EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Putting the "Integrated" Back Into IPEDS:

Improving the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System to Meet Contemporary Data Needs

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The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) is the nation's most comprehensive source for information on more than 7,500 colleges and universities. However, IPEDS—as it currently operates—is insufficient to answer the emerging critical questions that facilitate college choice, transparency, policymaking, institutional improvement, and accountability, and in some cases answers questions that are no longer relevant. At a time when our national postsecondary data infrastructure absolutely must improve to meet the needs of students and families, policymakers, and institutions, IPEDS has the foundation to fill this gap in the short term. Other approaches, such as creating a federal student-level data system, may offer a more comprehensive solution, but would require more time to implement. We cannot wait for such systems to be built, but must at least improve existing systems to meet immediate needs. In this sense, improving IPEDS serves as a viable interim solution.

In many ways, IPEDS sits at the center of the national postsecondary data infrastructure. It is the only system that collects—and makes publicly available—data on almost every postsecondary institution in the nation, and is the only national system that serves students and families, policymakers, and institutions. However, because IPEDS collects data at the institution level, it also faces several limitations. **Table 1** provides a brief overview of the strengths and weaknesses of

IPEDS as a system poised to address the current gaps in our existing data infrastructure.

Improving IPEDS to meet contemporary data needs will require addressing the weaknesses listed in **Table 1**—to the extent feasible—while simultaneously balancing cost, technology, and political considerations. While it is a relatively short-term solution, upgrading IPEDS will require some time and financial resources from postsecondary institutions, as well as the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the branch of the U.S. Department of Education (ED) that oversees IPEDS. The recommendations we present in this paper will require approximately one to three years for full implementation, as well as initial investments that may exceed current IPEDS planned expenditures or require shifting of IPEDS-designated funds. However, over the years, the time and money required to maintain an improved IPEDS would decrease. For example, linking other federal data to IPEDS could reduce burden for institutions as compared with the current system. Furthermore, IPEDS changes must take into consideration the need to balance the appropriate role of the federal government in education, protect student privacy and security, and engender intra- and interagency collaboration.

The following five recommendations guide the process for transforming IPEDS into a more robust system:

TABLE 1: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF IPEDS

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
▶ Includes broad coverage of institutions and high compliance rate	▶ Does not flexibly adapt data collection to address changing instructional delivery models, student behaviors, or varying data needs
▶ Subject to rigorous quality control standards, managed by a statistical agency (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES])	▶ Certain metrics do not reflect all students enrolled at the institution, including part-time and low-income students
▶ Offers historical consistency	▶ Does not effectively address student mobility/transfer
▶ Reduces security concerns through use of aggregate data	▶ Fails to capture data on students' post-college outcomes
▶ Informed by regular input from community about metric design	▶ Requires aggregate reporting by institutions, which can be burdensome for low-resourced colleges
▶ Disseminated effectively and made accessible to stakeholders in a variety of formats	▶ Does not facilitate collection of program-level data
▶ Provides strong investment in training for data reporting and data use	▶ Difficult to remove or change data elements once added to IPEDS, even if no longer useful
▶ Functions at a relatively low cost, compared with more complete infrastructure redesigns	

1. Collect data on key performance indicators that fully reflect 21st century students. IPEDS does not capture several important indicators in the postsecondary education pipeline, including completion rates for all students, academic preparedness and student progression, and credential completion efficiency.

Actions:
▶ Collect more complete and streamlined completion rates by combining the IPEDS Graduation Rates, Graduation Rates 200, and Outcome Measures components into a single consistent and comprehensive component, and by incorporating the retention rate measure into this component.
▶ Add measures to IPEDS to report students' levels of academic preparation, success in developmental coursework, and success in gateway courses in core subjects at each IPEDS institution.[1]
▶ Add a measure to IPEDS to capture the average number of credits students earn before earning a credential at each IPEDS institution.[2]

2. Streamline IPEDS components to reduce institutional burden and produce more relevant data. NCES can streamline a number of separate IPEDS components without losing substantial value, while saving time and effort to institutions in the long-term. Additionally, IPEDS contains components that are unlikely to change dramatically annually, and thus should be collected less frequently to reduce the time institutions spend each year on submitting data to IPEDS.

Actions:
▶ Combine the Fall Enrollment component and 12-Month Enrollment components to create a single, disaggregated enrollment component that captures all postsecondary students.
▶ Reduce the reporting frequency for the Human Resources and Academic Libraries components to every two years.
▶ Publicly release IPEDS data usage rates to identify underused elements and inform future IPEDS changes.

3. Create strategic linkages between IPEDS and other systems that already collect valuable data. Federal Student Aid (FSA), the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Department of the Treasury, and the U.S. Census Bureau all collect data that could enrich IPEDS, while reducing institutional burden.

Actions:
▶ Link to the National Student Loan Data System to replace or enhance duplicative elements in the IPEDS Student Financial Aid component.
▶ Link to the DoD and VA to replace institutionally reported data on military students, veterans, and eligible dependents in IPEDS.

▶ Link to the Department of the Treasury, U.S. Census Bureau, Social Security Administration, or other sources to include earnings and employment data in IPEDS.

4. Create a single campus level identifier for every institution of higher education. All colleges and universities have different identification numbers in every federal data system in which they are entered (e.g. IPEDS, FSA, and VA). An institution is defined differently in each system, making it difficult to match data across systems.

Action:
▶ Create a unified institutional ID number for use across all federal agencies, and develop procedures for federal agencies to use in adopting a unified ID.

5. Use IPEDS data to simplify institutional reporting on federal grants. Instead of asking institutions to report duplicate data to IPEDS *and* federal grant reports, the ED can pre-populate the reports with IPEDS data, easing the annual reporting process.

Action:
▶ Prepopulate Title III and Title V Annual Performance Reports with IPEDS data. Provide feedback reports to institutions using these data.

These recommendations can provide better, more useful data in the mid-term until a more comprehensive data infrastructure is built. To say these improvements are feasible in the mid-term is not to say they will be simple or easy to accomplish. They will require political will, institutional cooperation, and the investment of time and modest funding, but the benefits of an improved IPEDS in the near-term are most certainly worthwhile. As long as IPEDS remains our nation's foundational postsecondary data system, we must find ways to address the cost, complexity, or political challenges to these upgrades to ensure the system meets today's needs and answers more of the important questions that we should be asking—but currently cannot answer—about student access, progression, completion, cost, and post-college outcomes.

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1   For definitions of the specific measures of academic preparation we propose adding to IPEDS, see Amanda Janice and Mamie Voight, *Toward convergence: A technical guide for the postsecondary metrics framework*. Institute for Higher Education Policy (2016). http://www.ihep.org/sites/default/files/uploads/docs/pubs/ihep_toward_convergence.pdf

2   For a detailed definition of credits to credential, see Amanda Janice and Mamie Voight, *Toward convergence: A technical guide for the postsecondary metrics framework*. Institute for Higher Education Policy (2016).

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