

Notes for the NCES AIR Forum Listening Session, May 27, 2026

Q: What types of support are critical for your ability to report the highest quality data possible (thinking about timeliness, completeness, and accuracy)?

- What support does NCES provide that should be maintained?
 - Data quality was solid (e.g., usable and trustworthy) and NCES did well to bring together stakeholders and producers.
 - Training provided through the contractor was critical. It helped higher ed professionals navigate through the surveys, learn about the intent of the surveys and the questions, as well as best practices
 - o Keyholder training is important- helped to build skilled staff within institutional research
 - o Trainers were sent to regional offices and regional conferences. This made it much easier for IR staff to attend/be trained, because they didn't have to travel far, if at all.
 - TRPs are very important. Need to talk to the people closest to the data to know what they have, what they can provide.
 - The definitions and FAQs that were provided were really helpful. Also the Help Desk.
- What support is missing that would be helpful if it were provided?
 - Would be very helpful if all questions sent by institutions to the Help Desk could be published somewhere, not just used to develop FAQs. That way an institution could search through the questions and answers to see if they could get their own questions answered without having to contact the Help Desk.
 - The definitions are not necessarily well-aligned with the context of institutions that are not 4 year, such as community colleges, institutions for non-traditional learners such as National University, grad-student only institutions, dual-mission institutions
 - o In general, IPEDS needs to be improved to better represent non-traditional learners and institutions for which that is their main student base, also, give them more visibility within IPEDS releases/publications, etc.

Q: ACTS specific responses about support, lack of it?

- It was noted that the Help Desk gave different guidance at different times and/or to different callers
- Definitions changed during data collection
- In general, attendees did not attribute these challenges and issues to the data collector but rather to the context of the collection (implemented too quickly, no TRP/collaboration with the field or data providers, unfunded mandate)
- During this discussion, one attendee suggested the quick roll out was due to the desire to have new data on admissions quickly, but this was very burdensome for institutions, which led to a general observation that NCES needs to bear the burden of any efforts to provide more timely information, not institutions.

Q: What other NCES data sources do you use and for what purpose?

- NPSAS, BPS, B&B- basically, all the NCES post sec studies, PSS, Digest, High School Longitudinal Studies that follow students into postsecondary education
- There was discussion about NCES's statistical tools and how much they are used.

- One attendee noted that they use NCES's tools to train future researchers. So, these are not just tools to generate statistics. They are teaching tools. The same attendee noted that it can be easier to access NCES data for research purposes than their own institution's data.

Q: What else would you need or want to see be part of a rebuilt NCES?

- PEQIS (basically a postsecondary version of SPP)
- Improved data tools.
 - It was noted that the existing ones can be clunky to use.
 - There is no tool that allows a researcher to look at multiple years of IPEDS data and do trend analysis (I noted that DataLab has a trend tool for NPSAS, so perhaps IPEDS could be added there.) Apparently there is a ShinyApp from Dartmouth to help with this.
 - Tools that get the NPSAS state-level data closer to state policymakers and researchers. Right now, they are too hard to access.
 - One attendee noted that they put a lot of hours into responding to IPEDS, and the fact that the data tools are not more modern and easier to use feels like a lack of recognition of that effort. Data extract tools should be easier to use and more consistent with one another so that once you learn how to use one, those skills should allow you to easily use another.
 - Use an API for data collection and reporting.
 - Provide data in a format such that any data tool/software can access and use them.
- Reformat older datasets so that they are compatible with new data. Use only one method for providing data and do not change it (at least not without advanced notice to the field so that they don't encounter problems when they try to download new data). The latter happened with the last IPEDS release due to a change that was made with the file format; Help Desk staff told users that they were not told about the change.
- Sync B&B fields of study and CIP (and SOC) codes
- Finer CIP breakdowns by enrollment. Would be helpful if CIP was updated more frequently.
- Finer breakdowns in field of study.
- One attendee noted that it is very difficult to identify institutions in her sector: regional public-sector schools.
- I noted that many of the comments were related to representation within the studies, so I asked if attendees would prefer to have larger samples in NPSAS for better representation as a trade off for fewer studies (e.g., no BPS). There did not seem to be much support for that idea, with one person saying it depends on ROI and that while having to report less data is appealing, actually having less data is not.
- Bring back the Data Institute (a training conducted by AIR to teach researchers about NCES data and how to properly analyze them).
- Allocate funding to IR offices for IPEDS.
- Have longitudinal studies that follow degree recipients other than those with a bachelor's