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Four Ways the Institute of Education Sciences Can Prioritize Student Outcomes Data



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The Trump Administration's Department of Education (Department) has stated that it will prioritize research that "puts students at the center" to equip educators with resources to "improve outcomes for all students."¹ The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) is the Department's research branch that conducts education research, statistics, and evaluations to make information accessible for policymakers, researchers, educators, parents, and students.² The agency's research helps lawmakers craft evidence-based policies and makes data about the state of education accessible to the public—important goals that advocates on both sides of the aisle should readily support.³

Below, we have outlined four ways that IES can achieve its goal of centering students and outcomes in its higher education data collection and reporting. With these recommendations, the public will better

understand how taxpayer dollars fund higher education and how institutions prepare students to succeed in college and beyond.

1. Maintain Critical NCES Sample Surveys for Student Financial Aid and Outcomes

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is the division of IES that is statutorily required to collect, analyze, and report on education data to promote improvement in educational outcomes.⁴ As part of those efforts, the agency conducts sample surveys—data collections about education that sample a nationally representative group, rather than the entire population—to answer research questions, inform policy, and report on our nation’s education outcomes.⁵

NCES sample surveys help the public understand how financial aid is awarded, whether students can pay off their debt, and if institutions are providing strong returns to students and taxpayers.⁶ Sample surveys that focus on higher education include the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) and the Beginning Postsecondary Students Survey (BPS).⁷ NPSAS collects data on how students finance their college education, and it has been conducted every three to four years since 1987.⁸ BPS collects data when students start college and over the next six years to determine if they complete their degree, how they transition into the workforce, measure earnings, and report how much student debt they have.⁹

While the Department claims it wants to prioritize student- and outcomes-centered IES research, the Administration terminated \$900 million in IES contracts this year, and the president’s Fiscal Year 2026 budget request underscored threats to the agency’s operations with further budget cuts.¹⁰ With IES contract terminations, the future of NCES sample surveys remains in jeopardy, sparking concerns across the political aisle as advocates call on the Administration to reinstate funding.¹¹ The Department recently reinstated the 2024 NPSAS contract, but it has not yet restored funding for others.¹²

An IES research agenda that seriously prioritizes student- and outcomes-focused data will restore and maintain funding for statutorily authorized sample surveys. These surveys equip state and federal policymakers with metrics to assess higher education’s return on investment and ensure students receive a quality, affordable education.¹³ Maintaining sample surveys is essential for understanding the higher education landscape and identifying areas of improvement to support students, families, and taxpayers.

2. Strengthen Connections Between IPEDS and Treasury Data to Examine Outcomes

After College

College is one of the biggest investments an individual can make in their life, and the public and policymakers are paying close attention to whether college is worth the cost. Access to quality data about students' post-college outcomes is critical to help understand how well colleges pay off for students.¹⁴ The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)—a system that collects data about higher education institutions that participate in federal financial aid programs—and the US Department of the Treasury (Treasury) provide information that, together, paints a more comprehensive picture of student outcomes in higher education.¹⁵ IPEDS collects and reports data about higher education institutions—tuition costs, enrollment, admissions policies, degree completion, and more; and the Treasury houses data on how much students are earning after enrolling in or completing their degree.

The College Scorecard is an example of a successful collaboration between IPEDS and Treasury—it is an online platform where users can look up key metrics about a college like graduation outcomes, enrollment demographics, and tuition costs.¹⁶ Prospective students can navigate the College Scorecard and easily see what they could expect to pay in tuition costs and earn after attending a given college. Without a strong partnership between the two agencies, students, families, and taxpayers would be left to guess about college returns on investment. IES should continue and strengthen its relationship with the Treasury to ensure reliable access to up-to-date data about students' outcomes after college. Together, these agencies' data help the public and policymakers understand which institutions deliver strong economic returns for students.

3. Enhance Publicly Available Data on Graduate Student Outcomes

While IES collects and publishes robust data for undergraduate colleges, there is far less publicly available data on graduate programs. When it comes to looking for information about graduate school, students are often left with more questions than answers about program costs, financial aid, debt loads, repayment rates, and degree completion.¹⁷ Students can readily access data about undergraduate institutions from the College Scorecard, but such use cases are limited at the graduate level because the same data are not publicly available. Even with a push for greater transparency in outcomes, there is exceedingly little publicly accessible data on graduate programs' mode of instruction, post-enrollment earnings, or repayment outcomes.¹⁸

While we know less about graduate students, we do know that they make up 25% of all loan borrowers, and they hold nearly 50% of federal student debt.¹⁹ The recently passed reconciliation package also includes provisions to cap graduate school loans and hold low-value programs accountable.²⁰ With the increased attention to graduate borrowing and program return on

investment, IES has an important role to play in collecting and publishing data about these programs. Publicly available data about program costs, earnings, and completion rates will help graduate students make informed choices about their education pathways.

4. Publish Data Tailored to Community College Student Success

Publishing more comprehensive data tailored to understanding student success at community colleges would advance the Administration’s goal to strengthen student- and outcomes-based data. Community colleges are instrumental for equipping students to transfer to four-year colleges affordably, preparing them for the workforce through associate degree and certificate programs, and offering dual enrollment options for high school students.

Community colleges serve multiple missions, offering a range of programs and courses to help meet students’ educational and career goals. But IPEDS surveys are limited when it comes to meaningfully assessing community college outcomes.²¹ IES should consider supplemental metrics that are specifically crafted to capture student outcomes at community colleges, rather than solely carrying over metrics that make more sense for four-year institutions. These changes would advance the ability of researchers, local policymakers, and the public to assess and understand the successes of their community colleges.

For example, most community college students pursue their degrees on a part-time basis, but many IPEDS metrics only reflect outcomes for first-time, full-time students.²² IES could broaden the scope of students considered in surveys, collecting and disaggregating data by enrollment status. Additionally, some students who enroll in a community college with the intention of transferring to a four-year degree program may not complete an associate degree prior to transferring. Counting them against the institution’s completion rate can therefore be misleading, lowering the graduation rate even though those students met their goal to transfer. IES could facilitate more robust data collections on transfer students—whether they transfer to a four-year program (with or without first attaining an associate degree), whether they complete a bachelor’s degree (and how long it takes to do so), and their post-enrollment earnings. Additionally, one in five community college students are dually enrolled in high school, so more robust data on these students’ outcomes could inform policies about these programs.²³

Conclusion

IES data is instrumental for helping policymakers, legislators, and students understand higher education outcomes. In the coming months, the Trump Administration will have significant opportunities to double down on its stated commitment to student- and outcomes-based data. To help

students and taxpayers better understand investments and returns on higher education, the Administration should reinstate and maintain funding for NCES sample surveys, strengthen data connections between IES and Treasury, build out publicly available data on graduate programs, and expand data collection and reporting on community college outcomes.

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