

G. ACTS FAQs

General

1) How were institutions selected to complete the ACTS survey component?

Institutional eligibility for the ACTS component was informed by President Donald J. Trump's Presidential Memorandum on August 7, 2025 entitled "Ensuring Transparency in Higher Education Admissions," available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/08/ensuring-transparency-in-higher-education-admissions/> as well as Secretary Linda McMahon's subsequent directive to NCES to initiate a series of changes to IPEDS during the 2025-26 school year.

Consistent with the purposes outlined in those memoranda, only 4-year public, private for-profit, and private not-for-profit institutions are potentially eligible to complete the ACTS component. Eligible institutions may be exempted from completing ACTS in a survey year if they (1) do not award non-need-based aid and (2) admitted 100 percent of applicants in that year.

2) What should I do if I do not have the data for a whole cohort of students in a particular academic year?

Because the majority of the data elements needed to complete the ACTS survey component are also necessary to complete other IPEDS surveys (e.g., Admissions, Cost, Completions, Fall Enrollment, Graduation Rates), NCES expects missing data rates to be low.

Each student-level data collection file, for each cohort year, will allow respondents to indicate that the data for a particular cohort in a particular year cannot be provided. Entering this response for any section will also require an explanation for the missing data. Any such explanations will be retained and will accompany the aggregate data file when submitted to NCES.

3) What should I do if I have most of the data elements for a cohort of students in a particular academic year, but I do not have certain data elements?

Because the majority of the data elements needed to complete the ACTS survey component are also necessary to complete other IPEDS surveys (e.g., Admissions, Cost, Completions, Fall Enrollment, Graduation Rates), NCES expects missing data rates to be low.

In the case of individual data elements, a value of "-1" should be entered to indicate "unknown." If there are large portions of missing data, (e.g., if your institution does not retain secondary school GPA data for undergraduate students who apply but are not admitted), there is space within the student-level data collection file to enter additional explanations. Please be as specific as possible. These explanations will also be retained with the file you submit to IPEDS.

Once the aggregate data are moved to the IPEDS Data Collection System, there will be additional edits performed that check for consistency with other IPEDS survey components and collection cycles, as is normally the case with IPEDS submissions.

4) What should I do if I'm not confident that the data are accurate?

Because the majority of the data elements needed to complete the ACTS survey component are also necessary to complete other IPEDS surveys (e.g., Admissions, Cost, Completions, Fall Enrollment, Graduation Rates), NCES expects missing data quality to be high.

All reasonable efforts should be made to verify the accuracy of the data. If the data are known to contain significant inaccuracies, please indicate that you do not have the data to report (either by indicating the section is unavailable for an entire cohort year or by using the "-1" unknown code for individual data elements, in the applicable sections) and provide a detailed explanation in the student-level data collection file. These explanations will also be retained with the file you submit to IPEDS.

Once the aggregate data are moved to the IPEDS Data Collection System, there will be additional edits performed that check for consistency with other IPEDS survey components and collection cycles, as is normally the case with IPEDS submissions.

5) Are my data expected to match values submitted to IPEDS in prior year(s), where applicable?

Yes, once the aggregate file is uploaded to the Data Collection System, quality review processes will be applied which will check against known values submitted to IPEDS in prior surveys. Therefore, it is expected that data reported are accurate and consistent. Inconsistencies with prior data (e.g. from a prior IPEDS reporting year) will require an explanation in the Edit Report.

6) Should non-matriculated students be accounted for in any sections of the survey component?

Students who are enrolled but have not gone through the admissions process (e.g., non-matriculated, non-credit, and/or auditing) should not be reported.

Entering Data in the Student-Level Data Collection File

1) If we do not use certain data in the applications process (e.g., test scores, GPA), are we expected to report those data even if we have them?

Data used in admissions decisions are expected to be reported (e.g., data that are required for admissions or data that are considered in admissions decisions but not required). Other data collected by the institution, but not used in the decision process, should not be reported in ACTS. In those cases, use the "-1" value to indicate that data are not being provided because they are not used in the decision process.

2) How should we determine family income?

For students who receive aid, family income should be available as it is considered when determining aid. For federally-aided students, this is part of the Federal Tax Information (FTI) which is permitted to be used for purposes of reporting to IPEDS.

Your financial aid office uses family income to determine the student's Student Aid Index (SAI). For dependent students this will include the parents' adjusted gross income and the student's adjusted gross income. For independent students this will include the student's adjusted gross income.

For students who did not receive aid or submit data for consideration, the family income should be reported as unknown.

3) What if we have processes other than “regular admissions,” where should those be reported? (For example, automatic admission to state institutions based on HS GPA).

Report as “regular admissions” any admissions processes other than early action or early decision.

4) Is Pell eligibility based only on their status at the time of enrollment? Or if a student became Pell-eligible part way through the year should they be reported as Pell-eligible?

Only use the student's first enrolled term to determine Pell eligibility for ACTS reporting purposes.

5) Where do I find parental college attainment, and does parental college attainment apply to one parent or both parents?

In the student-level data collection file, indicate “yes” for parental college attainment if one or both parents completed college. This information can be found on the FAFSA, for those students who completed a FAFSA.

6) Are all GPAs unweighted in all sections?

Yes, for purposes of comparison across institutions please use unweighted GPA scores with a maximum of 4.0.

7) Should summer terms be included in any “academic year” calculations? (e.g., GPA calculations)?

The academic year as defined by the institution can include a summer term (preceding or succeeding the Fall/Winter/Spring).

8) What should we do if we are unable to parse financial aid data based on admissions data? (i.e., the data reside in two different systems which cannot be linked).

Please make all reasonable efforts to work across offices and information systems in order to provide the data as specified. If data cannot be provided as requested, a detailed explanation should be provided, as described above in the FAQs related to missing/unknown data.

9) What if our financial aid systems do not differentiate aid based on merit, or categorize aid as need-based and non-need-based?

Financial aid based on the qualifications, achievements or accomplishments irrespective of financial need (i.e. non-need-based) should be considered merit-based. Financial aid based on student need should be considered need-based aid. Other types of financial aid that do not meet either criterion are expected to be rare and should not be reported in the ACTS.

10) Should summer terms be included in any financial aid calculations? (e.g., accelerated/year-round Pell)?

For purposes of financial aid reporting, only one aid year should be included which may include a crossover term (e.g. summer term). Accelerated Pell (e.g., year-round Pell) or other grant aid awarded from a different aid year should not be included.

Using the ACTS Aggregator Tool

1) What is the ACTS Aggregator Tool used for?

This web application allows users to securely process student-level data into aggregate datasets required for ACTS submission. Each tab in the student-level data collection file contains the student-level variables needed to perform the necessary calculations to create the aggregations required by ACTS, and the ACTS Aggregator Tool will perform these calculations. It supports consistency, accuracy, and efficiency in data handling while reducing the need for manual processing.

2) What if my institution prefers not to submit student level data to the Aggregator Tool?

Please note that the aggregation will occur on a secure, RTI-hosted cloud-based web platform. Unit level data will never leave the platform and will be deleted once the data collection is completed. Only aggregated data files will be transferred to the IPEDS data collection system, hosted on Department of Education servers. Most users will find the web application easiest to use—it's ready to go, requires no installation, and securely processes data in a FIPS 199 Moderate environment. However, if there is need to discuss alternative means of submitting the ACTS data, please contact the IPEDS Help Desk.

3) What formats of data can I upload to the web application?

The application expects Excel (XLSX) templates as input. These templates can be downloaded from the ACTS Data Aggregator Tool. Output formats include comma separated values (CSV) files and Excel (XLSX) files.

4) What browsers and operating systems are supported?

The ACTS Aggregator Tool supports the latest versions of Chrome, Edge, Firefox, and Safari on both Windows and macOS platforms.

5) What should I do if I encounter an error while processing my data?

Check that your input data follows the required formats described in the student-level data collection file:

- Ensure that the file you are uploading matches the academic year selected;
- Ensure that all of the correct columns are present in the file, and you have not removed any columns;
- Ensure that you have not changed any of the column names present in row 4 of the student-level data collection file;
- Ensure that the values included in each column are of the proper type (e.g., integer, float) and fall within the allowable range for values in that column according to the codebook tab; and
- Ensure you do not have any empty cells. Missing or not applicable data should be coded as -1 for unknown or -3 for not applicable according to the directions in the codebook tab.

If the issue persists, contact the contact the IPEDS Help Desk at ipedshelp@rti.org or (877) 225-2568 with your error log and description of the issue.

Data Security and Privacy in the ACTS Aggregator Tool

1) How is my data protected when using the ACTS Aggregator Tool?

All data transmitted through the web application is encrypted in transit and at rest. The environment meets FIPS 199 Moderate security standards and adheres to NIST SP 800-53 controls for confidentiality, integrity, and availability.

2) Are the data stored after processing?

Yes, temporarily. For auditing and debugging purposes, submitted data is stored in a secure location on the contractor's network. The data is automatically deleted at the end of the data submission period. If files are submitted that require deletion prior to the end of the submission period, please contact the IPEDS Help Desk at ipedshelp@rti.org.

3) Are audit logs maintained?

Yes. All system activities—including logins, uploads, downloads, and administrative actions—are logged for auditing and compliance purposes. Audit records are protected from modification and retained in accordance with records management policies.

4) Who can access the data I upload to the web application?

Access is restricted to the authorized user who uploads the data. System administrators do not have access to user-submitted data unless required for troubleshooting under approved and logged support procedures.