

**Attention: Information No Longer Current
(Alert archived November 2011)**

Alert #3

Subject: National Postsecondary Education Cooperative

Prepared: November 1997

Summary

The National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC) was authorized by Congress in 1994. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) was to create NPEC "to identify and communicate on-going and emerging issues germane to postsecondary education, and to promote the quality, comparability and utility of postsecondary data and information that support policy development, implementation, and evaluation." NPEC presents itself as a "compact of co-equal partners of postsecondary education data users and providers."

NPEC represents a broad spectrum of organizations and agencies representing all levels of postsecondary education that provide and/or use data. This includes colleges and universities and proprietary institutions; state and federal government agencies; national associations; the media; accrediting associations; coordinating boards; and more. All partners are volunteers, except for NCES.

As a very young organization, NPEC still is developing its organizational structure and work processes. One of the more exciting aspects of NPEC is the absence of a history or past practices to limit or set precedents for what is done and how NPEC goes about its work. Members can be creative and innovative. This also means NPEC operates with a substantial amount of ambiguity, a characteristic which may be bothersome, particularly to people who are more comfortable with clarity and precision.

Current Status Organization and Structure. NPEC is evolving into a highly complex organization because both the mission and membership are very extensive. The basic structure includes the bodies or support groups enumerated below.

- The **Council** comprises some 140 members with representatives sought from all states and territories. Members serve 3-year terms and meet annually.
- The **Steering Committee** is the governing body for the Council. The Committee has two primary functions: 1) establish project priorities and activities, and 2) develop membership and operating guidelines and practices, including appointing Council, Working Group and Subcommittee members. The Committee has about 25 members, and meets 3-4 times per year.

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- **Working Groups** address a research issue or topic germane to the overall mission and purpose of NPEC. Each Working Group has about 12-15 members; Co-chairs are appointed by the Steering Committee and serve either as regular or ex officio members of the Steering Committee.
- **Subcommittees** address more topical and short-term subjects, such as planning the annual Council meeting, developing communications materials and strategies for NPEC, and recommending new Council and Steering Committee members.
- **Consultants** carry on specific tasks and duties related to NPEC's work. At the present, two consultants provide support and guidance for NPEC Working Groups and Subcommittees. Other consultants are retained for specific projects.
- **NCES staff** who work for NCES or related agencies. These Washington-based individuals provide staff support for all aspects of NPEC's work.
- **External contractors** obtain NCES contracts to carry out certain aspects of NPEC's substantive projects and to handle the logistics of our many meetings.

Projects and Activities. NPEC has already engaged in a number of interesting research projects and activities. Some are completed, but more are in various stages of planning or implementation. Some projects papers and/or videotapes are available or soon will be, and virtually all projects will have a concrete product at some point. Keep connected through the NPEC web page: <http://nces01.ed.gov/npec>

- **Student outcomes.** Several NPEC projects focus on assessing postsecondary education outcomes. Some developed processes for identifying useful outcome measures related to critical policy and practice concerns. Two papers are now available, "Student Outcomes Information for Policy-Making" and "Enhancing the Quality and Use of Student Outcomes Data." These papers soon will be available on NPEC's web page.
- Specific attention is now being given to outcomes in the areas cognitive development and occupational preparation. A draft report that describes and analyzes numerous approaches to assessing cognitive outcomes in problem solving, critical thinking, and writing will soon be available on NPEC's web page.
- **Workforce development.** Emerging initiatives in this area raise many new policy considerations. This project is concerned with developing new ways of assessing job-related skills, student transitions, and work-based experiences. One of the more interesting aspects of this project is that it promises to bring together a wide variety of postsecondary institutions, some of which are not typically part of conversations about workforce development.
- **Better data coordination.** To reduce the data-reporting burden and to promote the comparability of data resources, NPEC has been working to improve the coordination of data definitions and survey efforts. Representatives from selected organizations convened

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in December 1997 to discuss ways to improve data coordination. An analysis of data definitions and survey methodologies used by these organizations and a draft paper summarizing "Best Practices for Data Collection and Reporting" were prepared to facilitate these discussions.

- **Unit Record Data Exchanges.** External accountability mandates and campus improvement efforts have increased the need and pressure for exchanging unit record data. A number of states already have developed or are in the process of developing unit record data bases. This project seeks to identify the conditions--such as federal legal guidelines, security, confidentiality--that promote or hinder exchanges. At present there is no consensus within NPEC about crucial questions, such as whether or not such exchanges are truly necessary, who should participate, or what measures are needed to preserve record security. The committee is currently examining the feasibility of a pilot study which would be animated by a voluntary exchange with a limited number of elements.
- **Emerging issues.** To anticipate the data ramifications of emerging policy concerns, NPEC has sponsored a series of expert Policy Panels addressing topics such as technology in the teaching and learning process, and changing conceptions and definitions of access to postsecondary education. Videotaped excerpts from both panels are being made now and will be shown at the AIR Forum. Papers also are being prepared.

Implications for AIR

AIR has been centrally involved in NPEC from its inception. In fact, the first public announcement of NPEC was made in a plenary speech at the 1994 AIR Forum in New Orleans. As a key postsecondary education association, AIR was asked to recommend NPEC Council members. In addition to having AIR members taking leadership roles in NPEC, the links between the two groups ensure that projects and activities are complementary, that AIR's ability to communicate emerging national issues to members is strengthened, and that NPEC projects and activities can be presented to AIR members through Forum programs and panels. Finally, because expenses associated with NPEC activities are borne by the federal government, AIR's participation and involvement does not affect the Association's budget.

Implications for Institutions

The implications of NPEC's existence and activities for institutions are at this point more a matter of conjecture than certainty. There are, however, some possible implications.

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- Improved comparability, validity and reliability of data and information as data providers and users move toward using some common definitions for key postsecondary education variables.
- Reduced reporting burden as data providers and users reach understandings and accommodations to respond to data and information needs without proliferating the number, complexity or differences among reports.
- Guidance on how to report data relating to emerging issues (e.g., student outcomes, workforce development, technology, access).
- Better sense of what's happening and, perhaps more important, what's likely to be happening, in postsecondary education over the next years. This should help institutions with their own planning.
- Useful reference materials, such as the draft report that describes and analyzes approaches to assessing cognitive outcomes referred to above.

Timelines

1994--Authorizing legislation

1995--First council meeting

1996--Projects included Student Outcomes from a Policy Perspective, Student Outcomes from a Data Perspective, and Unit Record vs. Aggregate Data.

1997--Projects include Better Coordination of Postsecondary Education Data and Exchange, Pilot Test of a Model for Linking Student Outcomes Data to Policy Issues, Data Ramifications for Workforce Development Policies, Unit Record Data Exchanges, Policy Panel on Technology and its Data Ramifications, and Policy Panel on Access and its Data Ramifications.

1998--Projects to be determined in January 1998.

Additional Resources

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