDS data as well as strategies that might help minimize 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 March 8, 2021.