

Understanding and Improving the Usage of the Outcome Measures Survey Component

NPEC IPEDS 2024

Abby Miller, ASA Research

Gigi Jones, Ph.D.

Executive Summary

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) introduced the Outcome Measures (OM) survey component in 2014–15. This resulted from research and several meetings, including a report of the Committee on Measures of Student Success (CMSS), a group mandated by the 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act to take students attending 2-year colleges into consideration. The OM survey was intended to supplement the Graduation Rates (GR) survey, which only tracks the completion rates of first-time, full-time students and leaves out a large portion of students in higher education. The National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC) commissioned this paper to better understand the extent to which OM data are being used, how they are being used, and how the survey could be improved to increase usage.

This paper relied on a documentation scan and interviews with stakeholders to gather information about OM usage and feedback. A web search for publications yielded few examples of publicly available OM data analysis but some examples of data dashboards. The authors also analyzed NCES documentation to examine how the survey was developed—including technical review panels and public comments that led to the survey’s current structure and metrics.

Interviewees representing organizations that serve 2-year institutions indicate that they have used OM to a limited extent, in addition to other datasets. However, most stakeholders do not use OM data because they are unaware of OM, find the various metrics and cohorts confusing, or because of the lag time of all outcomes tracked 8 years after the cohort initially enrolls.

This paper makes recommendations for refining the OM survey component and increasing OM usage, beginning with better understanding the utility of OM data in consumer tools such as the College Scorecard and College Navigator. The authors also suggest exploring the possibility of combining OM with GR, depending on stakeholder feedback, to maintain the 2-year inclusiveness of OM and the legislatively mandated components of GR.

Contents

- Executive Summary..... 2
- Introduction 4
- Research Questions 4
- Methodology..... 5
- Documentation and Web Scans..... 5
- Interview Findings..... 11
- Recommendations 15
- Conclusions 17
- References 18

Introduction

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) created the Outcome Measures (OM) survey component to provide a more comprehensive view of student success across all Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) institutions. However, OM is a more recent survey component compared with the well-established, highly used Graduation Rates (GR) and 200% Graduation Rates (GR200) survey components, which are limited to first-time, full-time (FTFT) student cohorts. For community colleges, FTFT students typically constitute a small fraction of their total student populations; thus, GR and GR200 data are viewed as unhelpful metrics of community college student success.

Given that OM is a relatively new survey component, this paper aims to address the following areas of interest among the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC):

1. Understanding the utilization (or underutilization) of OM data, which provide more comprehensive information on student success at IPEDS institutions than GR and GR200 data.
2. Providing actionable short-term and long-term recommendations to NCES for enhancing or improving the utilization of OM data.

This paper will be able to serve as background for a future technical review panels (TRP) that discuss and suggest changes to the IPEDS data collection.

Research Questions

This paper seeks to address the following research questions:

- 1) *Who is using OM data?**
 - a. *Who (or which groups) are the frequent IPEDS users of OM data?*
- 2) *For data users who use OM data, how and for what purposes are OM data being used?**
- 3) What are the reasons for frequent IPEDS data users not using OM data?
 - a. Is it too difficult or early to explain OM data? Which target audience(s) would benefit from using OM data?
 - b. Are audiences or stakeholders entrenched in GR after many years of usage?
 - c. NCES is not known to market its data; however, what steps could NCES take to increase the usage of OM data among its IPEDS data users?
 - i. What improvements or clarifications could NCES apply to the current OM data elements or instructions that would improve OM data usage? Alternatively, what OM data elements or instructions are confusing, resulting in underutilization?
 - ii. Could NCES collect additional OM data elements (e.g., data on new types of cohorts, race/ethnicity, and sex)?

**Note:* Because of the unavailability of OM download data, which were originally proposed to be analyzed for this paper, questions 1 and 2 cannot be fully answered. The paper's authors have attempted to answer these questions to the extent possible using the methods described below.

Methodology

The findings summarized in this paper stem from a documentation review, web scan, and interviews with nine stakeholders. The following methods were used to address the research questions above:

1) Documentation and Web Scans: The authors conducted a scan of existing OM-related documentation, along with a general web search using OM keywords. These scans sought to collect information about:

- The development of OM, including data elements currently collected by IPEDS;
- Posted data analysis using OM data, including policy and academic research; and
- Data dashboards and tools using OM data.

The authors also included information about the development of OM based on TRPs, Office of Management and Budget (OMB) packages, the 2018 NPEC paper titled *The History and Origins of Survey Items for the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System*, and other NCES documentation.

2) Stakeholder Interviews: The authors conducted nine individual videoconference interviews on Zoom with nonfederal stakeholders who are well versed in IPEDS data and higher education policy. Interviewees represented postsecondary institutions and organizations, including the 2-year sector. We sought to understand and gain insight into the usage (or underusage) of OM data and what areas could be improved to bring about greater OM data usage. Due to the federal limit of nine interviewees, the authors also relied on written comments from the community in response to IPEDS OMB packages prior to the OM survey release and updates.

Note: The authors originally proposed to analyze download data from NCES to examine the download rate of OM, GR, and GR200 data for each year that OM has existed. In addition, the authors proposed exploring whether the website data could provide additional insights into who or which types of individuals are downloading the data. However, these data were unavailable.

Documentation and Web Scans

For the documentation scan, the authors searched for information about the development of OM, including how data elements evolved. We identified documentation from OM TRPs, OMB/*Federal Register* comments, the *History and Origins* report, and other NCES documentation. For the web scan, we searched for academic and policy reports or data dashboards that used OM data; this yielded few results. The findings of these scans are summarized below.

Documentation

IPEDS documentation states that the OM survey component “was first administered in the 2015-16 collection to provide alternative measures of student success to reflect more accurate graduation rates for the 2-year sector for purposes of the Student Right to Know and Campus Security Act of 1990” (McNeely, 2023). The following analysis of OM-related documentation further explores the component’s development.

OM Development

Understanding the history of how OM evolved can help provide context for the consideration of any future changes. Below is a summary of events that led to the development and refinement of OM.

- **2008: The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA)** mandated that institutions report graduation rates by race/ethnicity, gender, and Pell Grant and loan recipient status. The HEOA also instructed the Commissioner for Education Statistics to convene a diverse group of experts and stakeholders in higher education (the Committee on Measures of Student Success [CMSS]) to “advise the Secretary of Education on how to assist 2-year degree-granting institutions of higher education in meeting graduation rate disclosure requirements outlined in the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended” (RTI International, 2012).
- **2008: TRP #24** met to discuss how to capture the additional required information, as well as a part-time cohort, in GR. The TRP acknowledged that GR leaves out a large population of students who are of interest to the education policy and advocacy community. Between 1997 and 1999, the first years GR was implemented, 2-year public institutions reported on a part-time, first-time cohort. However, this changed when IPEDS moved online in 2000, because the part-time cohort was not required by the Student Right-To-Know and Campus Security Act (SRK) (RTI International, 2008).

TRP #24 recommended adding a part-time cohort, maintaining the full-time cohort required by SRK, and tracking graduation rates for the part-time cohort beyond 150% of the normal time it would take to complete a program, because it takes longer for part-time students to complete degrees. The panel also suggested establishing a threshold for a minimum number of part-time students enrolled to require institutions to report on this additional cohort. In addition, the panel recommended adding Pell Grant recipient sub-cohorts to both the proposed part-time cohort and the established full-time cohort.

- **2011: The CMSS report** found the “federal graduation rate measure [was] incomplete and [did] not adequately convey the wide range of student outcomes at 2-year institutions” and recommended adding a part-time cohort to GR.
- **2012: The U.S. Department of Education Action Plan for Improving Measures of Postsecondary Student Success** was released “in support of the [Obama] Administration’s college completion agenda and based on [the CMSS’s] recommendations” (NCES, 2013). The plan outlined next steps, including expanding the IPEDS completion rate, refining the definitions of “degree-seeking” and “substantial preparation for transfer,” providing technical assistance to 2-year colleges, and convening stakeholders to discuss student success measures (Committee on Measures of Student Success, 2011).
- **2012: TRP #37** met to clarify the definition of “degree-seeking” and to establish a part-time cohort (RTI International, 2012).

- **2014: TRP #45** met to discuss the inclusion of non-first-time student outcomes. The TRP #45 report later stated, “As a result of TRP [40] suggestions and public comments, NCES requested clearance to implement a new Outcome Measures (OM) component in the Winter collection to collect more comprehensive measures of student success for a broader group of students” (RTI International, 2014).
- **2013: The OMB package** for the initial OM survey component was submitted. Comments included concern that 8-year outcomes are overburdensome and unnecessary for community colleges—rather, 6-year outcomes are sufficient. Stakeholders also requested including Pell Grant recipient data and aligning outcomes with GR.
- **2013–14: The preview year** for institutions to review and prepare for OM data collection.
- **2014: TRP #45** met to further discuss the OM survey component prior to its initial collection in 2015–16. The panel met about changes to OM in light of developing consumer information for the College Scorecard. Discussion explored items such as cohort years and demographic characteristics. Pell Grants emerged as an important area of interest.

In addition, the TRP discussed whether capturing outcomes at one point in time—meaning using an 8-year-old cohort to track all outcomes, including those after four years—is effective. The TRP report stated that “the panel agreed that reporting the status of the entering cohort at one point in time would not be sufficient for all completion durations” and recommended collecting data from several different points in time, despite the increased complexity and institutional burden (RTI International, 2014). However, this recommendation was not enacted, and OM currently collects outcomes from a single point in time.

- **2015–16: The OM implementation year.**
- **2016:** As a result of both the TRP and public comments, IPEDS proposed **adding a Pell Grant cohort** to OM beginning in 2017–18 (2016–17 preview year). The rationale for adding Pell to OM included meeting HEOA requirements because of an increase in the number of Pell Grant recipients, the excessive burden of adding Pell to GR by race/ethnicity, and interest in Pell versus non-Pell outcomes by the higher-education community. Due to a number of concerns expressed by public comments in response to the OMB package, IPEDS then convened TRP #50 to discuss potential changes to OM in 2016–17.

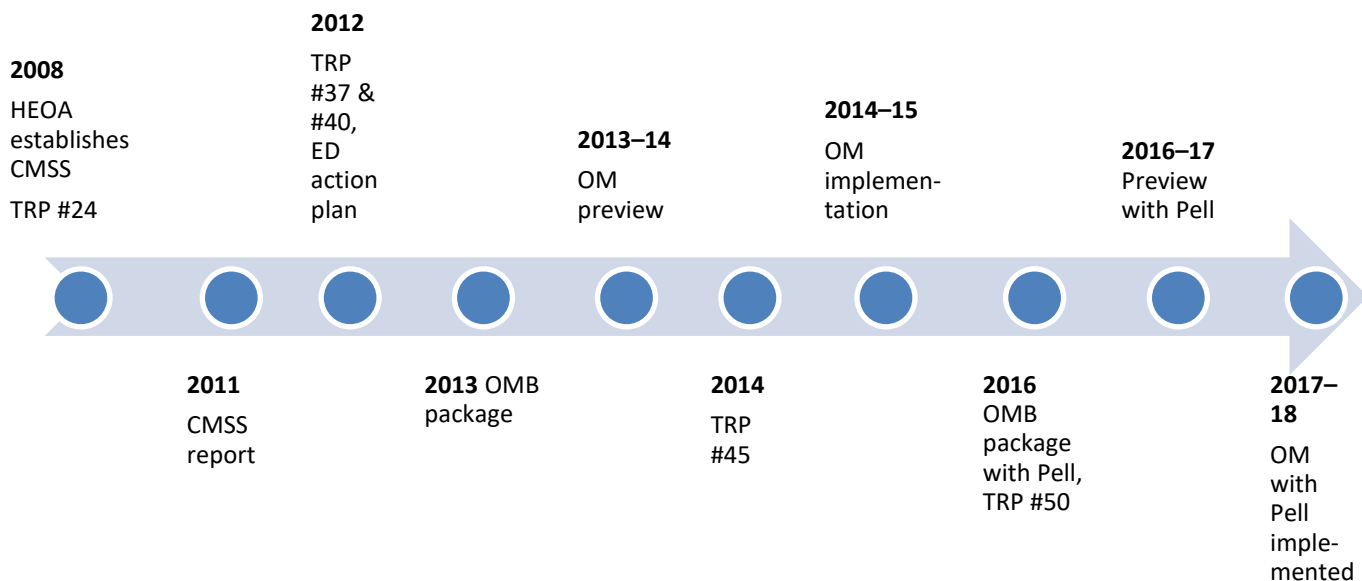
Note: Despite concerns that Pell Grant recipients disaggregated by race/ethnicity would add excessive burden to GR, Pell was also added to GR at this time.

- **2016: TRP #50** discussed the following data collection topics: non-degree-granting institutions, fall or full-year cohort, Pell receipt at entry or any time over 8 years, Pell sub-cohorts, and outcome indicators (award type for each point in time) (RTI International, 2016).
- **2016: OMB package updates.** Based on TRP #50 and public comments, NCES submitted another OMB package to update OM beginning in 2017–18. Changes included shifting to a full-year cohort for all institutions, disaggregating Pell Grant recipients by the four existing OM cohorts, collecting Pell recipient status four years after recipients entered institutions, and collecting the highest award at each point in time (4, 6, and 8 years). NCES decided at this time to continue collecting OM data for degree-granting institutions only and not to disaggregate OM data by race/ethnicity or gender. Changes to instructions also specified including students studying abroad in initial cohorts.

Note: Many comments received in response to the proposed changes were from institutions contesting the change from fall to full-year reporting.

- **2016–17:** The **preview year** for the updated OM (with Pell).
- **2017–18:** The **implementation year** for the updated OM (with Pell).
- **2023: TRP #69** discussed the definitions of “non-first-time,” “transfer-in,” “transfer-out,” and “degree-seeking” in OM and other survey components, including limitations and suggestions for further clarification. Corresponding OM definitions and frequently asked questions were updated for 2024–25.

Figure 1: OM Timeline Summary



OM Feedback

The implementation of OM was a positive change encouraged and well received by the higher education advocacy and policy community, as the traditional graduation rate measure of FTFT students was limiting and misrepresentative of a large and growing student population (Lederman, 2017). The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) welcomed the change as “significant progress” but reported it was still not enough to fully represent community college students (Ashford, 2017). The AACC further stated that its own Voluntary Framework of Accountability more accurately represents its students. Specifically, although the OM shows improvements over GR, it still does not report “transfer data for students who complete a degree, and it fails to provide data on subpopulations.” Higher-education researchers have agreed that although OM provided progress over GR, there is still a need to include *all* students and outcomes (Soldner et al., 2016).

Potential OM Concerns

Higher education advocacy and research organizations submitted comments to NCES when the OMB package was open for review, both in 2013 and in 2016. The following topics arose as areas of potential concern for OM data through public comments in response to both TRPs and OMB announcements and may still be problematic for data reporters and users.

- **Non-degree-granting institutions.** Several organizations advocated for including these institutions in the data collection, as they receive a large volume of federal funding for Pell recipient students. The outcomes of Pell recipients at these institutions are of interest to higher-education researchers. Currently, OM only collects data for degree-granting institutions.
- **Fall versus full-year reporting.** The most recent OM changes required academic reporters to report data for a full-year cohort. A full-year cohort, as opposed to a fall cohort, captures enrollments throughout the year. This is important for 2-year institutions that enroll students throughout the year, but it may be problematic for 4-year institutions, whose students who

enter after the fall may have different outcomes or characteristics than those enrolling in the fall. Further, some institutions indicated that the full-year reporting adds excessive burden and doesn't conform with HEOA reporting requirements.

- **8-year outcomes for 2-year institutions.** There is still debate as to whether 8-year outcomes are appropriate for 2-year institutions. Some data users say this measure is not applicable and do not track outcomes beyond 200% (4 years) for 2-year institutions. Further, community colleges with small institutional research (IR) offices are concerned about the level of burden that retroactively reporting 8-year outcomes can place on their staff members. Others argue that it can take several years beyond the traditional 150% graduation rate to see successful outcomes.

OM Use

A search for literature using IPEDS' OM data¹ yielded a small number of reports; most of the examples explore measures of student success rather than use OM data for analyses or comparisons of student outcomes. A report for the Holistic Measures of Student Success project mentioned that IPEDS made progress in better representing community college students through OM, but the report also made recommendations for further improving data within today's context (Blankstein & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020).

OM Analyses

The following analyses were identified in a search for reports or publications using OM data. A Third Way report on college completion and postgraduation outcomes utilized OM data to track completion rates by sector, noting the ability of OM to capture 8-year rates for a larger cohort than GR, including part-time and transfer-in students. The report did not analyze transfer-out or enrollment outcomes but rather used the OM data to determine that less than one-third (29%) of community colleges graduate the majority of their students within 8 years (Itkowitz, 2019). The report did not view transfer-out students as indicators of success at 2-year institutions, when in fact students who transferred could have gone on to complete degrees elsewhere.

A 2019 Center for American Progress (CAP) online analysis found that while only 20% of community college students completed within 4 years, an additional 30% transferred to other institutions (Yuen, 2019a). Another online CAP analysis of OM data released shortly after the addition of Pell Grant recipients found the bachelor's degree attainment rate to be more than 10% higher for students who had not received Pell Grants than those who had at 4-year institutions. Interestingly, part-time transfer Pell recipients completed college at higher rates than their non-Pell recipient peers (Yuen, 2019b).

Another example of OM data analysis was found at the state level. This report used OM data to more accurately reflect the North Carolina community college population, emphasizing the ability of OM to analyze graduation rates for part-time students and transfer-out rates. In addition to its analysis, the report noted a shortcoming of OM—namely, that while it can provide transfer-out and attainment rates,

¹ Search keywords included various combinations of "Outcome Measures," "graduation rates," "completion," "degree," "non-first-time," "data analysis," "postsecondary," "college," "higher education," "IPEDS," and "NCES."

it cannot provide transfer rates for those who obtain credentials or attainment rates for students after they transfer (Taylor & Whatley, 2021).

College Rankings and Benchmarks

Washington Monthly produces alternative college rankings that take into account low-income students and growing populations such as adults and part-time learners. The publication's adult college rankings use part-time completion rates from OM.² In addition, its social mobility index relies on OM to take into account part-time Pell recipients.³

Higher education organizations that serve 2-year institutions— AACC, Achieving the Dream, The Aspen Institute, and the Community College Research Center—use OM data internally as benchmarks for various initiatives. These organizations typically use OM as one of many different metrics from a variety of sources, including GR and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC).⁴

NCES Tools

The U.S. Department of Education incorporates OM data, along with other data from IPEDS, into the College Scorecard, and NCES incorporates IPEDS data into the College Navigator—both tools intended to help students and families make decisions about college selection. The College Scorecard provides information about education and employment outcomes, and the college completion metrics have been updated to use the most recent OM data in addition to GR data. However, it is not clear how much consumers understand or appreciate the nuanced differences in those data, and the majority of reports about OM use focus on the employment outcomes.

A report that made recommendations for improving the College Scorecard based on student feedback (prior to the release of OM) suggested using 4-year graduation rates rather than 6-year rates, based on students' interests (Morgan & Dechter, 2012). Students understand that it can take longer than four years to graduate but do not plan to take longer for financial reasons. This would suggest that perhaps OM data are not useful for the College Scorecard or College Navigator.

External dashboards relying on College Scorecard data also focus on employment outcomes. For example, the Postsecondary Value Commission's Equitable Value Explorer tool displays its data by earnings and income.⁵ Additional information about each institution in that dataset includes graduation rates—from GR, not completions from OM.

Interview Findings

Interviewees shared more challenges around OM than benefits. The primary benefits are expanding the student population beyond first-time, full-year students and, like all IPEDS data, being reliable, consistent, and enabling longitudinal comparisons. While interviewees said they value OM conceptually,

² Additional information about the ranking data and methodology can be found at <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2018/08/26/a-note-on-methodology-best-colleges-for-adult-learners-3>.

³ Additional information about the ranking data and methodology can be found at <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2023/08/27/a-note-on-methodology-4-year-colleges-and-universities-14>.

⁴ Data are used for internal analyses and are unavailable to share.

⁵ <https://equity.postsecondaryvalue.org/datatool>

most prefer other data sources for various reasons. One interviewee from a 2-year institution shared that she has not yet used OM data because her state’s central office uses its own data to compare institutions within the state. Some shared that although the information is important, the current organization is cumbersome and difficult to grasp. Additional feedback from interviewees follows.

OM Challenges

Below are the most common challenges shared by interviewees:

1. **OM is too complicated.** Several interviewees expressed this concern: Either they themselves do not understand the structure of OM and feel overwhelmed by the data, even as researchers, or they are concerned OM is not user-friendly enough for the general public wanting to learn more about institutions. Whereas some researchers might appreciate the detail and nuance in the data, others might want to access the information more quickly and find it difficult to navigate. One interviewee expressed the sentiment that OM has “too many measures” and users “don't know what to choose”; particularly those who are not “power users” may not understand how to navigate the various cohort options.
2. **OM is still unknown.** OM is still a relatively new dataset, and it may take time for users to better understand the data and feel more comfortable using them. A community college IR director shared that they report data to the IPEDS keyholder at the system level; however, they “don't know what [OM] is. ... No one is using it”—despite the fact that IR directors are data-savvy and OM was originally conceived to answer community college calls for a more inclusive cohort. While NCES has made efforts to publicize and simplify OM through trainings and online visualizations about the data, some users are intimidated by the unknown and prefer to continue using a survey component with which they are more familiar, such as GR.
3. **The lag time hinders OM data utility.** Another observation shared by interviewees is that OM has too much of a lag between the cohort start time and the year the data are available to use. Interviewees expressed concern that due to the lag, data do not reflect the current characteristics of each institution’s students or the educational or political context and other factors that can affect student outcomes. It can be difficult to think back 8 years about what was going on at the institution that might explain outcomes and what could be improved. They are more likely to use institutional, state- or system-level, or external datasets that report data in real time. A researcher focused on 2-year institutions shared that 2-year colleges are more interested in early momentum metrics within the first year. Some even track outcomes on a weekly basis. OM helps paint a fuller picture, but 2-year institutions may be more interested in first-year retention and 3-year graduation rates, even if those surveys represent a more limited population, because shorter-term metrics act as better indicators of gains and gaps.

Alternative Data Sources

Interviewees cited the following datasets as being preferable over OM for completion metrics:

1. **National student-level datasets.** Two interviewees cited NSC as a preferred source for outcomes data due to its ability to track more granular outcomes, such as transfer-in completions and completions by student characteristics, in a more timely manner. One interviewee expressed concerns about errors in the NSC data, but OM can only be used for longer-term indicators.
2. **State or institutional datasets.** The community college IR director said their office uses its state’s robust data system because it is presented in dashboards in real time, at a granular level, and goes back several years to enable longitudinal analyses. In addition to outcomes analyses, IR directors in the state rely on state data for student-centered formula funding; they are unable to get this financial information from IPEDS. The state dataset also allows for easy analysis by specific programs—including Pathways, career and technical education, English as a second language, adult education, transfer, and online programs—and by student cohorts and characteristics, including gender, income, and special populations such as veterans. State data quality and accessibility vary, but the number providing real-time dashboards is growing.
3. **IPEDS GR.** A researcher shared that they prefer GR because of its longer history enabling longitudinal comparisons. However, this researcher added that neither GR nor OM is particularly useful since they are reported at the institutional level rather than the student level.

Feedback — Suggestions for Improving OM

Below are interviewee recommendations for improving OM data and usage. Note that the first two recommendations—to expand cohorts and to eliminate cohorts—may appear contradictory. The first recommendation is a common request to add demographic characteristics, and the second is indicative of how some researchers are conducting analyses using OM data.

1. **Add cohorts.** Four interviewees suggested adding disaggregations to OM by race/ethnicity and gender, similar to GR, to allow for the identification and tracking of equity gaps in completions. One interviewee prefers GR because of its ability to disaggregate data this way, even if it only represents FTFT students.
2. **Simplify the cohorts.** Two interviewees suggested changing the current structure of OM from several different cohorts to two cohorts: the traditional FTFT cohort and everyone else. They often end up collapsing the data into these two groups for analyses, and they believe this simplification would benefit other data users. One interviewee suggested simply reporting outcomes for all students.
3. **Revisit the name.** One interviewee did not realize that “Outcome Measures” is the name of the survey component, and another interviewee concurred that the name is too broad and not necessarily explanatory. In addition to the survey component’s name, some elements’ labels are confusing. One interviewee shared that the label “non-first-time” is more confusing than “transfer-in” because the label is more about what the cohort is *not*.
4. **Add a user-friendly data tool.** One interviewee questioned why IPEDS is no longer part of PowerStats, a user-friendly data tool that provides access to NCES postsecondary sample surveys. This tool makes the data very easy to analyze by different institutional and student characteristics and could increase the usage of OM. The interviewee also recommended an interactive dashboard, such as those available for some institutions and states that allow users to simply click on a cohort and filter the year and characteristics—e.g., Pell receipt and

attendance status. The Trend Generator tool appears to fulfill this functionality to some extent but does not allow for the comparison of one institution with a group of institutions, and it may be that users are unaware of this tool. Other tools for analyzing IPEDS data on the NCES website are a bit outdated and cumbersome.

5. **Increase awareness.** An interviewee shared that presidents and other administrators at 2-year institutions are unaware that IPEDS provides outcomes data about non-first-time, non-full-time students. There is a need to continue communications around OM to raise awareness among stakeholders beyond institutional researchers. NCES could also change the organization of information about OM data on its website to be more user-friendly. For example, an interviewee suggested organizing data and information by topic rather than survey name since the average user may not understand the differences between Completions, GR, and OM survey components.

Feedback — Future Suggestions

Interviewees also requested the following information to increase OM's utility; however, given the confusion surrounding OM, the hesitancy to use OM, and the conflicting feedback about whether to simplify or expand OM, it seems the general structure will need to be revisited before adding data points. The following suggestions are included for future reference, but they may be more appropriate for sample surveys or external student-level datasets.

- **Special populations.** One interviewee would like to see information about special underrepresented populations, such as veterans, first-generation students, students experiencing homelessness, students with dependents, and students with disabilities. Another interviewee requested information about graduate student outcomes and dual enrollment students. Given the burden of IPEDS, these data might be better accessed through sample surveys.
- **Transfer specificity.** One interviewee would like to see additional information about transfers, including attending multiple institutions and stop-outs. Another would like transfer outcomes disaggregated by either vertical or horizontal transfer, and a third interviewee would like to see bachelor's degree completion for transfer-in students at 4-year institutions. A data user added that "non-first-time students" "is not a normed group. ... You can't make good comparisons/conclusions directly from the data about transfer outcomes across institutions (prep, units at entry, etc.), which can vary considerably."
- **Workforce outcomes.** Two interviewees expressed concern that IPEDS cannot currently provide information about social mobility based on earnings and workforce data (although this information can be obtained through the College Scorecard). One of these interviewees would also like to see information available by program/major field. Although the IPEDS Completions survey component collects program-level data, "It's a static aggregate dataset. ... You don't have a sense of the pathways." Another interviewee suggested exploring the possibility of tying IPEDS data to Census Bureau or Internal Revenue Service data to include employment and economic outcomes.

Recommendations

Below are the authors' recommendations for improving OM, including general design guidelines, based on the above collective feedback.

- 1. Conduct additional research.** Before making any changes to OM, it is important to collect additional information about to what extent and how OM data are being used. Analysis of survey download data could shed some insight into the extent of usage. Additional insights about survey uses and needs could be gained through a survey or focus groups with a broader audience. (This paper was limited to nine interviewees due to OMB restrictions.) Given that one of the primary uses of OM is the College Scorecard, feedback from consumers would help determine whether OM data are being weighed in college decisions. It is not clear whether consumers rely on GR or OM information in the College Scorecard or which is most useful for making decisions about where to attend college. In addition, it would be helpful to contact organizations that advocated for adding the OM cohorts to inquire whether they have used OM data for analyses. An initial review of these organizations suggests that OM is rarely being used. Additional research with stakeholders could reveal why they are not using OM and what improvements to the survey component would increase their usage.
- 2. Determine OM's audience.** One interviewee suggested honing in on the intended OM audience. Does NCES expect OM users to be similar to GR and other IPEDS users or different? Is the intended audience primarily researchers or the general public? NCES could begin with a review of OM download data to determine how often the data are being used, how, and by whom.
- 3. Plan ahead.** An interviewee expressed concern that higher education is rapidly changing but IPEDS does not consider these changes when planning its data collections. The need for IPEDS data to better reflect part-time, non-first-time, and Pell recipient students was ongoing for many years, and how to best collect these data is still a subject of debate. NCES might consider holding TRPs or other meetings about emerging trends now so it could be poised to collect what will be considered crucial data in the future. For example, workforce outcomes are now a focus of education research, and online education has become more common. Another current issue of concern in education is the use of artificial intelligence in the classroom. NCES should consider not only what has happened in the past but what may happen in the future, to allow for flexibility of its data collections to better represent current trends.
- 4. Be transparent.** Any further changes to OM should be transparent and should take into account feedback, including perceived IR burden. Although the CMSS met for several years and several TRPs were held about how to best move forward with collecting outcomes data about non-first-time, non-full-time students, the decision to create a separate survey component was made behind the scenes. It is not clear whether any dialogue was held with data users about the utility of a separate survey component. There was an opportunity for public comment about the proposed survey component, and that feedback was taken into account in determining the data collected, such as the number of cohorts. However, no public documentation exists about why these outcomes are collected through a separate component rather than through GR.
- 5. Consider combining OM with GR.** There seems to be a lack of awareness—even among 2-year institutions—of OM being a separate survey component, what it includes, and how it is different from GR. Given the underuse of OM, it would make sense to combine the OM metrics with GR in a way that maintains both the larger student population of OM and the mandated items of GR. (See the forthcoming NPEC paper titled *Developing a Single Student Outcome Survey Component: Merging IPEDS Graduation Rates, Graduation Rates 200%, and Outcome Measures.*)

One interviewee shared that OM is a part of the completion story, along with GR, and it would make sense to view these data in tandem.

6. **Better explain OM's utility.** NCES does a good job of displaying in a visual, simplified manner the OM cohorts and outcomes (<https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/survey-components/11>). However, these graphics are intended for data reporters, not end users. Additional information could explain *why* these data are collected, what they mean, how they are different from GR data, and when and how they should be used. A chart could be developed to help researchers and consumers decide whether to use GR or OM data in various scenarios, what the measures mean, and how the data can be used. Examples could be provided to demonstrate these nuances. This Resource Page is helpful but difficult to find and should be available on the IPEDS landing page: <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/Use-The-Data/Measuring-Student-Success-In-IPEDS>. Exhibit 3 of this document is particularly useful and should be moved to the top of the page. The GR and GR200 columns could be combined to provide further simplification. The addition of a flowchart to help data users make decisions about which survey component to use would be helpful. NCES could also provide information for IR offices to distribute to their administrators to help increase awareness of OM across the campus.
7. **Revisit dynamic definitions.** Interviewees expressed concern about the following constructs, which are difficult to define due to rapidly changing institutional offerings. Because the following definitions are problematic, interviewees sometimes look elsewhere for outcomes data.
 - **Institution level.** Two-year institutions offering bachelor's degrees are now considered 4-year institutions in IPEDS, even if they primarily award associate's degrees. This is problematic when data are grouped by institution level and degree type but do not represent the typical experiences of students within that sector. The "predominantly associate's" label used by the College Scorecard might be more appropriate.
 - **Attendance status.** A researcher whose focus is on 2-year institutions shared that a student's attendance status can change so frequently that "part-time" and "full-time" are more dynamic statuses than they are static. NSC reports students as being primarily part-time, primarily full-time, or mixed. However, this NSC variable is derived from enrollment records and would likely be overburdensome for NCES.
8. **Consider IR burden.** According to the most recent IPEDS OMB package, the average number of hours required to prepare OM is now 9–10 (Table 2), down from the 40 hours estimated when OM was first introduced. This most recent estimate is close to those of other IPEDS survey components. Nevertheless, burden must be considered since OM is a relatively new requirement in addition to GR, which collects similar information, and IR offices at smaller colleges may have only one or two staff members each and already feel overwhelmed by data reporting requirements. In addition, based on usage of the data, it is unclear whether the burden is justified.

Table 1 — IPEDS Reporting Burden⁶

Table 3. Average 2022–23 self-reported preparation hours by experienced and new IPEDS keyholders, by IPEDS component							
IPEDS component	Total number of respondents	Experienced keyholders			New keyholders		
		Average 2022–23 self-reported preparation hours per respondent	Estimated number of respondents	Estimated total preparation hours	Average 2022–23 self-reported preparation hours per respondent	Estimated number of respondents	Estimated total preparation hours
IC	6,020	3.26	4,515	25,067	4.03	1,505	2,496
C	6,020	6.47	4,515	21,040	7.35	1,505	3,956
E12	6,009	7.16	4,507	25,931	8.11	1,502	4,649
SFA	5,888	8.95	4,416	32,917	9.19	1,472	5,411
OM	3,656	8.91	2,742	17,671	10.11	914	3,599
GR	5,358	3.13	4,019	19,800	7.40	1,339	3,535
GR200	5,016	3.48	3,762	10,222	3.77	1,254	1,631
ADM	1,995	3.56	1,496	4,253	4.09	499	891
EF	5,982	7.19	4,487	25,157	10.26	1,495	5,818
F	5,833	9.40	4,375	37,534	10.95	1,458	6,539
HR	5,978	8.21	4,484	31,255	11.39	1,494	6,791
AL	3,748	5.45	2,811	14,303	5.93	937	2,823

Conclusions

Based on interviews with stakeholders and documentation review, it seems that greater awareness of OM data is needed. The survey was developed with 2-year institutions in mind in response to years of advocacy, but much of the 2-year sector remains unaware of OM or does not find the data useful in their current form. This could be a matter of renaming the survey component and its elements, better publicizing the data to institutional administrators and the public, or combining OM with the more established and familiar GR survey component.

One theme to emerge in interviews is that it may be difficult to assign uniform metrics to institutions whose missions vary widely, and many institutions use their own data for that reason. Areas of interest include outcomes by a specific program or for special populations, more granular transfer outcomes, and postgraduation outcomes such as employment and economic mobility. Further, the non-first-time, non-full-time graduation and transfer-out rates are important for community colleges where those students represent large percentages of the population, but the same rates might be misleading for a private four-year institution with a small number of students in that category.

The suggestions made herein should be considered within this finding that no matter how much the data are refined, they will never be applicable to every institution in the U.S. Before any changes are made, it is recommended that NCES further investigate usage or underusage through download data and meet with stakeholders to achieve a greater consensus about next steps. Finally, any survey component changes should be made in tandem with plans for communicating changes, increasing data accessibility, and ensuring flexibility and transparency.

⁶ Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) 2024-25 through 2026-27 Supporting Statement Part A OMB No. 1850-0582 v. 33

References

- Ashford, E. (2017, October 12). IPEDS Improved but Needs Better Data. *Community College Daily*.
<https://www.ccdaily.com/2017/10/ipeds-improved-needs-better-data>
- Blankstein, M. & Wolff-Eisenberg, C. (2020). *Measuring the Whole Student: Landscape Review of Traditional and Holistic Approaches to Community College Student Success*.
<https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/measuring-the-whole-student>
- Committee on Measures of Student Success (2011). *A Report to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan*.
Archived. <https://noncreditdatadotcom.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/us-duncan-2011-report.pdf>
- Itkowitz, M. (2019). *The State of American Higher Education Outcomes in 2019*.
https://www.thirdway.org/report/the-state-of-american-higher-education-outcomes-in-2019?utm_source=Third+Way+Subscribers&utm_campaign=b451223d3d-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_04_04_05_41&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_8952c391fb-b451223d3d-221505509
- Lederman, D. (2017, October 12). The New, Improved IPEDS. *Inside Higher Ed*.
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/10/12/new-federal-higher-ed-outcome-measures-count-part-time-adult-students>
- McNeely, E. M. (2023). *The History and Origins of Survey Items for the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (2022–23 Update)*. U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/pdf/NPEC/data/The-History-and-Origins-of-Survey-Items.pdf>
- Morgan, J. & Dechter, G. (2012). *Improving the College Scorecard: Using Student Feedback to Create an Effective Disclosure*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress.
<https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/CollegeScorecard-4.pdf>
- NCES (2013). IPEDS 2014-2016 and 2013 Supporting Statement Part A. Washington, DC: OMB No. 1850-0582 v.13. Retrieved from Regulations.gov.
- RTI International. (2008). *Report and Suggestions from IPEDS Technical Review Panel #24 Collecting GRS Data for Part-Time Students and Pell Grant Recipients*. Retrieved from <https://ipedstrp.rti.org>
- RTI International. (2012). *Report and Suggestions from IPEDS Technical Review Panel #37 Selected Outcomes of the Advisory Committee on Measures of Student Success*.
https://edsurveys.rti.org/IPEDS_TRP_DOCS/prod/documents/Report%20and%20Suggestions%20from%20IPEDS%20TRP%2037%20-%20FINAL.pdf

RTI International (2013). *Report and Suggestions from IPEDS Technical Review Panel #40 Additional Selected Outcomes of the Advisory Committee on Measures of Student Success*.

https://edsurveys.rti.org/IPEDS_TRP_DOCS/prod/documents/TRP40_Suggestions_final.pdf

RTI International (2014). *Report and Suggestions from IPEDS Technical Review Panel 45: Outcome Measures*.

https://edsurveys.rti.org/IPEDS_TRP_DOCS/prod/documents/TRP_45_Summary_for_Posting.pdf

RTI International (2016). *Technical Review Panel No. 50 Outcome Measures 2017-18: New Data Collection Considerations*.

https://edsurveys.rti.org/IPEDS_TRP_DOCS/prod/documents/TRP50_FinalAction.pdf

Soldner, M., Smither, C., Parsons, K., & Peek, A. (2016). *Toward Improved Measurement of Persistence and Completion*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.

<https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/toward-improved-measurement-persistence-and-completion.pdf>

Taylor, J. L. & Whatley, M. (2021). *Credential Completion and Transfer Outcomes at North Carolina's Community Colleges Using IPEDS Outcome Measures*. Raleigh, NC: Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research.

https://belk-center.ced.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/128/2022/10/Transfer-Report-2_Belk-Center.pdf

Yuen, V. (2019a). *What Graduation Rates Have Missed for Community College Students*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/graduation-rates-missed-community-college-students>

Yuen, V. (2019b). *New Insights on Attainment for Low-Income Students*. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/new-insights-attainment-low-income-students>