

Report and Suggestions from IPEDS Technical Review Panel #29:

Improvements to the Completions Survey

SUMMARY: Based on a review of the current IPEDS Completions component, the Technical Review Panel suggests that a number of changes be made to the collection forms in order to better capture data on program *completers*, in addition to the data already being collected through this survey on degree and certificate *completions*. Comments from interested parties are due to Janice Kelly-Reid, IPEDS Project Director at RTI International, at ipedstrpcomment@rti.org by February 12, 2010.

On December 8 and 9, 2009, RTI International, the contractor for the IPEDS web-based data collection system, convened a meeting of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Technical Review Panel (TRP) in Washington, DC. The purpose of this meeting was to solicit further input from the postsecondary education community on improvements to the Completions Survey. The panel consisted of 45 individuals representing the federal government, state governments, institutions, data users, association representatives, and others. The TRP discussed ways that the data collected through the Completions survey could be improved for the 2011-12 data collection year.

Overview

Understanding the number of students completing postsecondary education programs, and the demographics of these students (particularly their age), is a matter of growing interest to U.S. policymakers and legislators. The current administration has made increasing the number of Americans with postsecondary credentials a key education issue. Legislation recently passed in the U.S. House of Representatives includes funding for strategies to increase college completion and improve state data systems for measuring student enrollment, persistence, and completion.¹ In addition, state policymakers and legislators are also focusing on increasing the educational attainment of their population and funding programs and initiatives to improve student persistence and completion.

In order to effectively measure progress towards achieving these policy goals, high quality and complete data on the completions of postsecondary education programs are needed. As such, the December 2009 IPEDS Technical Review Panel focused on discussing the ways in which the Completions survey could be improved to better address policy questions and provide more detailed information on the number and types of students completing awards. Specifically, the panel was asked to examine the following questions:

- (1) How can reporting student completion of transfer-preparation programs best be incorporated into the Completions survey?*
- (2) How can data on completers—the number of students that have received a degree or certificate—best be collected through the Completions survey?*
- (3) How can data on completions and completers by age of student best be collected in the Completions survey?*

¹ H.R. 3221 “Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2009 passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in September 2009 and referred to the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions.

Discussion Item 1: Incorporating Transfer-Preparation Programs into the Completions Survey:

(1) *How can reporting student completion of transfer-preparation programs best be incorporated into the Completions survey?*

Background

Under the Student Right to Know Act, institutions report annually on the completion or graduation rate of degree-seeking, first-time, full-time undergraduate students. When calculating a graduation rate for the Graduation Rate Survey (GRS), federal code allows that institutions can count students as having completed a degree or program if they have:

- successfully completed a transfer-preparatory program; or
- completed the first 3 years of a 3-2 program and are eligible to enter another institution to complete the program.

Additionally, according to federal statute,

"the Secretary considers the 'equivalent of an associate degree' to be—

(i) An associate degree; or

(ii) The successful completion of at least a two-year program that is acceptable for full credit toward a bachelor's degree and qualifies a student for admission into the third year of a bachelor's degree program."

While under the above provisions institutions may include students who have successfully completed a transfer-preparation program in the GRS survey, they are not instructed to do so in the Completions survey. With no clear instructions or means of accounting for these students, this raises several concerns about the consistency and validity of the data being reported, specifically:

- the potential duplication or over-reporting of successful completions when compared with the actual number of students earning degrees.
- possible undercounting of the number of completions of programs that the Secretary considers equivalent to an associate's degree according to Federal regulation.

Discussion

During discussion, the panel was asked to consider two key questions:

1. Whether the statutory definition of transfer-preparation programs needs further clarification in the Completions survey instructions; and
2. How institutions should report student completion of transfer-preparation programs.

The panel determined that one of the greatest obstacles to implementing an effective change of this kind at this time is the lack of a clear and consistent definition of what is meant by "transfer-preparation" and whether it fully addresses all types of preparation activity across all institutions and sectors. The definition of "transfer-preparation" can be interpreted in many different ways, and the

methods used to evaluate these programs seem to vary state by state, and even institution by institution. As such, even if a new reporting component were to be added to the Completions survey for transfer-preparation programs, there would be no uniformity of data, and no means of accurately comparing these data statewide or within sector—much less of aggregating them at the national level.

The panel agreed that in order to capture useful data related to student completion of transfer-preparation programs, it would first be necessary to more clearly define what constitutes a transfer-preparatory program—both here and in the GRS—and provide more comprehensive instructions to assist users in interpreting this definition. Further, if the intended focus of collecting these data is on programs that don't offer a formal award, and exist solely for the purpose of preparing students to transfer, it is essential to determine how many of these students there are, and what the true impact of not collecting data on such students has on the existing Completions data. Panel members questioned the value of incorporating these numbers into IPEDS without having a more clear idea of their meaning and their significance (e.g. how many students are truly not accounted for under the current definition).

Consequently, the panel suggested that no action be taken to align the Completions survey with GRS at this time. The panel determined that institutions should be reporting only actual degree and certificate completions as currently defined in IPEDS in the Completions survey. However, the panel also suggested that further study be done into this issue to gather additional information that would allow better assessment of the real level of need for collecting these data. Additional information should identify the extent to which transfer-preparation programs exist; the number of students participating in these programs; and how these students are currently being counted. Depending on the information gathered, this issue may be revisited at a future meeting of the TRP.

The panel further suggested that the instructions for the Completions survey be tightened to specify that institutions should report completions of credit awards only. The instructions currently state that institutions should report:

"all degrees and other formal awards conferred by your institution"

and do not make a distinction between credit vs. non-credit awards. Panel members agreed that until non-credit figures are collected in the Fall Enrollment survey, they should not be collected in Completions. The TRP suggests that additional research and discussion into the non-credit work being completed at the postsecondary level be explored further during a future meeting of the TRP and has no bearing on the current discussion in terms of the Completions survey.

Discussion Item 2: Collecting Data on the Number of Students Earning Awards

(2) *How can data on completers—the number of students that have received a degree or certificate—best be collected through the Completions survey?*

Background

While IPEDS currently collects data on the number of degrees and certificates awarded each year by institutions, there are no data collected on the number of students who earned those degrees and certificates. Because students can earn multiple awards in the same academic year (e.g., a certificate and an associate's degree; a master's and a bachelor's degree, etc.) the result is possible duplication of the number of students earning awards so that no clear national data is available on the actual number of *students* completing postsecondary education programs. Since collecting data on completers in

addition to completions would help to address relevant policy questions, the TRP was asked to consider how these data might best be collected through the Completions survey.

Discussion

The panel first acknowledged that one of the main issues associated with reporting these data is the institutional burden associated with the collection. Collecting data on completers by CIP code would significantly increase the time and resources required of institutions to prepare and report completions data. It would also increase the likelihood of duplication where students completed multiple programs within the same degree level. As such, panelists agreed on the necessity of finding a solution that would impose the least amount of institutional burden, while also presenting the highest level of unduplicated data.

However, it was also noted that collecting data on the total number of completers would not be as useful for institutions that award multiple degree levels, or as constructive for addressing policy questions, as collecting data by award level (e.g., number of associate's degree completers, number of bachelor's degree completers, etc.). Panel members agreed that while an added institutional burden exists with reporting demographic data by award level, the value of the data justifies the imposed burden.

The panel then discussed the value of reporting demographic data by all eleven award levels traditionally reported in IPEDS and came to the consensus that collapsing some of the award levels would not only reduce institutional burden, but also decrease the likelihood of duplication where students earned multiple degrees or certificates in the same academic year. The panel ultimately suggested reducing the number of award levels for reporting degree and certificate completers to the following:

Award Levels for Completions (11 levels)	Award Levels for Completers (6 levels)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than one-year certificates • At least one but less than two-year certificates • Associate's degree • At least two but less than four-year certificates • Bachelor's degree • Post-baccalaureate certificates • Master's degree • Post-master's certificates • Doctor's degree - research/scholarship • Doctor's degree - professional practice • Doctor's degree - other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than 1-year certificates • At least 1 but less than 4-year certificates • Associate's Degrees • Bachelor's Degrees • Post-baccalaureate / Post-master's certificates • Master's and Doctor's Degrees

Based on the above, the TRP suggests that the following new screens be added to the existing collection forms to capture data on program completers:

New Screen A – All Completers				
	Male		Female	
	Number of Students	Total Degrees Awarded	Number of Students	Total Degrees Awarded
By Race/Ethnicity				
Nonresident alien	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Hispanic/Latino	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
American Indian or Alaska Native	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Asian	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Black or African American	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
White	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Two or more races	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Race and ethnicity unknown	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Total	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>

Screen A shows the total unduplicated number of students and degrees awarded, cross-referenced by race/ethnicity and gender where **CV** indicates a calculated or pre-populated value, and **RV** indicates an institutionally reported value. Based on the information provided, the institution will subsequently be presented with the following screen for *each* award level that they indicate offering:

New Screen B		
For each award level (maximum of 6 levels)		
	Number of Students	Total Degrees Awarded
By Gender		
Male	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Female	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
By Race/Ethnicity		
Nonresident alien	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Hispanic/Latino	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
American Indian or Alaska Native	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Asian	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Black or African American	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
White	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Two or more races	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Race and ethnicity unknown	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Total	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>

Institutions will also be provided with a summary screen of the award level data they have provided. There will be no data entry on this screen; all data will be pre-populated based on the information provided in each of the relevant award level screens:

New Screen C – Summary of Award Level Data				
	Male		Female	
	Number of Students	Total Degrees Awarded	Number of Students	Total Degrees Awarded
By Award Level				
Less than 1-year certificates	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>
At least 1 but less than 4-year certificates	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Associate’s Degrees	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Bachelor’s Degrees	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Post-baccalaureate/Post-master’s Certificates	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Master’s and Doctor’s Degrees	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>

The summary screen will effectively serve as an indicator of where duplication exists within award levels. If, within a given award level, a notable difference exists between the number of students and total degrees awarded, it will be a clear indication that duplication occurred there. However, it will not be possible to distinguish duplications across award levels, since a student who receives multiple awards of different levels will be reported once for each award level earned.

Discussion Item 3: Data on Completions and Completers by Age

(3) *How can data on completions and completers by age of student best be collected in the Completions survey?*

Background

Research shows that adult learners—students aged 25 and older—are enrolling in postsecondary education programs at increasing rates. While institutions report student *enrollment* by age through IPEDS, there are no data collected on student *completions* by age.

While such data would be useful to policymakers in designing and developing strategies to improve educational attainment, it would also increase the level of burden placed on institutions, as well as the amount of time and resources necessary to prepare and report IPEDS data.

The TRP was asked to consider how meaningful, reliable, and valid data on completers by age of student might best be captured through the Completions survey, specifically:

- What would be appropriate age ranges to use?
- For each CIP code, should institutions report the number of credentials awarded by gender, race/ethnicity, and age; or simply by age and gender? How would each option impact cell sizes?
- What would be the best method for collecting data on completers by age?

Discussion

The panel again discussed the level of burden associated with reporting these data. Adding a component for collecting age data by race/ethnicity within each CIP code would impose a very large burden on institutions. Panel members questioned to what extent this burden would be worth the benefit in terms of collecting these data by CIP code.

The panel agreed that the more pressing need at this time is collecting age data on *completers*, not on *completions*. Consequently, the TRP suggested IPEDS start collecting age data by award level *only* during the 2011-12 data collection year, then revisit the need for CIP level data during a future collection year. The panel also suggested that IPEDS should only collect age data on completers by gender, *not* by race/ethnicity in order to avoid small cell sizes and high institutional burden. This approach is consistent with the format used for collecting age data in the Fall Enrollment survey.

Based on the above, the TRP suggested that additional rows (shaded below) be added to the six new award level screens for reporting data on completers (discussed in Discussion Item 2 above), to also collect data on completers' age cross-referenced by gender. The panel agreed that although the Fall Enrollment (EF) survey collects age data in ten ranges, the five collapsed ranges used to publish EF data in the First Look tables is sufficient for these purposes. These age ranges are shown below:

New Screen B		
For each award level (maximum of 6 levels)		
	Number of Students	Total Degrees Awarded
By Gender		
Male	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Female	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
By Race/Ethnicity		
Nonresident alien	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Hispanic/Latino	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
American Indian or Alaska Native	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Asian	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Black or African American	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
White	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Two or more races	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Race and ethnicity unknown	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
By Age		
Under 18	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
18-24	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
25-39	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
40 and above	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Age Unknown	<u>RV</u>	<u>CV</u>
Total	<u>CV</u>	<u>CV</u>

The panel also suggested that all data be reported based on the student's age as of June 30 (e.g., their age at the end of the relevant completions year.)

Additional Discussion Items

Several additional items were discussed by the group, related to:

Reducing Institutional Burden

The panel suggested that as additional reporting components continue to be added to IPEDS effectively increasing the burden on institutions; perhaps NCES should be investigating the possibility of developing additional support mechanisms to assist institutions with IPEDS reporting. Suggestions included moving toward an NCES-developed template similar to the recently released Net Price Calculator template that would provide institutions with a fully automated means of entering data and uploading files to IPEDS, or a macro for converting Access and/or Excel tables into upload files. The panel noted that the best way to address the issue of burden is not by decreasing the amount of information collected, but by making it easier for institutions to report data. The panel agreed that creating an alternate IPEDS reporting tool would be a feasible long-term solution. NCES will explore the option further.

Survey Alignment

The panel also discussed the issue of survey alignment, and whether more of an emphasis should be placed on bringing all of the IPEDS surveys back into better alignment with one another. However, the point was raised that it may not be fair to ask institutions to report additional data solely for the purpose of consistency without any greater need. It was also noted that without knowing what additional changes or new reporting components may be mandated in the future, we could be adding reporting components prematurely and increasing institutional burden without knowing how the surveys will continue to evolve. The TRP agreed that while survey alignment is an important topic, and one that should be kept in mind going forward, it is not advisable to undertake a complete restructuring of the IPEDS surveys at this time solely for the sake of alignment.

What are the reporting implications of these suggestions?

If the above suggestions are implemented, the Completions survey forms will be modified for the 2011-12 data collection year to incorporate the new screens suggested by the TRP for capturing data on completers.

Comments

RTI is committed to improving the quality and meaningfulness of the data on degree and certificate completions collected through the Completions survey. **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 February 15, 2010.**