

Navigating in Uncertainty: How to Prepare for ACTS

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A little about me...

- Assistant Provost for Institutional Research at Southern Arkansas University
- College of Business faculty and course developer for advanced *Statistics & Analytics* and *Data Visualization*
- 20 years working in higher education (eight in IR, Registrar's environment prior)

About the Association for Institutional Research (AIR)

Who We Are

- Founded in 1966
- Global, non-profit association
- Supporting data and analytics work across higher education

Website

- airweb.org

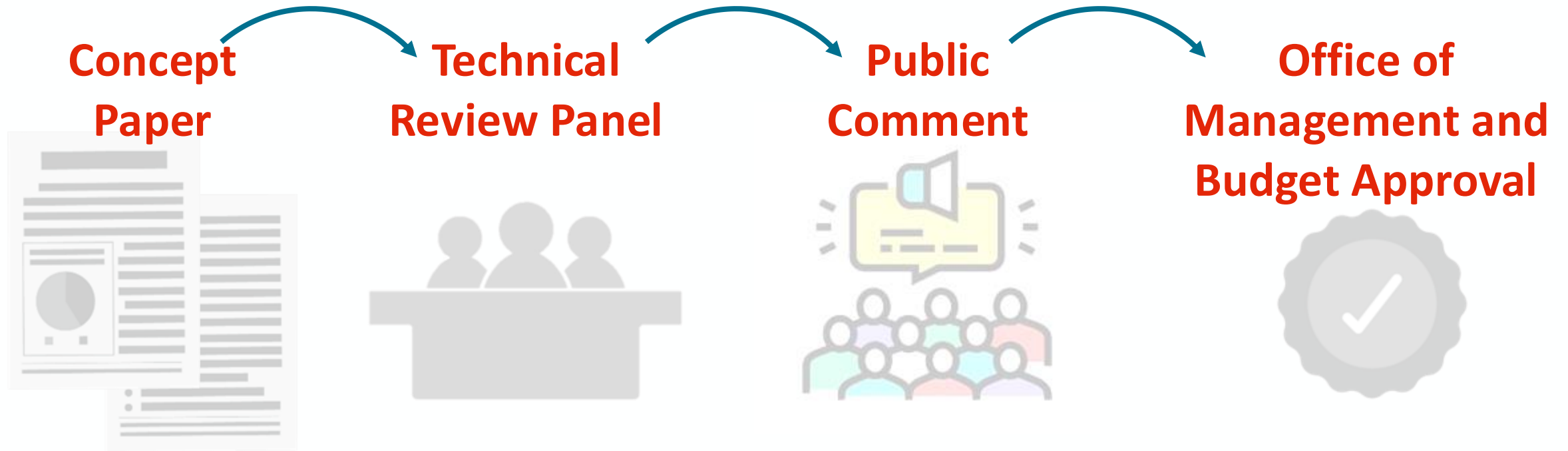
What We Offer

- Provide professional development through the **AIR Data & Decisions® Academy**
- Offer tailored support through **AIR Data & Decisions® Consulting** to help institutions solve their unique data and reporting challenges
- Deliver publications, tools, and resources that support effective data use
- Connect a broad network of individual, organizational, and affiliated members

Our Mission

Empower professionals to use data, information, and analytics in ways that are effective, ethical, and impactful.

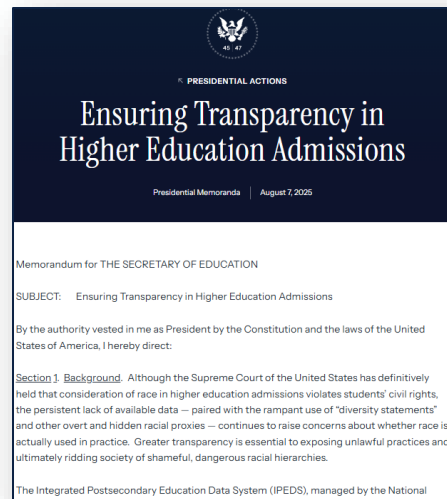
How IPEDS Surveys Normally Evolve



Time frame allows for refinement of definitions, address concerns, and educate and prepare the field.

How ACTS Is Different

Presidential Memorandum (Aug. 7, 2025)*



Launch in
2025

DATA

DATA

DATA

DATA

*Ensuring Transparency in Higher Education Admissions (8/7/2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/08/ensuring-transparency-in-higher-education-admissions/>

How do you feel about the ACTS implementation?



Huh? What's ACTS?



I'm not really sure what to think.



I'm feeling anxious.



I'm feeling confident.



Acknowledging the Moment

Overwhelmed

Frustration

Anger

Fear of “getting it wrong”



Setting Boundaries for Today's Discussion

This session is not
about debating
policy.

Our goal today:
Navigate what's
been put before us.

AIR will create
space for
community
dialogue separately.

Today, we're here to talk about how to move forward.

AIR ACTS Coffee Chat – November 21, 2:00 PM ET

- Informal, 1-hour, open discussion forum
- Created in response to stakeholder requests
- No structured agenda or guided questions
- Space for practitioners to talk through ACTS issues, challenges, and insights
- Conversations will develop organically based on participant needs

To register: <https://www.airweb.org/learning/calendar/2025/11/21/event/coffee-chat--navigating-the-acts-survey>

Or visit www.airweb.org, click “Community” from top menu then click “Coffee Chats”

Next AIR ACTS Coffee Chat scheduled: December 5, 2:00 PM, ET

Future Training

Two-Part Workshop (Two Sessions Each Part)

- **Session 1:** December 9, 2–4 p.m.
- **Session 2:** December 18, 2–4 p.m.

Focus

- Guided build-out of the ACTS student-level file
- Coding, recoding, and structuring fields
- Preparing and uploading to the ACTS Aggregator Tool
- Clearing technical validation errors

Limited seats — priority registration for today's attendees
Additional dates offered in **January and February**



**Things are changing
quickly**

Rapid Changes and Evolving Guidance

- Significant, detailed guidance released on **November 14**
- Documents are dense and highly technical
- This presentation reflects our *current* understanding
- We focused on teasing out the most relevant, actionable elements
- More clarity and training will be provided as guidance evolves
- Additional training dates: **To be determined**

Who Will Need to Report?

- Four-year institutions
- Focus: “Selective” institutions
- Exempted Institutions: Those who admit 100% of applicants AND whose financial aid is 100% merit based (i.e., no need-based financial aid)

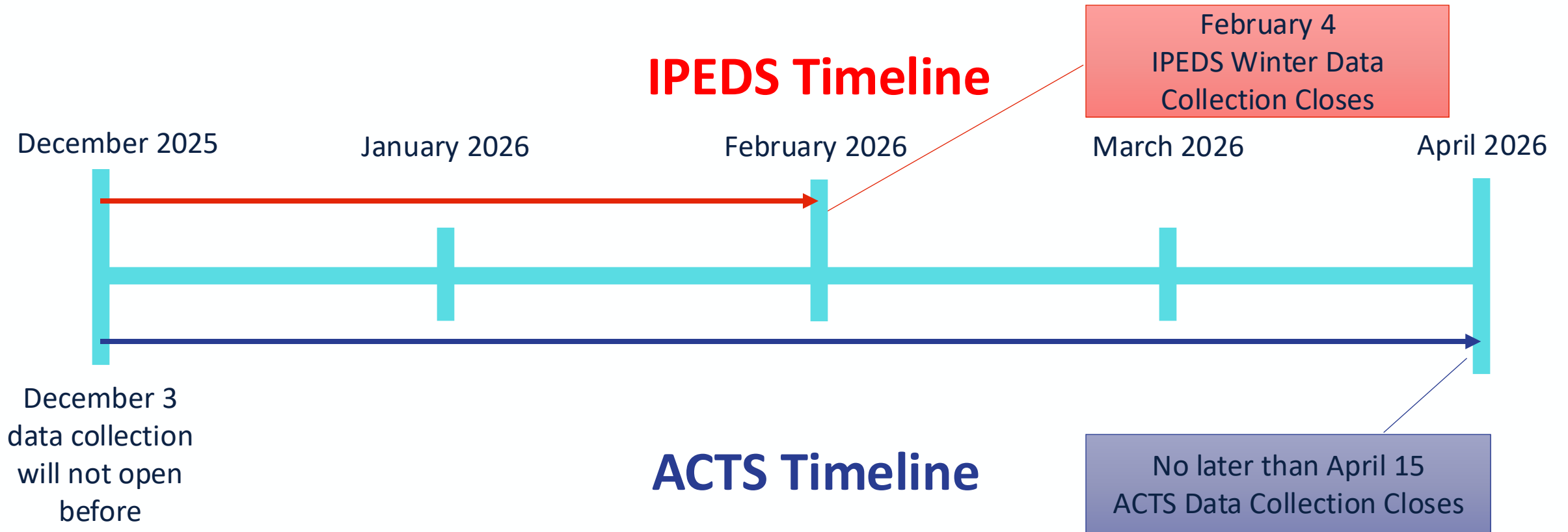


Assume inclusion rather than exclusion!

***Easier to prepare and scale back
than to be caught off guard.***



ACTS Collection Timeline Update



Two-System Reporting Structure

ACTS reporting occurs sequentially in two systems:

ACTS Aggregator Tool

- Upload student-level files
- Automated calculations (quintiles, thresholds)
- Aggregate tables produced



IPEDS Data Collection System (DCS)

- Aggregated file uploaded
- Edit checks & QC review
- Final lock/submission



The Six Steps (High-Level Guide)



Purpose: Establish the standardized layout for all student-level submissions.

What happens in Step 1:

- Log into the **ACTS Aggregator Tool**
- Download one template **per academic year** to report
 - Files available for AY 2019–20 through 2025–26
- Each template contains four (4) tabs:
 - Undergraduate Admissions
 - Undergraduate Completers
 - Graduate Admissions
 - Graduate Completers



Step 2: Populate Student-Level Data

- **Core actions:**
 - Enter one row of data per student
 - Each column per required variable
 - Work offline in the downloaded template
 - Use an anonymous ACTS Student ID (no PII)
- **ACTS Student ID must:**
 - Be unique within each year
 - Use digits only
 - Be ≤ 10 digits
 - Not begin with 0

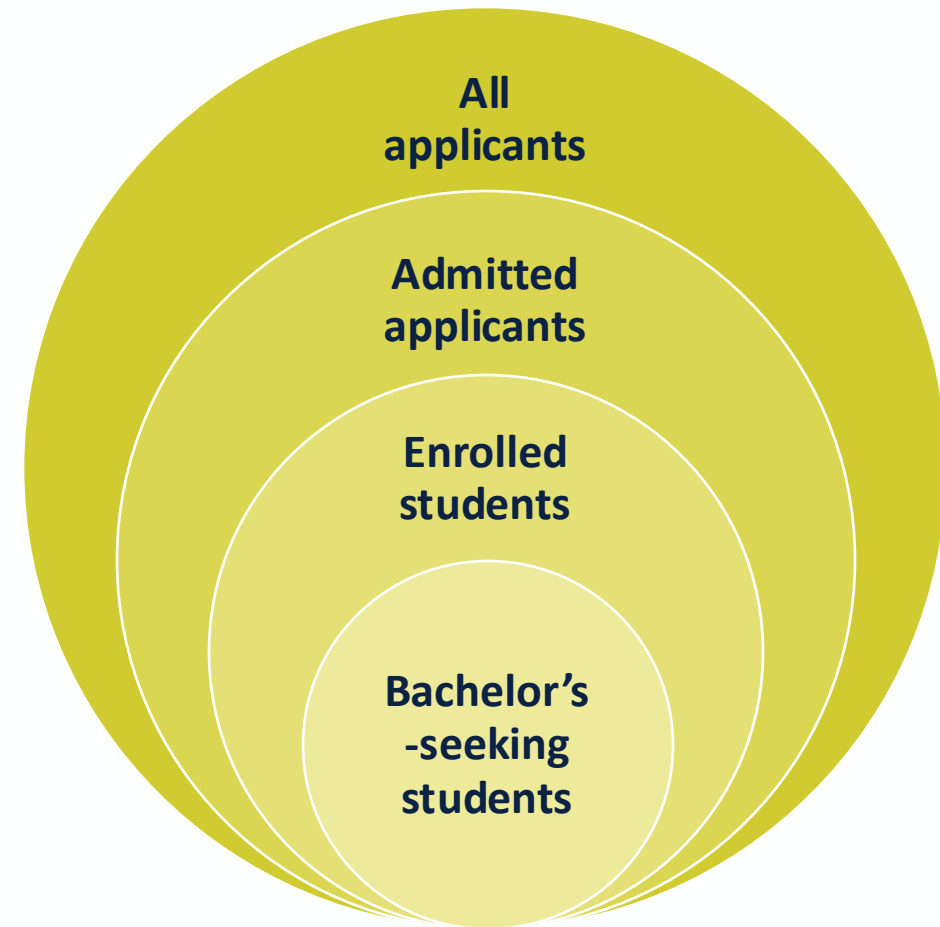
Institutions maintain internal crosswalks; do NOT submit crosswalk.

File Template Includes

Each academic year template contains four (4) tabs:

1. Undergraduate Admissions
 - Applicant, Admitted, and Enrolled
2. Undergraduate Completers
3. Graduate Admissions
 - Applicant, Admitted, and Enrolled
4. Graduate Completers

Undergraduate Admission Cohort



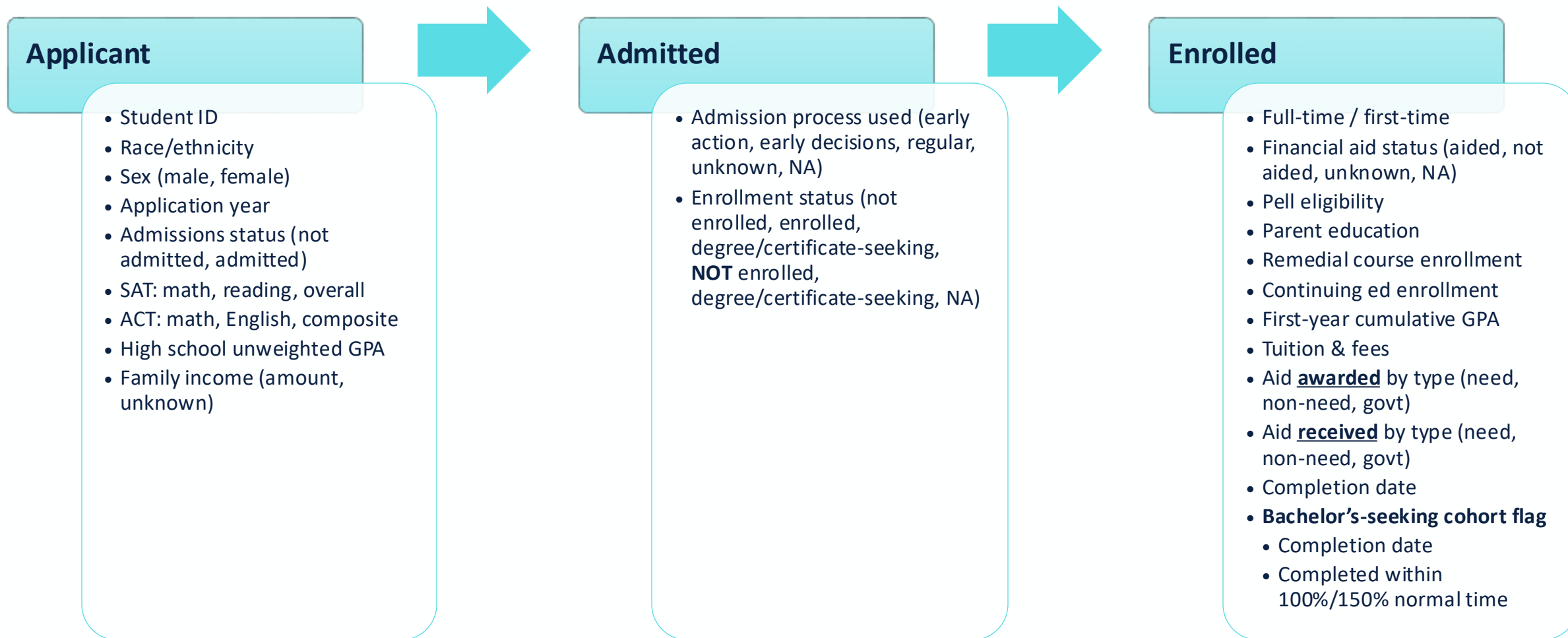
Admissions Cohort (all applicants): Includes all individuals who met institutional requirements to be considered for undergraduate admission and received an admissions decision by October 15. Within this cohort:

Admitted applicants are the subset who received an official offer of admission.

Enrolled students are the subset of admitted applicants who enrolled as first-time, full-time, degree/certificate-seeking students.

Bachelor's-seeking students are the further subset identified as bachelor's or equivalent degree seekers.

Step 2: Undergraduate Student Data Required - Admissions



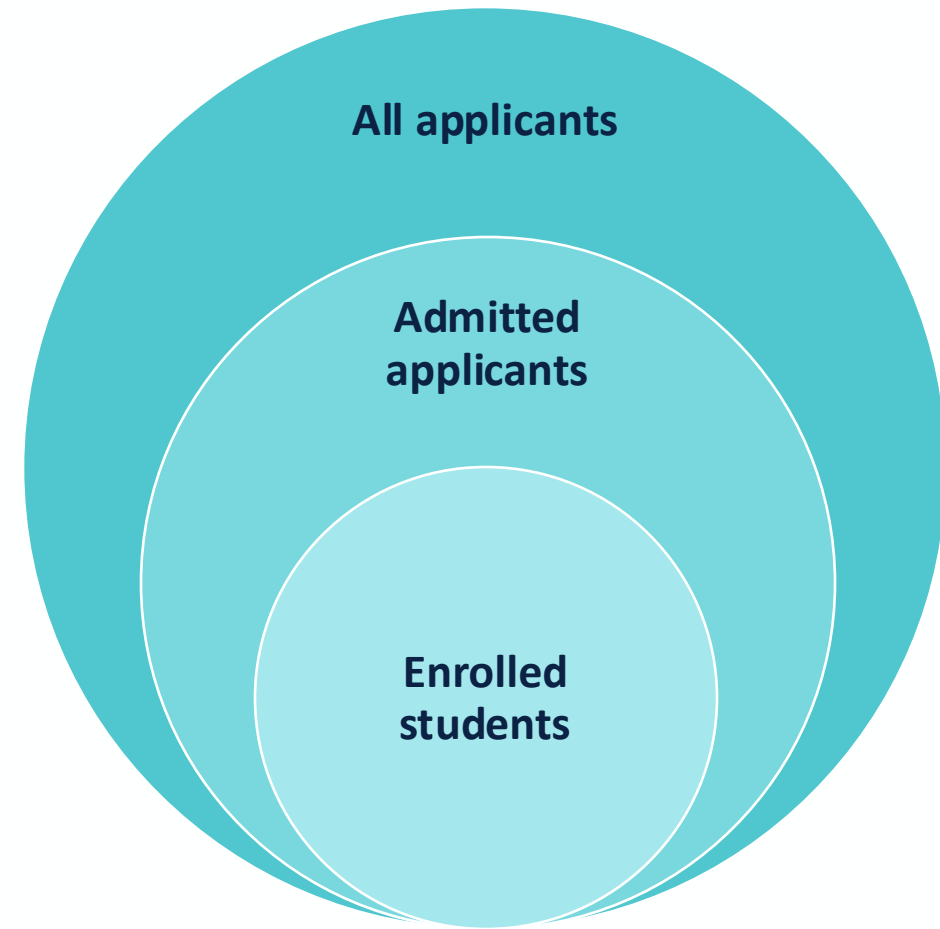
Step 2: Undergraduate Student – Completers

Defined: Individuals who received a recognized undergraduate degree or certificate during the **2019–20 academic year**, as defined for IPEDS reporting, regardless of when they first enrolled. All degrees/certificates must match those reported on the institution's previous-year IC file.

The following data is required :

- Student ID
- Race/ethnicity
- Sex (male, female)
- Unweighted cumulative GPA

Graduate Admission Cohort



Admissions Cohort (all applicants): Includes all individuals who met institutional requirements to be considered for graduate program and received an admissions decision by October 15. Within this cohort:

Admitted applicants are the subset who received an official offer of admission.

Enrolled students are the subset of admitted applicants who enrolled as first-time, full-time, degree/certificate-seeking students.

Step 2: Graduate Data Required - Admissions

Applicants

- Student ID
- Race/ethnicity
- Sex (male, female)
- Application year
- Admissions status (admitted, not admitted)
- GRE / LSAT / MCAT
- Family income (amount, unknown)

Admitted

- Enrollment status (Enrolled; degree/certificate-seeking, Enrolled; not degree /certificate-seeking, NA)

Enrolled

- Full-time status
- Degree/certificate program
- 4-digit CIP code
- Financial aid status (aided, not aided, unknow, NA)
- First-year cumulative GPA
- Tuition & fees
- Aid awarded/received (institutional & government)

Step 2: Graduate Data Required – Completers

Defined: Individuals who received a recognized undergraduate degree or certificate during the **2019–20 academic year**, as defined for IPEDS reporting, regardless of when they first enrolled. All degrees/certificates must match those reported on the institution's previous-year IC file.

Required Data:

- Student ID
- Race/Ethnicity
- Sex (male/female)
- Cumulative GPA



Step 3: Upload Files to Aggregator Tool

What the system checks:

- Correct template format
- Matching academic year
- Required columns present
- Data types valid (integer, float, categorical)
- Values within allowable ranges
- Missing data correctly coded

If validation fails: Fix file → re-upload



Step 4: Wait for Analysis

Behind-the-scenes processing includes:

Calculation of:

- GPA quintile thresholds
- SAT/ACT quintile thresholds
- GRE/LSAT/MCAT quintiles
- Household income quintiles

Generation of aggregated tables by:

- Race/ethnicity
- Sex
- Income range
- GPA/test score quintile
- Admission process
- Degree type / field (graduate)

Institution receives an email when analysis is complete.



Step 5: Review Results

Return to the Aggregator Tool

Review:

- Data Review Report
- Aggregated data file

If errors detected:

Update student-level file

Start again at Step 2. Populate student-level data

Goal: Confirm that files reflect what you would have expected.

How to review the Aggregator Tool files

Recommended Review Approach:

- Spot-check selected aggregations
- Assess reasonableness of outputs
- Calculate 1–2 tables manually for validation
- Document what was reviewed and how
- Use professional judgment to decide sufficiency

(Not intended: recalculating full aggregation suite.)



These are effectively your files now, so make sure they align with what you would expect.



Step 6: Submit Aggregated File in IPEDS Data Collection System (DCS)

Process inside DCS:

Action	Status
Upload data file	Uploaded
DCS performs edits; edit report generated	Edited
Institution responds to edit errors	Clean
IPEDS QC review; QC report generated	Edited
Respond to QC issues	Clean
Lock submission	Complete

Important: Edits must be resolved or explained.

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Aggregations Produced by ACTS

Undergraduate Aggregations (Overview)

Aggregated counts
produced by:

Race/ethnicity

Sex

Income groups

GPA quintile

SAT/ACT quintile

Admission round

Pell eligibility

Parent education

Remedial/continuing ed enrollment

Aid type & amounts

Graduation rates (100% / 150%)

First-year and final cumulative GPA

Graduate Aggregations (Overview)

Aggregated counts
produced by:

Race/ethnicity

Sex

Degree/certificate level

Field of study

Income groups

GRE/LSAT/MCAT quintiles

Aid type & amounts

First-year and final cumulative GPA

Final Summary

ACTS Reporting Lifecycle

- Build student-level files
- Validate through Aggregator Tool
- Automated calculations
- Review and correct
- Submit to IPEDS DCS
- Resolve edits → lock the file

Outcome: A standardized, federally compliant set of ACTS reporting tables.



Framework for Readiness: The Three Buckets

Introducing the Framework

Data You
Don't Have

Data
Definitions
Don't Align

Data You Have
(But It's
Messy)

Bucket 1: Data You Don't Have or Don't have access

Data You
Don't Have

Data
Definitions
Don't Align

Data You Have
(But It's
Messy)

- **Example:** Applicant-level data for non-admitted students; record retention policies vary (2–3 years typical)
- **Action:** The correct action is to document the missing data; not reconstruct it.



Bucket 2: Data Definitions Don't Align

Data You
Don't Have

Data
Definitions
Don't Align

Data You Have
(But It's
Messy)

- **Example:** Family income
- **Action:**
 - Professional judgment is required
 - The correct action is to apply the “reasonable person” test.



Data You
Don't Have

Data
Definitions
Don't Align

Data You Have
(But It's
Messy)

Bucket 3: Data You Have (But It's Messy)

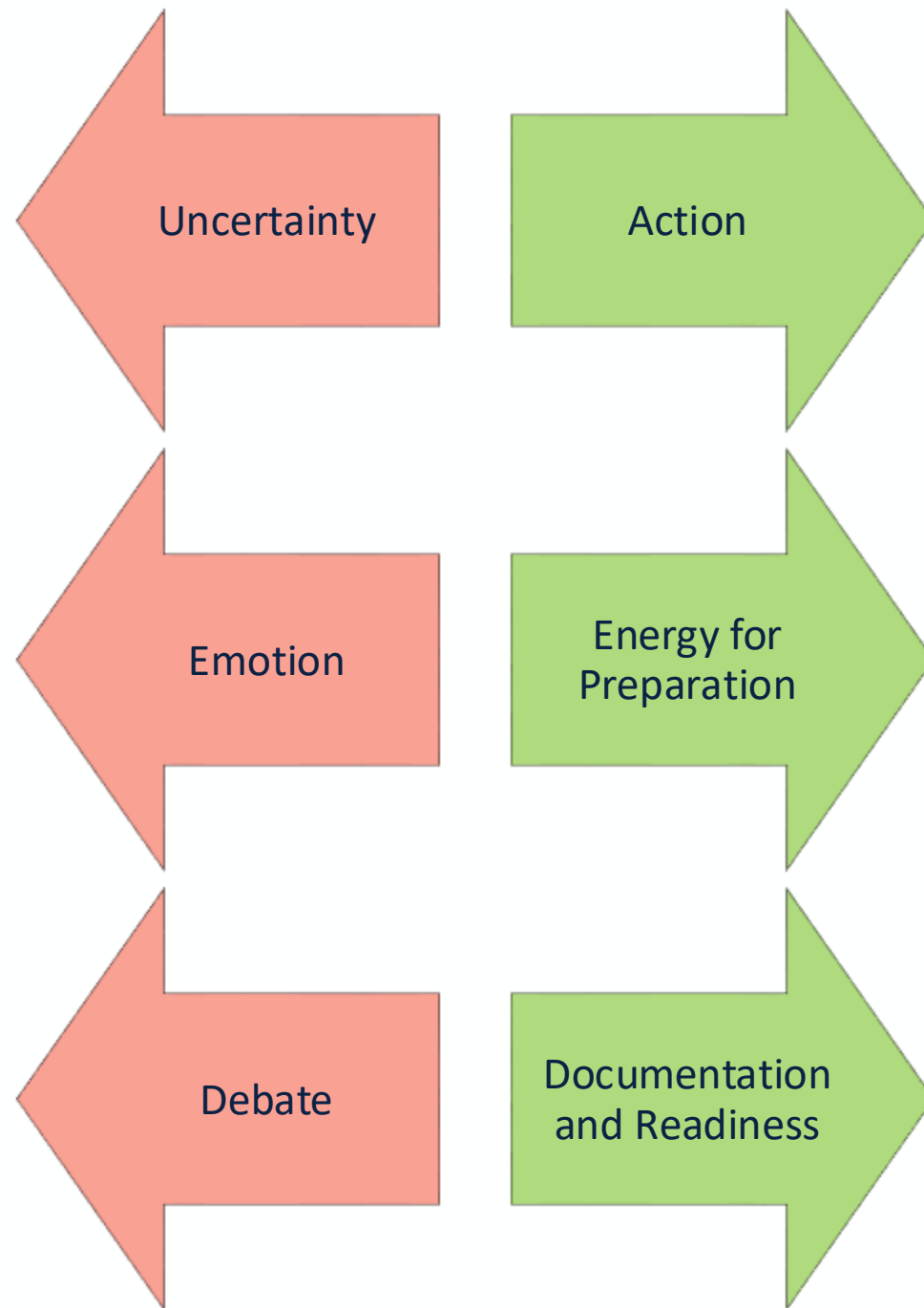
- **Examples:**
 - Integration challenges (CRM, SIS, admissions systems)
 - Incomplete connections or field misalignment
- **Action:** Determine, for your institution, what is “reasonable effort”.





Moving from Anxiety to Action

Reframing the Work Ahead



Turning Uncertainty into a Plan

- Document assumptions
- Define ownership
- Build internal timelines
- Align systems and people



Collaboration and Readiness

- Coordinate across IR/IE, registrar, admissions, IT
- Decision logs and communication templates
- Avoid duplication of effort



AIR and Community Support

AIR resources:

- Peer networks
- Virtual trainings
- Technical assistance
- Consulting support

www.airweb.org/ACTS



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Closing and Reflection