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| To: | NPSAS:12 Technical Review Panel |
| From: | Jennifer Wine, Director, NPSAS:12 |
| Date: | October 17, 2014 |
| **Subject:** | **TRP Meeting Executive Summary** |

The third technical review panel (TRP) meeting for the 2011-12 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:12) was held in Washington, DC on June 17 and 18, 2014. This memorandum summarizes the information presented to and recommendations made by the TRP. A meeting agenda and meeting slides from each presentation are posted on the TRP website as well.

Goals for the Technical Review Panel

NCES provided background information on NCES efforts to enhance the quality and quantity of graduate data captured by NCES studies. First, background on a meeting held by the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative-Sample (NPEC-S) – an advisory body to NCES—was presented. Next, graduate student data elements captured by the following NCES studies were presented: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), NPSAS, Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B) meeting. In addition, an overview was provided on the following National Science Foundation (NSF) studies: the Survey of Graduate Students and Postdoctorates in Science and Engineering (GSS), the Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED), and the Survey of Doctorate Recipients (SDR). Studies from other non-federal organizations such as the Council on Graduate Schools (CGS) and the National Research Council were referenced.

NCES summarized the data gaps among these various studies. Specifically, there is a lack of basic descriptive data on master’s students and limited information on time to degree, specific program information, and graduate persistence. NCES addressed plans for future NPSAS and B&B data collections and gave NPEC’s recommendation for future studies.

NCES charged the TRP to focus on the following priorities: (1) graduate student financing and experiences in college (including student background characteristics, financial aid, enrollment, and income/expenses), (2) develop alternatives to discipline-based measures, and (3) to enhance NPSAS interview with new item based on gaps in existing research.

Methodologies of NCES Surveys Covering Graduate Education

RTI introduced the panel to two of the NCES studies involving graduate students. The first, the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), is a nationally-representative, cross-sectional study of how students and their families cover the costs of postsecondary education during a specific financial aid year. Graduate students, including professional students, are included in the NPSAS sample. The second NCES study involving graduate students is the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B), which follows students who complete requirements for the bachelor’s degree during the NPSAS year when they are first identified for participation. Graduates are followed for up to 10 years following degree completion and portions of the survey cover graduate study.

Besides a student survey, NPSAS and B&B data sources include administrative data from the Central Processing System (FAFSA data), National Student Loan Data System, National Student Clearinghouse, and the SAT/ACT. NPSAS also includes data abstracted from the student records at the postsecondary institutions attended.

NPSAS:12 had sample sizes of 1,670 institutions and 128,100 students, and NPSAS:16 has preliminary sample sizes of 2,000 institutions and 126,300 students. The NPSAS institution and student eligibility requirements were reviewed. IPEDS is used for the institution sampling frame, and 10 sampling strata are formed. The 4-year institution sample sizes and graduate student sample sizes were shown.

Items collected on the enrollment lists from institutions were reviewed. These include several items that have been added for the NPSAS:16 field test. For NPSAS:16 there are plans to oversample several types of students, including graduate students in certain disciplines (to be determined). The graduate sample strata need to have sufficient size for analytic power.

An overview of the B&B:08/09 eligibility and sample design was provided. The B&B:16 cohort will be larger than previous cohorts and will contain an oversample of teacher and STEM majors.

NCES Surveys: Selected Findings and Trends in Graduate Education

Selected graduate student findings from NPSAS:12 were presented. Several slides showed the program type of the responding graduate students, including a break-out by gender, race/ethnicity, foreign students, and age. Also presented were the average cost of attendance and aid packages by type of institution and type of program. Finally, both the percentage of graduate students who borrowed and the average amount borrowed were provided.

Next, graduate student findings from B&B were presented. Included were highest graduate enrollment and degree completion. Also shown were tables providing demographic information by program such as gender and race/ethnicity. Results showing educational experiences were also presented. These included degree expectation, timing of entry into graduate school, and importance of preparations.

On the second day of the meeting, there was a demonstration of NCES’s PowerStats tool where users can create tables on their own. The tools are available on the NCES Datalab website: <http://nces.ed.gov/datalab/>.

NPSAS:12 Graduate Student Sampling / Alternatives to Discipline-Based Measures

NCES asked TRP panelists for recommendations in improving the sampling design in order to maximize the utility of the data for researchers and graduate schools. Specifically, NCES staff noted that the NPSAS:12 sampling design could incorporate program/discipline-level strata due to the sample size. Given that much of the variation in many of the NPSAS estimates is dependent on graduate program or discipline, NCES requested feedback on whether the sampling design should be adjusted or whether additional variables should be created to group students and institutions differently to better meet the needs of analysts.

The panel could not come to a consensus for addressing the limitation of not being able to sample by program or discipline. It was recommended that NCES should not depart from the current sampling design unless they are able to greatly increase the sample size. The panel encouraged NCES to experiment with new classifications of graduate students that may be correlated with program or discipline (e.g., by how programs fund students financial aid packages, by common discipline groupings, etc), but could not provide specific recommendations.

NPSAS:12 Student Interview Item Review

The main focus of the meeting was to review the NPSAS and B&B interview items that were administered to graduate students. TRP members were asked to evaluate the items and to recommend updates and improvements, including suggesting any new items or removing outdated items. After a brief overview of the data elements by section, including a screencast of a recorded NPSAS:12 graduate student survey, panelists discussed each item (by section) in small groups. One member from each group then reported their suggestions to the full panel. The key concerns and suggestions of the TRP members are described below, organized by section of the student survey.

## Enrollment and Education Experiences

In discussing the Enrollment and Education Experiences sections of the NPSAS survey, panelists agreed many topics were addressed appropriately; however, panelists suggested several items be revised, added, or dropped. While discussing questions related to *applying to graduate school*, panelists suggested adding questions about entrance exams, English language proficiency, and reasons for applying but not enrolling in graduate school. In reference to *details of graduate school* items, panelists recommended adding a question to the NPSAS survey asking whether a master’s degree was received en route to a doctoral degree. Other recommended additions included the following: an item about a second bachelor’s degree; support service availability and use by graduate students; availability of accelerated degree programs; participation in study abroad; non-programmatic research experiences; and other non-coursework degree requirements such as internships, practicums, etc.

Discussions related to *graduate program satisfaction and expectations* resulted in the suggestion to update an item asking for *reasons why* [the respondent was] *no longer in graduate school*; specifically, panelists suggested new response options such as the respondent’s satisfaction with the quality of advising received, faculty support, and quality of instruction. Panelists also recommended the following B&B items for addition to the NPSAS survey: *aspects of life for which graduate education was important preparation, worth of graduate education, and job related to graduate degree*.

Panelists also devoted time to suggestion for new items about career expectations upon entering a graduate program. Along with this topic, they also suggested adding the following: the types of things graduate students felt were missing from their graduate education; skill acquisition in graduate school (e.g. communication, critical thinking, project management, etc.); and how far along respondents were in their program before they dropped out (if applicable).

Finally, TRP members suggested that existing B&B items related to *personal enrichment classes,* *satisfaction with undergraduate program*, and *high school information,* be removed altogether from the survey.

## Financial Aid

When discussing the Financial Aid section, panelists suggested ways to guide respondents effectively and promote understanding of different sources of financial aid being collected in the survey. Panelists recommended adding a number of questions related to *benefits, grants, and scholarships in the academic year.* These included asking if the receipt of veteran’s benefits was as the child/spouse of a veteran, the requirements associated with employer financial support of graduate education, institution scholarships, and whether more than one year of financial aid was promised upon entering a graduate program.

When discussing *graduate assistantships in the academic year,* panelists suggested updating the question wording from “tuition waiver” to “tuition award” on the following item: *received tuition waiver through assistantship*. With regard to the item asking about receipt of health insurance, panelists recommended new question wording from, “through graduate assistantship” to “included in tuition/budget.” Panelists also considered how other studies defined income and suggested that assistantship income be treated separately from other sources of income. Additionally, panelists were interested in collecting more specific details about assistantships than was in the previous surveys. They recommended asking about whether an assistantship was part of a collective bargaining agreement, whether taxes were paid on the assistantship income, the possession of a hybrid assistantship (e.g., students who have the duties of a teaching assistantship and a research assistantship simultaneously), and whether a student was promised multiple years of funding.

In reference to *graduate institution charges and refunds*, panelists recommended that questions about the receipt and dispersal of tuition refunds (e.g. received the funds by direct deposit, prepaid debit card, student ID, etc.) be removed from the survey.

In relation to *cumulative student loan debt and repayment*, panelists were interested in the question about *level of stress caused by education related debt,* but recommended more wording or items be added to understand the specific sources of stress. Panelists also wanted to ensure a “none” option was included as a response option for the *result of financial cost of education* item. Panelists also suggested adding the following debt-related items to the section: plans to participate in income-based repayment programs or loan forgiveness programs; expectations surrounding total debt/repayment/earnings; and debt concerns that impacted field of study choice.

Additional suggestions for inclusion in the NPSAS survey included a set of financial literacy questions, information about whether the respondent was a beneficiary of emergency funds from their graduate institution*,* and items relating to international students’ financing of graduate education.

## Income and Expenses

For the Income and Expenses section, panelists were generally in support of the current survey items. Panelists did however, recommend revising *employment while enrolled in graduate school*; revisions included updated question wording on *number of hours worked while enrolled during academic year* from “academic year” to “calendar year.” Panelists also suggested the removal of items referring to time spent traveling to and from school/work, but promoted the idea that questions about respondents’ summer employment be added.

With regard to *post baccalaureate employment*, panelists recommended referencing the graduate degree, rather than the bachelor’s degree, when asking about the relationship of job skills to a student’s degree. They also suggested adding response options to job satisfaction questions to include satisfaction with “career advancement opportunities” and whether the respondent was “interested in the work”, as well as revisions to *important factors when choosing a job* to include reasons/aspects of job satisfaction and selection.

For *income* items, panelists recommended revision of question wording to include validation that respondent answers would not be tied to their IRS filing; and that salary range response options on spouse income questions be higher and more detailed.

For questions related to *household expenses,* panelists recommended removing questions about monthly mortgage/rent. Panelists were more interested in adding items about living arrangements, food/housing security, and the impact of their financial situation on students’ academic performance.

Panelists recommended adding former B&B items about vehicle loan and amount to the NPSAS survey, and revising question wording on *cost of books and supplies* from “cost of books and supplies during academic year” to “cost of required books, technology, and supplies for your degree program.”

Discussions about *dependent expenses* resulted in recommendations to add B&B items about *child private school attendance* to the NPSAS survey. Panelists also recommended adding a question about respondents sending money home to family or friends. For *credit card expenses,* TRP members recommended removing questions about the number of credit cards respondents have, but thought questions about the amount respondents use credit cards and how much they owe on them should remain in the survey. Panelists suggested that questions about respondents’ checking/savings account be removed, and proposed instead that questions about borrowing against a 401k, using a 529 savings plan, and having enough savings for 3 months of living expenses be added to the survey.

Finally, panelists suggested the addition of items related to *post graduation plans* including: opportunity costs of entering graduate school, Affordable Care Act expenses and source of health insurance, whether attendance at conferences was paid for out-of-pocket, and expenses for research, scholarly, or creative activities (e.g. honorariums for research subjects).

## Background

In discussions about the Background section, panelists suggested several revisions to gather a more thorough amount of information about the respondent’s background, specifically origin, languages, and socioeconomic status of parents. TRP members suggested revisions to questions related to *basic demographics* like race and gender. These included expanding response options for the gender question, and offering specific Asian designations. For questions related to *residence, citizenship and immigration*, panelists suggested that items asking the method by which a student became a United States citizen (e.g. born in the United States, by naturalization, etc.) be removed, and items such as country of origin and plans to stay in the United States after graduation be added instead.

In reference tothe topic of *languages*, panelists suggested a revision to the question wording in *first language learned to speak* from “first language” to “language of instruction” or “best language”; they also advocated for an additional language question or option to specify a “third best language”.

When discussing *family background*, panelists agreed to the following changes: revision of the question wording on *highest level of parents’ education completed* from “mother” and “father” to just “parents”; removing questions related to siblings; adding questions related to influences in graduate school; and adding questions related to the socioeconomic status of parents.

With regard to questions about *military and community service*, TRP members recommended all items related to community service be removed from the survey and a question related to veteran dependency of respondents be added. Finally, panelists recommended all questions related to *voting and political activities* be removed from the survey.