

MEMORANDUM

Date: July 10, 2008

To: Shelly Wilkie Martinez, Desk Officer
Office of Management and Budget

From: Lynda T. Carlson, Director
Science Resources Statistics Division

Via: Suzanne Plimpton, Clearance Officer
National Science Foundation (NSF)

Subject: Notification of data collection under generic clearance

The purpose of this memorandum is to inform you of NSF's plan to conduct a brief web survey of users of products from the NSF Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED) for survey improvement projects under generic clearance (OMB #3145-0174). In the context of heightened concerns about confidentiality and privacy, SRS needs to redesign the tabulations disseminated in the SED so that they better meets users' needs while also protecting the confidentiality of the respondents.

Through this web survey SRS will: a) explore how data users utilize the SED data; and b) obtain feedback on alternative approaches to tabulations for the SED. SRS will then use this input to improve the SED by providing the survey data in a more useful format to the users of these data.

The results of this survey are intended for internal SRS use and they will not be used to produce any official statistics/releases.

Background

The Survey of Earned Doctorates has been conducted annually since 1957. The survey collects data on the number and characteristics of all individuals receiving research doctoral degrees from all accredited U.S. institutions. The results of this annual survey are used to assess characteristics and trends in doctorate education and degrees. The current 2008 SED survey questionnaire is provided for reference in Attachment 1.

The SED annually produces different sets of tabulations that are widely used, including: 1) Summary Report; and 2) Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Fine Field of Study Tables (REG), which individuals could special order from the contractor (NORC) up until the release of the 2005 data in November 2006.

In 2007 SRS completed a detailed review of its existing rules and procedures for protection of the data collected under a pledge of confidentiality in all its surveys. As a result of that review, SRS implemented more stringent procedures to protect the confidentiality of data provided by respondents to the SED. The revised procedures

resulted in suppressing more data cells with very small counts in tables in the 2006 SED Summary Report as well as in the REG. The cells primarily affected were certain categories for the variables of race/ethnicity, citizenship and gender.

NSF received many complaints from the user community about the availability of less information from the SED than before, particularly for underrepresented minorities. A great deal of the concern related to the fact that SRS had implemented the changes without prior input from the user community. Users strongly suggested that SRS solicit user input as to how best to design the tables to meet a broad spectrum of user needs. NSF has listened to this concern. The following statement was released by NSF in early May.

SRS will be releasing the race/ethnicity, citizenship and gender data collected for the 2006 Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED) as in previous years. There are privacy and confidentiality issues that must be addressed, particularly in the context of small data sets. The question of how to aggregate the data in future years will be addressed with the data user community over the next few months and new tables will be developed to release data from the 2007 SED.

Users can request tables containing 2006 SED data with the same level of detail as in previous years for race/ethnicity, citizenship and gender through a link on the NSF/SRS website. The same web page also indicates that SRS is asking interested parties to take part in a brief web survey on the same topic that will be conducted in the near future. Users can indicate whether they wish to participate in this web survey.

This proposed web survey will be one of the ways to reach out to the SED user community to improve the SED. The results will be used as input to the redesign of the different tabulations produced with data from the SED so that they best meet users' needs and also protect the confidentiality of respondents.

Data Collection Instrument

A draft of the proposed web survey questions is provided in Attachment 2. The format of the questions will be dependent on the web survey software used.

The survey contains two sets of questions: one concerning the REG tables and another for the Summary Report. Respondents may answer one or both sets of questions, depending on which product(s) they use.

Data Collection Procedures

As soon as clearance is obtained, the SED contractor will email the web-survey link to: 1) past recipients of the SED Summary Report (550 in 2007); 2) to users who have ordered the REG tables from the contractor the last time they were available (39 in 2006); and 3) to users who indicate on the SRS web site that they want to participate in the web survey. The SED contractor will compare the lists and ensure there are no duplicate names.

Data collection activities are expected to begin in early July 2008.

Burden Information

Because the REG users have purchased these tables in the past, SRS expects a 75% response rate for the REG section of the survey (80 responses). Because of the possible lower salience of the issues for some of the past recipients of the Summary Report, SRS expects a 20% response rate (110 responses) for that section.

We also expect some responses resulting from the announcement on the SRS website asking people to indicate if they were interested in taking the SED products web survey. This option has been open since May 12, 2008 and in the first 5 weeks, 87 individuals indicated they would like to participate in the web survey. The web survey will run until August 31. If the same level of interest continues throughout the period, the estimated number of responses to the web survey from this source is 278 $[(16/5)*87]$.

Thus the estimated total number of responses equals 468.

We expect each survey response to require no more than 15 minutes. Therefore, we estimate a total of 117 hours of respondent burden for this web survey.

Incentive Payments

There are no incentive payments.

Contact Information

The contact persons for questions regarding this data collection are:

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Attachments (2)

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