



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION SCIENCES

NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

May 18, 2011

Tom North  
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Dear Mr. North:

I am writing in response to your comments of May 11, 2011, regarding the National Center for Education Statistics' application for a three-year clearance for the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). First, let me thank you for your interest and also for the service you provide for the data collection by serving as an IPEDS coordinator in the state of Oregon.

I appreciate your concerns regarding the proposed elimination of the fringe benefits data collection from the IPEDS Salaries Survey. On June 29 and 30, 2010, RTI International, the contractor for the IPEDS web-based data collection system, convened a meeting of the IPEDS Technical Review Panel (TRP) in Arlington, VA. The purpose of this meeting was to solicit input from the postsecondary education community on improvements to the Human Resources (HR) component. The panel consisted of 49 individuals representing the federal government, state governments, institutions, data users, association representatives, and others. The TRP examined the reporting burden for degree-granting institutions completing the Human Resources component and discussed strategies for simplifying the collection forms and eliminating potentially duplicative or unnecessary data in order to reduce institutional burden and improve the usefulness and quality of the data being reported.

The panel examined the fringe benefits portion of the Salaries section (Part F). On the two screens in this section, institutions are required to report projected fringe benefit expenditures paid to full-time instructional staff on 9/10-month and 11/12-month contracts. A number of panelists noted that this is one of the most problematic and burdensome sections of the HR component. In addition, panelists indicated that the expenditures data reported in this section are typically estimates since reporting is based on a November 1 census date and actual expenditures have not yet been captured for the full year. Therefore, institutions must project benefit expenditures using their own methods and processes, which could vary significantly across campuses.

That being said, the panel agreed that two important pieces of information related to benefits data should be collected in some capacity: (1) which benefits are being offered, and (2) the expense to the institution for providing these benefits. However, the group noted that the data currently collected in the HR component do not seem to supply this information accurately. The panel consequently determined that the burden of reporting these data is too great given that the data reported are estimates.

Those on the panel who were most interested in the data felt that using data from the IPEDS Finance component, which collects total actual amounts for salary and benefit expenses of staff, would be better for analysis and institutional comparisons. Although these data typically run two years behind due to the fiscal years, and are not as detailed, the panel noted that the numbers are likely to be more accurate than those currently reported in the HR component and should be adequate for performing cost analyses.

Prior to making any final decision based on these suggestions, however, NCES had its contractor post a summary of the TRP's suggestions to the web for public comment following the meeting. Emails were sent to keyholders and coordinators announcing the posting of comments. Comments were left open for 30 days and the comment period closed on September 17, 2010. We received only one comment from an interested party that stated, "I agree with eliminating the benefits section from the survey. The benefits section has not been revised in over 20 years. I have been in HR for many years and do not know anyone who uses the IPEDS benefits data. As stated in the TRP summary, the benefits section is one of the most problematic and burdensome sections of the survey. Getting rid of this section will chop a considerable amount of time off completing the survey."

Based on the TRP suggestions and receipt of the supporting comment during the open comment period, NCES has proposed eliminating the fringe benefits screens from the Salaries section of the HR component. Removing these two screens would significantly reduce institutional burden, and while there is value in collecting more detailed information about the types of benefits provided by institutions, the panel determined that the IPEDS Human Resources component is not the appropriate instrument for collecting this information. I encourage you to explore use of the IPEDS Finance data on salaries and benefits.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your concerns, and for serving as an IPEDS coordinator. We appreciate your support.

Sincerely,

Elise S. Miller  
Program Director  
Postsecondary Institutional Studies Program