

Report and Suggestions from IPEDS Technical Review Panel #64: Meeting the Moment: Modernizing the IPEDS Admissions Survey Component

SUMMARY: The Technical Review Panel discussed ways in which the IPEDS Admissions survey component meets existing needs and how it might be improved. This summary provides feedback on how changes would affect data quality and reporting burden for institutions. Comments from interested parties are due to Amy Barmer, IPEDS Technical Review Panel Task Leader at RTI International, at ipedsTRPcomment@rti.org by October 8, 2021.

On June 22 and 23, 2021, 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 data collection. As the postsecondary education industry evolves, IPEDS TRP meetings are increasingly critical in ensuring 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 this TRP was to critically examine the IPEDS Admissions (ADM) survey component and solicit expert panel feedback to ensure the data collected meet the needs of higher education stakeholders, including prospective students and their families, college admissions and access professionals, and policymakers. Options for refining and enhancing the ADM survey component were considered from the perspective of balancing the information needs of stakeholders while minimizing institutional burden. Forty-two panelists represented institutions, the research field, state governments, the federal government, higher education associations, and other experts.

Background

IPEDS collects basic information about the undergraduate selection process for degree/certificate-seeking students entering postsecondary education for the first time. Data collected include admissions considerations, number of applicants, number of admitted students, number of admitted students that subsequently enrolled, and percentiles for ACT and SAT test scores (if test scores are required for admission). Several data items, including data to calculate admissions rates and test score percentiles, are required by statute to be collected in IPEDS and posted on College Navigator.¹ Admissions data are collected only from institutions that do not have an open admissions policy for entering first-time degree/certificate-seeking students; and data are limited to first-time degree/certificate-seeking undergraduates entering in the fall.

¹ Aliyeva, A., Cody, C.A., & Low, K. (2018). *The History and Origins of Survey Items for the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (2016–17 Update)* (NPEC 2018-023). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Postsecondary Education Cooperative. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.

IPEDS first began collecting admissions data in 2000–01 in response to the Higher Education Amendments of 1998. Data were collected in the fall as part of the Institutional Characteristics (IC) survey component but were moved to a separate Admissions (ADM) survey component in 2014–15. No changes were made to the data collected, only to the collection period in which the data are submitted. Moving admissions data to a new survey component in the winter collection enabled all institutions to report data for the most recent fall period. Before 2014–15, institutions had the choice of reporting admissions data for the most current fall or the previous fall period. Other than movement of the admissions data to a new winter survey component and minor clarifications to the instructions and screens, the IPEDS admissions data collection has remained largely unchanged since it was first collected in 2000–01.

The National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC)² commissioned a research paper³ in 2019 to explore potential improvements to the ADM survey component to reflect the current landscape and better meet the information needs of stakeholders. This research included an environmental scan, data analyses, and interviews with stakeholders who use and report the ADM data. The findings of this exploratory research highlighted potential areas for updating and new data elements to better reflect current trends in higher education. For instance, transfer students are not reflected in the ADM collection but are a growing student population and represent approximately 9 percent of fall 2019 degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate enrollments at degree-granting institutions.⁴ Additionally, the current list of admissions considerations does not reflect the shift in recent years toward a more holistic admissions process or the test-optional policies adopted by many institutions, which have become increasingly common especially during the coronavirus pandemic.

RTI convened the TRP to engage the postsecondary community in a discussion about how IPEDS could change, refine, or adjust data elements, definitions, instructions, or other aspects of the ADM survey component to provide more meaningful and useful data related to admissions considerations, rates, and test scores. The TRP was asked to review the NPEC paper and consider potential changes to ensure ADM data meet the needs of stakeholders and keep pace with emerging trends in higher education. RTI asked panelists 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: Open Admissions Policy and the ADM Survey Component

Only institutions *without* open admissions policies complete the ADM survey component. A screening question in the IC Header survey component determines eligibility for responding to the ADM survey component by asking if the institution has an open admissions policy for all or most entering first-time degree/certificate-seeking undergraduates. Institutions that have an open admissions policy for all or most entering first-time undergraduates report this policy to IPEDS (in

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. (2019). *Improving and Expanding the IPEDS Admissions Survey Component* (NPEC 2019). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Postsecondary Education Cooperative. Retrieved June 16, 2021, from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.

⁴ SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Spring 2020, Fall Enrollment component.

the IC Header survey component screening question) and do not report on other admissions considerations, yield numbers, or test scores.

Modifying the open admissions policy definition for clarity. IPEDS defines open admissions as an “admission policy whereby the school will accept any student who applies.” The IC Header survey form, which provides additional guidance on what is considered an open admissions policy, clarifies that “if the only requirement for admission is a high school diploma or GED/other equivalent, your institution is still considered open admission. Institutions that require only an Ability to Benefit or similar test beyond the diploma/equivalent, and only reject a very small number of students based on the test, are also considered open admission.”

Panelists noted the additional guidance provided on the IC Header survey form is helpful for understanding what would constitute an open admission institution and suggested adding this guidance to the definition of “open admissions policy” itself for clarity. They agreed that combining the guidance with the definition would help to more clearly delineate the group of institutions considered open admission institutions. However, one concern noted by panelists is related to the following language used in the current guidance “...and only reject a very small number of students based on the test.” They suggested replacing the current language with “...and does not admit students based on the test” to better reflect the terminology used by institutions that are not open admission but are also not highly selective institutions. Panelists also noted that admissions policies can sometimes vary among programs within a single institution and therefore suggested that the definition should focus on admission to the institution overall rather than on specific programs. The panel suggested incorporating this clarification as appropriate into the survey instructions or guidance. RTI would appreciate additional input from the postsecondary community on the suggested wording. Any changes made to the wording in the new open admissions policy definition should also be reflected throughout the instructions and survey materials.

Expanding the ADM survey component to include open admission institutions. It is important to note that approximately two-thirds (65 percent) of institutions that report to IPEDS have an open admissions policy, meaning the majority of institutions do not complete the ADM survey component.⁵ IPEDS admissions data generally reflect public 4-year institutions and private nonprofit 4-year institutions more than other types of institutions, as most institutions in these sectors do not have open admissions policies and are required to complete the ADM survey component.

Panelists considered whether institutions with open admissions policies should complete all or part of the ADM survey component. However, they pointed out significant complications in collecting these data within the current ADM survey component framework. Panelists suggested further exploration of this topic, perhaps through NPEC-commissioned research or additional discussions in a future TRP meeting. Further research is needed on practicable ways to collect and clarify admissions data from open admission institutions, given that students at open admission institutions are less likely to follow a linear enrollment trajectory. Topics for further exploration include how to define student counts for open admission institutions (for example: Would an inquiry from a potential student or registrant at an open admission institution be the same as one from an applicant at a non-open

⁵ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall 2019, IC Header component.

admission institution?); whether yield numbers would apply only to students enrolling in credit-bearing courses; and how (or whether) open admission institutions should deduplicate student counts across the three stages of the admissions process (applied, admitted, enrolled).

Capturing nuances in open admissions policies in the IC Header. Panelists suggested a more immediate priority is to get additional clarity on what open admission means at various institutions. This could be accomplished by either (1) adding a follow-up question to the IC Header survey component to ask about the entrance requirements at open admission institutions (e.g., students are required to submit high school transcripts to enroll) or (2) collecting links to open admission institutions' admissions criteria, with the intent to help students by directing them to the institution's website for more detailed information on specific policies. A particular challenge is how much nuance to incorporate, given the wide differences in admissions practices among institutions.

As an additional complication, some institutions report variation in their open admissions policies (often noted in the context box in the IC Header survey component). These institutions may have variable admissions criteria by program or within specific colleges, or may have modified open admissions policies for certain types of students. Although these institutions may have admissions criteria that vary by program or within specific colleges, they do not complete the ADM survey component if they classify themselves as having an open admissions policy. Panelists noted that variation in open admission institutions' enrollment requirements may lead to confusion and misinterpretation when data are used for consumer information purposes.

Capturing other admissions policies in the IC Header. Possible options for other admissions policies include early decision or early action, automatic or guaranteed admissions for applicants who meet set requirements, and rolling admission. In general, panelists supported collecting whether the institution has these other admissions policies. Because this information would most likely be captured via simple checkboxes or a Yes/No question on the IC Header, collecting a modest amount of additional detail about these additional options would be manageable without a substantial increase in burden. If these additional options are included, corresponding guidance and appropriate definitions would be needed.

Discussion Item #2: ADM Part I: Admissions Considerations

Part I of the ADM component collects admissions considerations and whether institutions require, consider, recommend, or do not require/recommend each item. Considerations include secondary school grade point average, secondary school rank, secondary school record, completion of a college-preparatory program, recommendations, formal demonstration of competencies, SAT/ACT test scores, scores from other tests (e.g., ATB, Wonderlic), and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores.

Changes to the current list of admissions considerations. Panelists reviewed the admissions considerations currently collected and considered whether to remove or modify outdated items, clarify definitions or items, or add new items that better reflect current trends.

Panelists agreed the current list of considerations provides important information for consumers, researchers, policymakers, and institutions seeking basic information used by institutions in their admissions process. They suggested retaining the current list to use as a starting point and considered additional clarifications and additions to round out the list.

- **More clearly define college-preparatory program completion.** IPEDS does not define what is meant by “completion of a college-preparatory program.” It is unclear whether this would include high school courses for which students may earn college credit or if high school dual enrollment would also be included. Panelists identified the need for a standard definition and clear guidance to address Advanced Placement and other types of college credits earned through exams (such as International Baccalaureate or College-Level Examination Program).
- **Add nonacademic considerations.** Panelists discussed expanding the list of considerations to reflect the recent shift toward a more holistic admissions process. They discussed additional considerations items with an eye toward the type of information that would be most useful to prospective students. Student characteristics—high school or neighborhood, legacy or alumni status—may be used as contextual factors in the admissions decision. However, panelists pointed out that these factors are beyond the control of the student and suggested limiting the admissions considerations to traditional considerations (i.e., the current list) and nonacademic considerations. They suggested adding two new nonacademic considerations to the list: work experience and personal statement or essay.

Panelists also suggested making a clear distinction between consideration for admission and consideration for placement, and suggested the ADM only collect data on factors used for admissions decisions. For example, some schools do not require SAT or ACT test scores; therefore, students should expect to take several placement tests upon admission to test their competency. The scores are used to determine whether students will be required to take remedial or developmental coursework before being approved to enroll in “college-level” courses.

Unique considerations beyond the standard list. Panelists discussed options for institutions to list unique considerations beyond the limited number of standard options, either through an open response field or through a data field to collect a link to an institution’s admissions criteria. Panelists noted a simpler fix would be to use the existing context box and reword the available guidance accordingly.

Changes to response options for admissions considerations. The terms used in the current response options for the admissions considerations (required, considered, recommended) are not currently defined in the IPEDS glossary and panelists noted ambiguity among the existing options, especially between the “considered but not required” and “recommended” options, noting the overlap between these choices and the potential for confusion.

Panelists discussed several options for addressing this issue, including incorporating a Likert-type scale for how each consideration is weighed in admissions decisions. However, panelists noted several concerns with this approach, most notably that the degree of importance can vary by the student and the program. Panelists suggested keeping the focus at the institution level and streamlining the current options into three mutually exclusive options: required to be considered for admission, not required for admission but will be considered if submitted, and not considered for admission. Panelists acknowledged this change would eliminate the “recommended” option from the current choice options but noted that the other two proposed options (i.e., required to be considered for admissions, not considered for admission) remain relatively consistent with the old categories.

Test-optional admissions policies. An increasing number of institutions have adapted their admissions testing policies from “test required” to “test optional” in the past decade, some temporarily in response to the coronavirus pandemic and others as a permanent policy. Panelists considered how the ADM survey component can best capture an institution’s test-optional admissions policy. The current operating practice is for institutions to select “considered but not required” under the SAT/ACT consideration, but there is currently no written guidance about a test-optional policy in any ADM survey materials. Panelists agreed that information about test-optional policies would provide useful information for consumers and researchers. Assuming the proposed response options for admissions considerations are implemented, test-optional institutions would select the option of “not required for admission but will be considered if submitted.” Panelists suggested adding a separate clarifying question about test-optional policies (separate from the current response options for test score considerations) for institutions to report their test-optional status through a simple yes/no checkbox.

Panelists pointed out that open admission institutions may still require students to submit scores, even when test scores are not factored into the admission decision, for course placement decisions or to determine eligibility for institutional non-need-based aid. However, panelists clarified that the admissions considerations are criteria used in the selection process, not for course placement purposes, and suggested emphasizing this distinction in the instructions.

Discussion Item #3: ADM Part II: Selection Process— Applicants/Admissions/Enrolled

Part II of the IPEDS ADM survey component collects student counts for first-time degree/certificate-seeking undergraduate students in the fall term at three stages of the admissions process (applied, admitted, enrolled). All student counts are collected by gender. The count of enrolled students is further collected by full-/part-time status.

Additional disaggregated counts beyond gender and enrollment intensity. Other IPEDS survey components collect data on non-first-time students (e.g., transfer-in, continuing/returning) and additional student subgroups (e.g., race/ethnicity, Pell Grant status, age). Panelists considered whether the student counts should be disaggregated beyond gender and enrollment intensity. Options considered include race/ethnicity, economic disadvantage, academic preparation (or prior dual enrollment), and in-state/out-of-state/international status. Although panelists generally agreed that student counts by race/ethnicity would provide valuable data to understand equity issues in enrollment, they also recognized potential limitations to the data. For example, data may be incomplete in the early phases of the admissions life cycle (i.e., the application and admission steps) because not all institutions require that students report such data until they enroll at the institution. Panelists noted concern that presenting incomplete data could result in inaccurate or misleading conclusions about institutions, as well as the racial/ethnic composition of applicants and admitted students. Another important consideration when considering additional detail is cell size and adequate protection of individual information.

In general, panelists agreed that the associated burden with additional disaggregates likely outweighs its benefit. If IPEDS were to start collecting disaggregated student counts, panelists suggested prioritizing race/ethnicity, because other options considered would likely not be feasible due to incomplete data and burden.

Selection process counts for non-first-time students. Panelists considered whether the collection should be expanded to collect counts of non-first-time students such as transfer-in and graduate students. Panelists supported the addition of transfer-in students, noting that this group is of particular interest to stakeholders and represents a growing population not currently represented in the IPEDS admissions data. They suggested that if this change is implemented, IPEDS should also collect admissions considerations for these students (in addition to the already-collected data on first-time students). Panelists also suggested adding a new admissions consideration item for transfer-in students to collect evaluation of students' prior postsecondary work. Panelists suggested further research on how to best incorporate these additional items into the ADM survey component while balancing reporting burden and data quality and completeness.

They also noted that graduate student data would be valuable, though also very difficult to track because criteria vary by program; therefore, institution-wide criteria would have little utility.

Non-fall-entering students. Because the IPEDS ADM survey component captures data only for students entering in the fall term, there are substantial proportions of students that are not reflected in the survey's data. To address this gap, the TRP discussed whether the ADM survey component should be modified to collect on a 12-month enrollment period, similar to the 12-month Enrollment survey component (E12), or otherwise collect counts for the non-fall terms. This would allow the survey to better reflect institutions that are program reporters, have rolling admissions, or have significant populations of non-fall-entering students.

The panel recognized value in collecting these counts for a 12-month period, especially to get a more complete picture of transfer-in students, but also raised concerns that collecting the data in this manner could lead to potentially misleading information. For example, collecting data about students entering in the spring or summer would introduce complications related to the fall census data around which the ADM survey component is based. Additionally, the panel generally agreed that, even if admissions data were to be collected on a 12-month period, it would still be necessary to retain the current structure and continue collecting data on the fall cohort also, given its fundamental role in so many aspects of postsecondary education data and analysis. The introduction of two admissions timelines could then create apparent misalignments in the data because fall enrollment counts are collected during the winter collection, while institutions would report total enrollment the following fall. This could result in misleading data and the possibility that data users may incorrectly compare fall enrollment against the prior year's total enrollment.

Given these challenges, the TRP suggested further investigation of how admissions data could be most effectively collected for a 12-month period, but did not recommend any such modification to the ADM survey component at this time.

Discussion Item #4: ADM Part III: Selection Process—Test Scores

Part III of the IPEDS ADM survey component collects the number and percentage of students submitting SAT or ACT scores and the 25th and 75th percentile scores for each test, as applicable.

Test score distribution statistics. In addition to the legislatively mandated data collected on enrolled students' test scores in the "middle 50 percent" range, panelists considered options for additional test score distribution statistics, such as the median, mean, and minimum/maximum scores. Panelists generally supported the addition of median test scores, as the median is considered a

common measure that is easily understood by a variety of audiences. They noted mean, minimum, and maximum scores as less useful additions due to their tendency to be skewed by outlier values.

Minimum number of test scores for percentile reporting. Panelists also considered whether IPEDS should specify a minimum number of test scores needed to calculate score percentiles, due to concerns that any small number of scores will not provide reliable measures. RTI would appreciate additional feedback from the postsecondary community on this topic.

Test scores by disaggregated student subgroups. Currently, SAT/ACT test scores are reported in the aggregate for all enrollees who submit scores. Panelists considered whether these data should be collected for additional student subgroups (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity). The TRP recognized value these data might have for researchers but expressed strong concern about collecting score data by subgroups, particularly race/ethnicity. Panelists cited the potential for unintended negative consequences with doing so and agreed that the risks would outweigh any benefits for researchers, especially given the declining emphasis on test scores in the admissions process. The panel recommended against modifying the ADM survey component to collect scores with additional disaggregation.

Test scores for admitted students. Panelists also weighed the benefits of expanding test score data collection to include all applicants and admitted/not admitted students (i.e., before fall enrollment). Panelists noted several concerns with this approach, including questions about the accuracy of scores for students that do not enroll (self-reported scores) and concerns about the reliability of data for public use. Panelists also echoed issues raised previously related to the overall deemphasis on test scores, which renders this change somewhat unnecessary.

Additional test scores used in admissions decisions. Finally, panelists considered whether IPEDS should collect statistics from other types of standardized exams beyond SAT and ACT, such as TOEFL and graduate/professional tests (e.g., GRE, GMAT, MCAT), if the ADM survey component is expanded to collect data on graduate students. Panelists saw limited value in collecting information on these additional test scores and advised against modifying the survey accordingly. Instead, the panel suggested that the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) continue to monitor trends in admission and revisit the topic as appropriate.

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 proposal 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 and to strategies that might help minimize additional reporting burden. We encourage interested parties to send any comments or concerns about this topic to Amy Barmer, IPEDS Technical Review Panel Task Leader at ipedsTRPcomment@rti.org by October 8, 2021.