

Voices from the Field:

Institutional Capacity and Support Needs for High-Quality IPEDS Submissions

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What Practitioners Want the NCES to Know

The professionals who produce data for the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) are invested in the success of the system and want to produce high quality, usable data that creates positive impact for their institutions and for higher education at large. They invest significant staff time in IPEDS reporting, build internal systems around its requirements, train new colleagues on its definitions and processes, and rely on its data for benchmarking and institutional decision-making. When they raise concerns — and they do raise significant ones — they tend not to argue for less federal data collection. Rather, they argue for better-designed, better-supported, and more stable data collection, and for a federal partner that matches their investment with adequate resources, runway, and infrastructure.

**Study conducted
April-May 2026**

335 survey respondents

69% primary keyholder
or lead reporter

68% experienced or
veteran-level with IPEDS

7 focus groups

54 participants

That spirit of investment ran throughout this study, with participants sharing what has been working, what has been difficult, and how the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) might improve IPEDS in the future. Across seven focus groups and a national survey, that attitude was consistent. Findings from the two methods triangulated closely, with themes emerging from focus group discussion consistently reflecting in survey response patterns, and survey data providing quantitative confirmation of the prevalence and intensity of specific concerns raised in the focus groups. This convergence strengthens confidence that what follows reflects durable features of the IPEDS reporting landscape, not the views of a particular institutional type or a particularly difficult year.

Notably, it became clear throughout the study that the concerns raised largely predate the recent introduction of the Admissions and Consumer Transparency Supplement (ACTS) and the perceived disruptions that went along with it and will persist after any single collection becomes routine. This was borne out in analysis by comparing data from institutions subject to the ACTS requirements and from those not subject to ACTS. That is an important framing for the results of this study: what follows is not a reaction to a bad year. It is a description of how IPEDS reporting actually works for the institutions that produce it and what those institutions need in order to improve quality in the future.

Finding 1: How Institutions Organize IPEDS Reporting

The dominant model for IPEDS reporting is centered in the institutional research/institutional effectiveness (IR) office, with distributed support as needed. Seventy-one percent of survey respondents identified the IR office as the primary accountability center, a pattern that held consistently across

institutional sectors and sizes. Most frequently, a single person leads most or all of the reporting work (41%), though shared models with central coordination (36%) and small IR-based teams (16%) are also common. The structural experience of this model, however, varies considerably by institutional size. At institutions under 2,500 students, one-person operations are the norm (53% of that group, compared to 11% at the largest institutions), consistent with the reality that a solo keyholder has limited capacity to build in redundancy. At the largest institutions, the IR-centered model is often supported by substantially greater infrastructure investments, including a well-developed analytic layer, automated validation tools, written standard operating procedures, and formal data governance efforts.

Nearly all institutions involve multiple offices in completing IPEDS: IR (97%), Finance (96%), Financial Aid (84%), and Human Resources (77%). Institutions that are part of larger systems typically have some level of coordination with the larger system, which can range from the system taking the lead on developing and entering data to the system taking a lesser role of coordinating practices among institutions and providing a final quality check of entered data by the institution-level staff.

In focus groups, practitioners described significant variation in how smoothly these multi-office workflows function. The model itself where IR is the hub and specialized offices participate as contributors is largely borne of pragmatism. Finance staff have deep expertise in the financial data compared to IR staff. HR staff understand the employment classifications that IR relies on them to produce. The quality controls layered on top of the model, which range from highly systematic to informal and reactive, vary more than the model itself. Some institutions invest in ensuring there is a structured process of quality assurance for IPEDS data, but many leave that up to the IR office to determine alone.

It's a trust factor for me — I let them [finance and financial aid offices] handle it, they know that data better than I do, but I check it and see if it's consistent from year to year.

— *Small private college keyholder*

The handoff points between offices are where quality risk concentrates, particularly when those offices are less engaged with the reporting function. The offices that own key data domains often do not understand or feel accountable to the federal reporting obligation, resulting in IR being responsible for a submission that it does not fully control or understand. Two structural features amplify this: the more specialized the knowledge a survey requires, the more dependent IR is on a partner office; and at small institutions with solo keyholders, the distributed model is not a governance choice but a necessity, with a single person responsible for coordination across every domain simultaneously.

I'm a small office — it's one, it's me — so I complete everything except for Financial Aid, Finance, and then I partially complete Human Resources. — *Small private college keyholder*

Finding 2: Quality Risks Rooted in Institutional Practices

The most persistent and impactful data quality risks in IPEDS reporting at the institutional level are not primarily problems of inattention or poor effort. Rather, they reflect the structural realities that IPEDS definitions are layered on top of data systems built for other purposes, managed by staff who turn over (often leaving little or no documentation), in organizations where multiple offices hold stewardship of the relevant data. These risks originate at the institutional level, but they are not entirely within institutions' power to fix, and understanding them is essential to designing external supports that will actually help.

Staff turnover and the documentation gap it creates were the most consistently described quality risk across the study. Forty-six percent of survey respondents cited turnover and training gaps as a top concern. In focus groups, the mechanism was described in precise terms: much institutional IPEDS knowledge lives in the heads of individuals who do the work rather than in documented procedures. When those individuals leave, the institution is left without a record of how prior figures were derived or why and how specific reporting decisions were made. Similarly, code written years ago often continues to be run and produce numbers that match prior years, but may no longer reflect the correct definition or the desired data. Legacy code often lacks documentation, and the institution may lack current staff who can interpret or modify it, resulting in unrecognized risk.

My predecessor did not save data sets, SOPs or any information explaining how a number was obtained, so matching prior reports is nearly impossible. — *Small private college keyholder*

It was just code that had been run because someone wrote it 10 years ago, and we just ran it, got the same number. Our eyes were opened a little bit — each year, don't just run the numbers, but analyze the code for: is this actually what we want to capture? — *Large public university researcher*

This problem persists at the system scale. If a keyholder leaves at one of its member colleges, a system office may need to absorb the onboarding burden. When systems take on programming and maintain IPEDS reporting queries for all their institutions, the documentation risks also grow commensurately. At a 30-plus college state system, a transition in their enterprise resource planning (ERP) data system exposed years of undocumented judgment calls embedded in old queries — decisions that had been producing inconsistent results across the constituent colleges without anyone realizing it.

We had a lot of curious things happening in the ancient Access queries, trying to figure out what previous people, what determinations they had made — especially where it now appeared that

those were not in line with IPEDS policy, or where judgments had been made for one college but not another. — *State system coordinator*

Definition mismatch is a related but distinct problem. Thirty-three percent of survey respondents indicated that IPEDS definitions are not formally documented or consistently used at their institution. ERP systems are built to run the business of the university, not to satisfy federal reporting definitions, meaning that data must always be remapped to meet IPEDS requirements. When internal data systems are reconfigured without IR's involvement, as happens routinely at institutions without strict data governance practices designed to ensure otherwise, the mapping IR has relied on fails, often silently. Public institutions must also often layer on additional state reporting definitions, which are sometimes quite dissimilar to IPEDS definitions and create additional burden.

[Maybe] the registrar had a meeting the other day, and they decided to switch the way they're using a field in the system, and you've relied on it for years — and now it's changed. — *Small private college keyholder*

We realized, as we were writing the queries, that our institutions are not consistently inputting the data. A code of APPL might mean something different among institutions. So we have to backtrack and go all the way back to creating policy and procedure that talks about how data has to be entered into the system. So the data we're currently reporting, we know is off of inconsistent data [...] but it's the best we can do. — *University system coordinator*

Financial aid emerged as the most frequently named difficult survey component across the study, and the coordination dynamic underlying that difficulty illustrates the broader pattern: IR holds accountability for a submission using data over which it has no authority and may not be able to access directly. The financial aid office stewards the data, is not accountable for the survey, and in some cases is operationally or culturally resistant to the level of data sharing that accurate reporting requires. This is typically due to how each individual institution's financial aid director interprets the multiple and sometimes conflicting laws and regulations that govern financial aid data privacy and security. Forty-nine percent of survey respondents cited limited staff time as a top quality risk, a figure that reflects, in part, the coordination overhead that falls on IR when it holds accountability but lacks authority.

Our knowledge about financial aid lies in the financial aid team, but they don't own the survey. It's a lot of me asking questions and then trying to fit what they give me into the IPEDS grouping. —
Community college IR director

Staff turnover, definition mismatch, and cross-office coordination failures do not operate independently as risks, but rather interact with and amplify each other. An undocumented financial aid coding decision made by a prior staff member, embedded in a query no one has revisited in six years, produces numbers that the new financial aid director can't explain to the IR director who needs to resolve the fatal error on the SFA survey: this is what the compounded version of these risks looks like in practice. And even worse is the version that quietly and consistently produces inaccurate data that passes the IPEDS validation checks year after year, leading to years' worth of errors in the IPEDS database.

The survey data also suggests that while the risks described above are broadly shared, how those risks manifest differs by institutional size. At smaller institutions, particularly those under 2,500 students, the dominant risk profile centers on manual processes and infrastructure gaps: limited automation, lower cross-office review rates, and greater dependence on individual knowledge with no institutional redundancy. At larger institutions, the risks shift so that compressed timelines and coordination complexity become the primary concerns, with both groups above 10,000 students rating timeline pressure substantially higher than smaller peers. Notably, reporting burden is high across all size categories, and does not follow a simple pattern in which smaller institutions are uniformly more burdened. What differs is the character of the burden, not its intensity.

Finding 3: Quality Risks Rooted in IPEDS Design and Structure

Practitioners also identified a set of structural challenges rooted in how IPEDS itself is designed. While the risks presented previously can be partially addressed through training, support, and better institutional practice, those shared in this section require changes to the program itself.

The most frequently cited structural concern, top-ranked in the survey at 58%, is **unclear definitions and changing guidance**. Practitioners described definitions that are ambiguous on their face, applied inconsistently by the Help Desk, or changed without adequate notice to update reporting processes effectively. The result is that individual institutions may be reporting the same underlying phenomena differently, producing data that is internally consistent for each institution but not comparable across institutions. One system coordinator described the practical consequence of operating at scale without definitional stability:

Where do you draw the line when you want to report an executive manager [on the HR Survey]? Those kinds of things make it sometimes challenging to feel like you're comparing apples with apples. Some of those categoricals are up for interpretation, not as solid a definition. — *Large public university*

A second structural problem is described as **the snapshot assumption**. IPEDS is designed around the premise that institutions can produce a single, authoritative, frozen record for each reporting period. However, many institutions lack data warehouses or similar analytic layers and work directly from transactional systems in which data changes continuously. When IPEDS cross-survey validation logic compares figures submitted months or years apart, the numbers may not match because the underlying data has legitimately changed. The validation logic is currently not flexible enough to not show errors for what ultimately may be relatively minor discrepancies in the data based on timing.

We're an institution that does not have a data warehouse, so we don't have those snapshots of the data. When they check the ACTS data against the admissions survey we submitted in January, we don't have the exact same data count. — *Large public university practitioner*

The snapshot problem connects directly to the third structural concern: **IPEDS is neither a set of independent surveys nor a fully integrated system, but something in between** with interdependencies and validations that are not documented or made visible to reporters. Practitioners across every group described encountering these connections for the first time when a validation failed, with no map of what connects to what and no guidance on what level of discrepancy is acceptable versus what requires action. The result is that reporters learn reactively about the architecture of IPEDS through its failure modes rather than proactively through its stated design principles and documentation.

It's really difficult 6 years down the road when you find out, oh, this needs to match that thing you reported 6 years ago, and you had no idea. — *Small private university keyholder*

For community and technical college practitioners, these design tensions are compounded by a more foundational perceived mismatch: **the language, definitions, and structural assumptions do not reflect their institutional realities.** They see IPEDS methodologies as rooted in the model of the four year, full-time, traditional, on-campus experience. Program length definitions, enrollment classifications, and cohort frameworks are all designed around traditional degree pathways, which means this group must expend even more effort to adapt their institutional realities to a framework that does not feel built for them. As a result of these design challenges, they also do not receive the same benchmarking benefits to participating in IPEDS as other institutions, as they do not see utility in comparing data that does not reflect their institutional models. Completing IPEDS surveys becomes a compliance-only act.

Definitions and directions have always felt like 4-year language to me. Feels like “round hole, square peg.”
— *Technical college practitioner*

Finding 4: ACTS as a Diagnostic Case Study

The Admissions and Consumer Transparency Supplement (ACTS), introduced in the 2025-26 collection cycle, was a dominant example in several focus groups and produced some of the strongest commentary in the entire study. Sixty-six percent of survey respondents described ACTS as “much more difficult” than other IPEDS components. Seventy-one percent acknowledged that ACTS affected the quality of their survey responses. Among practitioners whose institutions were required to complete ACTS, agreement that IPEDS produces accurate data was 16.5 percentage points lower compared to practitioners whose institutions were not required to complete ACTS.

However, the study’s interpretation of these findings is specific and important: ACTS largely did not create the data quality problems documented in this report. The structural fragilities described in Findings 2 and 3 pre-existed ACTS. The ACTS requirement created two conditions that made those fragilities simultaneously acute and visible. It required institutions to undertake substantial retrospective cohort reconstruction that exposed years of undocumented decisions and for staff to undertake new cross-functional integration of student-level data without the lead time or stable definitions to make sound choices. The rollout lacked a formal, timely field comment process that would have allowed institutions to prepare high quality data.

At the same time, it would be inaccurate to characterize ACTS purely as a diagnostic lens. For some institutions, this survey introduced genuinely new complexity and distinct burdens with their own data quality risks as well: new requirements for exact matches in validation across surveys with no built-in tolerances for definitional variations, collection of graduate student-level data that had never been collected before, and data integration across offices that had never needed to coordinate with that level

of granularity. These were legitimately new demands that would have challenged even well-prepared institutions, even without the larger concerns raised.

This interpretation is supported by cross-group comparison. Focus groups with little or no ACTS exposure, such as the community and technical college groups, described the same structural problems with IPEDS in the same terms. While ACTS elevated these weaknesses from concerning to untenable for some institutions, the underlying vulnerabilities remain regardless.

We got it done so that we could continue doing Title IV. I have no faith in what is going to come out of that survey. — *Small private college keyholder*

There is also a procedural concern embedded in the ACTS experience that practitioners across groups articulated consistently: the Technical Review Panel (TRP) process exists precisely to prevent the conditions that produced these outcomes. Its absence was not perceived as an oversight and practitioners experienced this as a rupture in a relationship that had previously felt collaborative.

I want to go back to the way we did things when we had a new survey — where we had time to review, to comment, to say, “wait a second, this doesn’t work.” There’s a reason why it was done that way, and it worked. — *30+ year IPEDS veteran*

That practitioner’s observation connects to a broader sentiment that surfaced across groups: the relationship among the Department of Education, the IPEDS Help Desk, and the institutions that produce the data has shifted in ways that have consequences that impact the quality of the results. Focus group conversations suggested that many IPEDS system users mentally position the Help Desk as a direct part of the Department of Education, rather than as a supporting layer contracted through a third party (RTI). In speaking of how the relationship has changed from the system users’ perspective, one practitioner summed it by sharing, “It used to feel like they were our partners, that they were here to help us.” Contextually, this sentiment is best understood as directed toward the Department of Education with follow-on impacts for how the Help Desk operates. The desire for a more collaborative dynamic is not nostalgia; it is a description of the conditions under which higher quality data was possible.

Finding 5: Supporting High-Quality IPEDS Reporting at the Institutional Level

Many institutions utilize effective practices for managing IPEDS quality within their constraints. The most widely used was prior-year trend comparisons (81%). However, it was unclear whether survey respondents differentiated between *institution-initiated* internal checks and *system-generated* validations built into the IPEDS platform itself. Focus group data suggested that many institutions rely heavily on the IPEDS validation checks as a primary mechanism of quality control. However, other reported mechanisms, such as manual data validation checks (79%) and written procedures and reporting calendars (70%), suggest that institutions have built independent methods as well.

Focus groups surfaced a set of more innovative practices that deserve attention as potential models. What is notable about the most effective ones is that they are adaptive responses to structural problems that could become best practices in the field:

- **AI-narrated standard operating procedures:** One practitioner described narrating their reporting process in real time to an AI tool while they performed the work. The tool then documented the work and converted it to a standard operating procedure (SOP). A new staff member then followed the SOP to verify the process worked to get the same results. “It’s a great way to edit and train at the same time.” The practice addresses documentation and training challenges simultaneously using a low cost, low burden method.
- **Peer consistency groups:** One technical college system has operated an IPEDS consistency group for 20 years, regularly using IPEDS comparison tools to identify when one college is reporting differently from its peers. Another state system runs an analogous quality-control query system across all of its 30+ colleges before submission.
- **Saved population snapshots:** Without a data warehouse, some institutions manually download and preserve data lists at a defined point in time, then reuse it for all surveys referencing the same cohort, which approximates a data freeze with existing tools. This approach necessitates appropriate data security in file storage.
- **Institutional ticketing systems:** Some IR offices attach all relevant artifacts, such as SQL scripts, decision notes, and process documentation, directly to survey-related tickets in their internal tracking systems, ensuring documentation survives staff transitions automatically.
- **Parallel verification reports:** Two offices independently run the same data using different methods and compare results prior to survey submission, which can be a simple, low-technology verification approach for components that lend themselves to this approach.

These practices describe smaller steps that individual institutions can take to improve their IPEDS practices and processes. Abstracting these up a level and looking at the institutions that described the most confident and systematic approaches to IPEDS quality, several institutional conditions emerged that may improve overall success for IPEDS:

- **Leadership engagement:** Senior institutional leaders understand and actively support the data function through both their words and actions.
- **A culture of shared responsibility:** IPEDS is understood and treated as an institution-wide accountability that is led by IR and cross-functional collaboration is fundamentally built into the workflow.
- **Formal data governance:** Data roles, accountabilities, policies, and definitions are established through a formal, shared process among the relevant institutional stakeholders.
- **Access to shared infrastructure:** The IPEDS team has access to all necessary data through a coordinated, centralized data system, with a stable analytic layer that includes the capacity to create point in time snapshots.
- **Deliberate planning for change:** The institution takes steps to minimize the disruptions caused by turnover in roles and other changes by cross-training staff, conducting succession planning, and documenting data practices proactively.

None of these factors map cleanly to sector or size. A small, well-led institution with strong documentation practices and cross-functional training can outperform a large university with strong infrastructure, fragmented accountability, and indifferent leadership. The factors that appear to associate with higher reporting confidence are less about institutional sector and more about deliberate investments in people, processes, and relationships.

Finding 6: Gaps in the External Support Infrastructure

Practitioners were consistent and specific about where the external support infrastructure falls short. The most frequently requested improvement, cited by 71% of survey respondents, is clearer definitions and illustrative examples. Sixty percent want earlier releases of specifications and materials. Forty-five percent want longer reporting timelines. These responses reflect operational realities rather than impatience. Many institutions begin work for the next reporting cycle before the prior cycle has closed, and late-arriving or unstable specifications create planning failures that cascade through the process.

The IPEDS Help Desk received consistent attention across focus groups, with a mix of genuine appreciation and pointed concern. It is valued as a resource, particularly for novel definitional questions where there is no written answer, and staff were characterized as truly trying to provide help when requested. Practitioners also described structural problems: inconsistent answers across representatives on the same question, insufficient capacity to answer queries near submission deadlines, and refusal to provide written follow-up. One practitioner described the experience of getting a hard lock with a fatal error outside of Help Desk operating hours with no available recourse. This suggests that, much like the experiences of the institutions themselves, ACTS also exposed the pre-existing fragilities in the IPEDS support infrastructure. It highlighted the importance of clear, consistent definitional guidance, support

capacity that can scale to meet demand at peak submission periods, high quality training for Help Desk staff, and recourse for institutions when systems fail outside of standard operating hours.

Sometimes I would call the Help Desk and get one answer, change it, call back — different answer. Consistency and clarity would be so helpful. — *Small private college keyholder*

The loss of training opportunities that built communities of practice and the corresponding negative impact on data quality was another clear signal that emerged from study participants. The loss of the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) IPEDS training contract removed a primary mechanism through which new practitioners developed foundational expertise and the more experienced refreshed and upgraded their skills. Beyond the individual loss, it also eliminated the sense of community shared by data professionals around the country to build shared understanding of IPEDS definitions and reporting expectations. While some participants acknowledged that AIR has continued limited virtual trainings without funding, they found significant value in the former availability of in-person trainings that were frequently scheduled to leverage attendance at regional and national events as effective learning and connection opportunities.

AIR used to do a fantastic job providing virtual and in-person training at a regular interval for new keyholders, for specific surveys [...] It was about best practices. Return that at no cost [...] It developed a community of practice. — *20-year veteran keyholder*

System coordinators echoed a similar sense of loss around the former state coordinators' annual conference for IPEDS. Practitioners who had attended for decades praised the synchronization mechanism it created for that group: everyone heard the same answers to the same questions at the same time, and system offices then propagated that consistent interpretation to their member campuses. Both losses have left gaps unmet by current resources.

Everybody in the country, almost, is there and kind of hearing the same answer and on the same page. And then you get those materials, and we always came back and condensed it and put summary stuff, and we would share that and present it to the campuses. It felt like that enabled us to really be on the same page with planning ahead. — *University system coordinator*

Two very specific technical gaps were identified from the focus groups and are worth naming for their specificity and potential ease of remediation:

- No change logs are posted annually for the data import specifications. Institutions attempting to use the automated upload process must manually compare current and prior-year specification files to find what changed, leading some to abandon automation entirely, losing meaningful efficiency in the name of accuracy. At worst, it is possible that some unrecognized import spec changes could lead to incorrect information being uploaded if incorrect data generated based on a prior specification is still able to pass validation logic.
- The Finance Survey instructions have not been updated to reflect ongoing changes to Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB) and Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB) standards. One reporter described needing to call the Help Desk repetitively and successively for each of the 16 colleges in their system to address errors on the same negative pension entry because the Finance Survey validation logic has never been updated to accommodate a GASB-driven accounting standard change – for multiple years in a row.

I love the documented part at the start of surveys where it tells you all the changes from the prior year, as it should be. I've never seen the same thing on the import spec. It just gets changed seemingly at random. I just run it every year when the surveys open up to see what breaks. —
Community college practitioner

Context Matters: Distinct Perspectives Within the Study

The six findings above reflect themes that emerged consistently across institutional types and practitioner roles. But several important perspectives surfaced throughout the study that are rooted in specific contexts: the concerns of the community college and technical college sectors, the needs of multi-campus system offices, and the experiences of IPEDS data consumers. They add texture and dimension to the broader findings without fitting neatly beneath any one of them. Their emergence may also suggest that other context-specific concerns for other groups exist that did not arise in the course of this study.

The Under-Measured Student Problem

For community and technical college practitioners, the data quality conversation carries an additional layer that their more traditional four-year counterparts do not face in the same way: IPEDS is not just difficult to report accurately; it is structurally incomplete as a picture of what these institutions do. The first-time, full-time, degree-seeking cohort that serves as the default IPEDS population for so many

surveys represents a fraction of enrollment at many two-year institutions or in programs below the associate's level. Continuing education students, dual enrollment participants, workforce certificate completers, and part-time returning adults are the fastest-growing populations at community colleges, and they are largely invisible to federal data consumers who rely on IPEDS metrics.

One practitioner noted that dual enrollment students were approaching 50% of total enrollment within their large statewide system. In real numbers, this meant that roughly 100,000 students were captured in only a handful of fields where they were combined with other non-degree students. Another put it plainly: "IPEDS only focuses on first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students. That's only around less than 10% of our student population." The data quality concern here is not only about accuracy within the existing framework but about whether the framework itself adequately represents the institutions required to report within it.

System Coordinators: A Distinct Set of Operational Challenges

System and multi-campus coordinators face a version of the IPEDS reporting challenge that differs structurally from the single-institution experience. Their work involves not just producing accurate data but ensuring consistency across member institutions that may interpret definitions differently, use different ERP configurations or even entirely different systems, and have varying levels of IR capacity. The findings on definitional inconsistency and staff turnover are not abstract for system coordinators; their challenges are multiplied by the number of campuses in their systems.

System coordinators identified a specific and practical tooling gap that no other group raised: the IPEDS platform was not designed with system-level work in mind. There are no batch upload or download tools, no system-level outputs, no mechanisms for managing submissions effectively across institutions in aggregate, and the instructions are largely written for single institutions. One coordinator described the operational reality directly: "We have 20-plus colleges, and we have to go in and download every survey for every single college." For a system office managing dozens of institutions across multiple survey components simultaneously, this is a meaningful and recurring source of inefficiency that compounds the coordination burden documented in Finding 2. Until the platform accommodates the variety of ways in which system offices actually work, that burden will remain a structural feature of multi-institution IPEDS reporting.

The Data Consumer Perspective

Data quality in IPEDS is typically framed as a production problem: institutions need to submit accurate data. But several focus group participants also discussed how they put the results to work. Their uses of IPEDS data for peer benchmarking and institutional research purposes raised a parallel concern on the consumer side: they do not always trust the data they are using, even when it has passed every edit check and been accepted by NCES.

The concern is not about obvious errors but about fundamental comparability in how institutions report data. There is significant belief that institutions do not report the same underlying phenomena in consistent ways. Definitional ambiguity and inconsistent Help Desk guidance, as previously discussed in Finding 3, mean that two institutions can produce internally consistent, edit-check-passing submissions that are nonetheless not measuring the same things in the same ways. One data consumer described the experience: “90% of the time, I trust it. But then there are times where I try to pull the data to use it, and it's obviously not comparable.” For example, one participant described difficulties in trying to benchmark with data from the Finance Survey, when it does not appear institutions capture expenses consistently in the same categories or when some systems allocate expenses to the institution-level while others do not. This perspective is a useful reminder that data quality is not fully resolved at the point of submission. Accuracy and comparability are related but distinct properties, and the current system focuses more on the former than the latter.

Size and Sector

The core findings of this study hold consistently across institutional types and sizes, with the variations noted above. The data also reveals meaningful differences in how those findings manifest. These differences are worth understanding for institutions assessing their situations and for NCES in considering how to design supports that reach institutions equitably.

When considering institutional size, it is clear that the burden of IPEDS is high across all size categories. The survey data make clear that the smallest institutions are struggling the most. Institutions under 2,500 students show lower role clarity, less cross-office review, heavier reliance on manual processes, and the lowest confidence in IPEDS data accuracy of any size category. These are not simply scaled-down versions of larger-institution problems; they reflect the structural reality of single-person operations with limited leverage to build in necessary redundancy or create governance infrastructure. At the other end of the spectrum, institutions above 25,000 students have made qualitatively different infrastructure investments: automated validation rates of 68% compared to 25–41% at smaller institutions, and substantially better documented definitions and procedures. Their burden is real but

driven by timeline pressure and coordination complexity rather than manual processes and infrastructure gaps.

Looking at institutional sector, differences are more modest. Public four-year institutions report higher rates of automated validation and more formally documented procedures, whereas private nonprofits are more reliant on manual processes and more concerned about staffing and system limitations. Public two-year institutions and private nonprofits appear somewhat more likely to disagree that they have sufficient capacity to produce high quality IPEDS submissions compared to public four-year institutions. These findings suggest that there may be some sector-based differences in how resources and infrastructure are deployed across institution types.

Fundamentally, though, institutional size and sector appear to function largely as proxies for the underlying factors that drive variation in reporting quality rather than being the driving forces themselves. Better predictors are likely institutional wealth and resource allocation, leadership prioritization of the data function, the presence or absence of data governance infrastructure, and access to high quality, shared technical infrastructure. Two institutions of identical size and sector can have meaningfully different IPEDS reporting experiences based on these factors. That framing may be more useful than a sector-by-sector breakdown, because it points more directly toward what is actionable — both for institutions investing in their own reporting capacity and for NCES considering how external supports can be most equitably designed.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn from the study's findings and ordered by signal strength — the breadth and intensity with which they were raised across groups and the survey. Signal strength reflects how consistently a need was articulated across institutional sectors and practitioner experience levels, not the importance of the underlying issue. Several recommendations that appear lower in the table are targeted at specific, concrete, and more easily implemented fixes that would have immediate data quality impacts. The distinction between high-leverage structural changes and low-cost operational improvements is worth maintaining as any future actions are considered.

Recommendation	Rationale
Restore the full TRP review-and-comment process before new collections launch to ensure higher data quality	The evidence is unambiguous: the absence of this process for ACTS led to shifting definitions throughout the collection process, retrospective data demands that institutions felt they could not cleanly fulfill, and staff absorbing significant new work burdens without a clear path to producing a reliable submission.
Acknowledge the “snapshot assumption” and design surveys with validation logic that accepts the inability of institutions to reproduce exact matches at different points in time	NCES should explicitly acknowledge that many institutions work from transactional, mutable systems rather than frozen data warehouses, and revisit collection assumptions, validation logic, and error tolerance accordingly.
Publish maps of cross-survey dependencies and definitions of validation calculations to help practitioners understand what they are looking for	Institutions need documented flowcharts of survey connections and access to the calculations used in longitudinal and inter-survey validations. This would allow them to test data proactively and understand potential error sources before submission.
Address data quality concerns raised during any data collection before using the data for analytical or policy purposes	NCES should publicly communicate about how it plans to use and present data, including how it will acknowledge limitations. This recommendation was specifically made in context of the ACTS data collection, for which practitioners expressed widespread uncertainty about the reliability of submitted data, but is applicable to any data collection.
Invest in Help Desk capacity and service quality to ensure institutions receive timely, consistent, and substantive support throughout the reporting cycle	This recommendation meets specific identified needs such as: consistent answers across staff, extended hours around deadlines, written follow-up for substantive questions, and ensuring staffing levels are adequate during peak demand periods.

Recommendation	Rationale
Restore a community of practice for IPEDS practitioners to improve training and shared understanding	The loss of the state coordinators’ annual conference eliminated a primary national synchronization mechanism. Training and community infrastructure are direct defenses against the staff turnover risk that every group named.
Publish change logs for data import specifications to facilitate IPEDS automation and ease reporting burden for institutions	Year-over-year changes to import specs are currently undocumented, forcing institutions to manually compare files to find what broke. Several institutions reported abandoning automation as a result. A change log is a simple, low-cost fix.
Update Finance Survey instructions and survey design to reflect current GASB and FASB accounting standards	GASB and FASB standards have evolved; Finance Survey instructions and survey design have not kept pace, leaving institutions uncertain how to report the changes — and creating recurring help desk calls that updates would eliminate.
Develop sector-specific guidance and language that speaks to two-year institutions and shorter-term programs	Current instructions are written in four-year language and do not accommodate open-entry/exit programs, apprenticeships, and workforce programs that are central to the community and technical college mission.
Allow “sex unknown” as a reportable value to eliminate inaccurate data imputation methods	Forced imputation of missing sex records produces systematically inaccurate data. A reportable “unknown” category would improve accuracy for institutions that do not require students to identify their sex.

About This Study

The Association for Institutional Research conducted this rapid background study to bring current practitioner voices into the June 2026 Technical Review Panel discussion on IPEDS data quality through two complementary components. Seven virtual focus groups — drawing 54 participants across small institutions, system offices, community and technical colleges, large public universities, private nonprofits, and experienced practitioners — provided operational and contextual depth to further illuminate the survey data. A national practitioner survey concurrently collected 335 responses during April–May 2026, providing data on how institutions organize IPEDS reporting, where quality risks concentrate, and what external support would most help. Both sources were considered in tandem when determining the findings of this study.

Focus group participants represented a deliberately broad range of institutional contexts: single-person IR offices and 64-campus university systems; institutions with mature data warehouse infrastructure and those working from point-in-time transactional systems; practitioners with 2 years of IPEDS experience and those with 40. This range is analytically significant: findings that recur across very different contexts are structurally durable.

The survey sample broadly reflects the degree-granting IPEDS institutional universe, though with some variation. Private nonprofit four-year institutions are somewhat overrepresented (53% of survey respondents versus approximately 35% of the degree-granting Title IV institutions reporting to IPEDS), while public two-year institutions and private for-profit institutions are underrepresented. The focus group design partially compensates for the two-year gap — dedicated sessions with community college and technical college practitioners produced findings consistent with and complementary to the survey results — but findings specific to the two-year sector should be interpreted with that limitation in mind.

The study was designed to explore the following questions through the survey and focus groups:

- How do institutions organize responsibility and accountability for IPEDS reporting quality?
- What internal practices most effectively support accurate, reliable, and timely submissions?
- What staffing, systems, governance, or timing factors create the greatest quality risks?
- How do institutional characteristics influence reporting capacity and quality controls?
- What external supports would most improve institutional data quality?

A focus group script was developed to explore the basic questions relevant to this project. It outlined the purpose of the project, the ground rules and expectations for participation, and included several prompts that were shared across all groups, with additional probes for particular topics if they arose. Focus group data was initially analyzed using an open coding approach and an initial coding framework was developed and applied to early transcripts. Given the rapid-response nature of this study, analysis

of all qualitative data shifted to a thematic extraction approach that prioritized identifying patterns and key insights over generating systematic code frequencies.

The survey was developed based on the research questions and administered using the QuestionPro platform. It was designed to identify broad patterns, prioritize themes, and complement focus group discussion. As such, it focused primarily on quantitative data, but also contained some open-ended text responses that were analyzed in tandem with and using the same approaches as the focus group data above. Given the study design and non-probability sample, findings are presented descriptively. Differences should be interpreted as indicative rather than inferential.

Because of its rapid, applied nature, this study was intended to provide directional, practitioner-informed insights to the Technical Review Panel rather than statistically representative estimates or true population distributions.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument

AIR is conducting a short national survey to better understand how institutions organize IPEDS reporting, maintain data quality, and where additional support may be helpful. Findings will inform the June Technical Review Panel on IPEDS Data Quality.

Please answer based on your overall experience with IPEDS reporting; do not respond based solely on your experience with ACTS reporting. If recent ACTS reporting influenced your views, there will be an opportunity to note that later.

Responses will be reported in aggregate unless explicit permission is granted.

About You and Your Institution

What best describes your current role in IPEDS reporting?

- Primary IPEDS Keyholder/Lead Reporter
- Shared responsibility for IPEDS submissions
- Contributor of data or review support
- Senior leader overseeing reporting/data functions
- Other (please specify)

How many years have you been involved with IPEDS reporting, in total (at this institution and prior institutions)?

- Less than 1 year
- 1–3 years
- 4–7 years
- 8–15 years
- More than 15 years

What type of institution do you currently work for?

- Public 2-year
- Public 4-year
- Private nonprofit 4-year
- Private for-profit

- System office/multi-campus office
- Other (please specify)

Approximately how many students are enrolled at your institution/system?

- Under 2,500
- 2,500–9,999
- 10,000–24,999
- 25,000 or more
- Not sure

How IPEDS Reporting Is Managed

How is IPEDS reporting primarily organized at your institution?

- Primarily one person leads most reporting
- Small team within one office
- Shared across multiple offices with central coordination
- Decentralized across offices with limited central coordination
- System office coordinates multiple campuses
- Other (please specify)

During a typical IPEDS reporting year, which offices are involved? (Select all that apply)

- IR/IE office
- Finance
- Human Resources
- Financial Aid
- Registrar
- IT
- General Counsel
- Provost
- Other (please specify)

At your institution, who is responsible for ensuring IPEDS data is accurate?

- IR/IE
- IT
- Multiple offices share accountability (e.g., IR/IE, Financial Aid, HR)
- Senior leadership (e.g., Provost/CFO)
- System office
- Not clearly defined
- Other (please specify)

How clear are internal roles and responsibilities for IPEDS reporting at your institution?

- Very unclear
- Unclear
- Somewhat clear
- Mostly clear
- Very clear

Which practices are regularly used to help ensure data quality for IPEDS submissions? (Select all that apply)

- Written procedures or calendars
- Cross-office review of submissions
- Prior-year trend comparisons
- Reconciliation to internal reports
- Senior leadership review/signoff
- Manual data validation checks
- Automated data validation checks
- Post-submission review/lessons learned
- None of the above
- Other (please specify)

Which of the following practices has the *greatest impact* on improving data quality at your institution?

- Written procedures or calendars
- Cross-office review of submissions
- Prior-year trend comparisons
- Reconciliation to internal reports
- Senior leadership review/signoff
- Manual data validation checks
- Automated data validation checks
- Post-submission review/lessons learned
- None of the above
- Other (please specify)

Capacity and Risks

Key: Strongly disagree, Moderately disagree, Neutral, Moderately agree, Strongly agree

Please indicate your level of agreement.

My institution has sufficient capacity (staff, resources) to produce high-quality IPEDS submissions.

IPEDS reporting places a significant burden on staff time and coordination.

IPEDS-related data definitions are formally documented and consistently used at my institution.

Which factors create the greatest risk to data quality at your institution? (Select up to three)

- Limited staffing time
- Staff turnover/training gaps

- Unclear definitions or changing guidance
- Difficulty obtaining data
- Data system limitations
- Compressed timelines/deadlines
- Manual processes/spreadsheets
- Limited leadership attention
- Coordination across campuses
- Other (please specify)

In the last two years, has your institution experienced any of the following? (Select all that apply)

- Increased reporting complexity
- More internal review requests
- Staffing reductions or vacancies
- New systems/transitions
- Greater difficulty meeting deadlines
- No major changes
- Other (please specify)

To what extent did ACTS reporting requirements affect your responses to this survey?

- Not at all
- A little
- Somewhat
- Significantly
- ACTS does not apply to my institution
- Unsure/Didn't work on ACTS reporting

Compared with standard IPEDS collections, ACTS reporting was:

- Much easier
- Somewhat easier
- About the same

- Somewhat more difficult
- Much more difficult
- ACTS does not apply to my institution
- Unsure/Didn't work on ACTS reporting

External Support and Improvement

Which external supports would most improve IPEDS data quality at your institution? (Select up to three)

- Earlier release of specifications/materials
- Clearer definitions/examples
- More training/webinars
- Better help desk responsiveness
- Improved validation tools
- Longer reporting timelines
- More peer examples/promising practices
- Better documentation resources
- Other (please specify)

Overall, how confident are you that current IPEDS processes support accurate and comparable data nationally?

- Not at all confident
- Not very confident
- Mixed / unsure
- Somewhat confident
- Very confident

Final Input

If NCES/IPEDS could make one practical change next year to improve institutional reporting quality, what would you recommend?

Appendix B: Survey Response Tables

This appendix presents the full results of the survey referenced in this study. Results are organized in three sections: full sample results, disaggregation by institutional sector, and disaggregation by enrollment size. Given the non-probability sampling design, all findings are presented descriptively and should be interpreted as directional rather than statistically representative of the full IPEDS reporting population. Percentages for multiple-response questions reflect the share of respondents who selected each option and will not sum to 100%.

Full Sample Results

The following tables present results for all survey respondents. For questions where fewer than 335 respondents answered, the applicable n is noted in the table.

About the Respondents

Table B1. What best describes your current role in IPEDS reporting?

Role	# Respondents (%)
Primary IPEDS Keyholder/Lead Reporter	230 (69%)
Shared responsibility for IPEDS submissions	45 (13%)
Senior leader overseeing reporting/data functions	35 (10%)
Contributor of data or review support	22 (7%)
Other	3 (1%)
Total (n)	335

Table B2. How many years have you been involved with IPEDS reporting, in total (at this institution and prior institutions)?

Years of experience	# Respondents (%)
More than 15 years	100 (30%)
8–15 years	92 (27%)
4–7 years	68 (20%)
1–3 years	62 (19%)
Less than 1 year	13 (4%)
Total (n)	335

Table B3. What type of institution do you currently work for?

Institutional type	# Respondents (%)
Private nonprofit 4-year	177 (53%)
Public 4-year	86 (26%)
Public 2-year	46 (14%)
System office/multi-campus office	9 (3%)

Institutional type	# Respondents (%)
Private for-profit	9 (3%)
Other	8 (2%)
Total (n)	335

Note: 'System office' respondents are included here as reported. For disaggregation purposes, system office respondents are excluded from sector comparisons due to small n.

Table B4. Approximately how many students are enrolled at your institution/system?

Enrollment	# Respondents (%)
Under 2,500	102 (30%)
2,500–9,999	127 (38%)
10,000–24,999	66 (20%)
25,000 or more	37 (11%)
Not sure	3 (1%)
Total (n)	335

How IPEDS Reporting Is Managed

Table B5. How is IPEDS reporting primarily organized at your institution?

Reporting model	# Respondents (%)
Primarily one person leads most reporting	136 (41%)
Shared across multiple offices with central coordination	120 (36%)
Small team within one office	52 (16%)
System office coordinates multiple campuses	13 (4%)
Decentralized across offices with limited coordination	10 (3%)
Other	2 (1%)
Total (n)	333

Table B6. During a typical IPEDS reporting year, which offices are involved?

Office	# Respondents (%)
IR/IE office	325 (97%)
Finance	320 (96%)
Financial Aid	280 (84%)

Office	# Respondents (%)
Human Resources	258 (77%)
Registrar	98 (29%)
Other	64 (19%)
IT	57 (17%)
Enrollment Management/Admissions	44 (13%)
Provost	27 (8%)
General Counsel	4 (1%)
Respondents (n)	334

Note: Multiple response; percentages reflect share of 334 respondents who selected each office.

Table B7. At your institution, who is primarily responsible for ensuring IPEDS data is accurate?

Accountability	# Respondents (%)
IR/IE	236 (71%)
Multiple offices share accountability	85 (26%)
IT	4 (1%)

Accountability	# Respondents (%)
Not clearly defined	3 (1%)
Senior leadership	2 (1%)
System office	2 (1%)
Other	1 (0%)
Total (n)	333

Table B8. How clear are internal roles and responsibilities for IPEDS reporting at your institution?

Response	# Respondents (%)
Very clear	157 (47%)
Mostly clear	130 (39%)
Somewhat clear	33 (10%)
Unclear	8 (2%)
Very unclear	5 (2%)
Total (n)	333

Table B9. Which practices are regularly used to help ensure data quality for IPEDS submissions?

Practice	# Respondents (%)
Prior-year trend comparisons	269 (81%)
Manual data validation checks	264 (79%)
Written procedures or calendars	232 (70%)
Reconciliation to internal reports	227 (68%)
Cross-office review of submissions	159 (48%)
Automated data validation checks	128 (38%)
Post-submission review/lessons learned	97 (29%)
Senior leadership review/signoff	92 (28%)
Other	13 (4%)
None of the above	2 (1%)
Respondents (n)	333

Note: Multiple response; percentages reflect share of 333 respondents who selected each practice.

Table B10. Which of the following practices has the greatest impact on improving data quality at your institution?

Practice	# Respondents (%)
Manual data validation checks	68 (21%)
Reconciliation to internal reports	66 (20%)
Written procedures or calendars	60 (18%)
Prior-year trend comparisons	47 (14%)
Cross-office review of submissions	43 (13%)
Automated data validation checks	22 (7%)
Post-submission review/lessons learned	8 (2%)
None of the above	6 (2%)
Other	5 (2%)
Senior leadership review/signoff	5 (2%)
Total (n)	330

Institutional Capacity and Quality Risks

Table B11. Agreement with capacity and quality statements (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

Statement	% Agree	% Neutral	% Disagree
IPEDS reporting places a significant burden on staff time and coordination.	81%	13%	5%
IPEDS-related data definitions are formally documented and consistently used at my institution.	72%	15%	13%
My institution has sufficient capacity (staff, resources) to produce high-quality IPEDS submissions.	70%	14%	16%

Note: Agree = Moderately or Strongly Agree; Disagree = Moderately or Strongly Disagree. n = 320–333 depending on item. Lines may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Table B12. Which factors create the greatest risk to data quality at your institution? (select up to three)

Risk factor	# Respondents (%)
Unclear definitions or changing guidance	187 (58%)
Limited staffing time	156 (49%)
Staff turnover/training gaps	148 (46%)
Compressed timelines/deadlines	132 (41%)
Data system limitations	121 (38%)

Risk factor	# Respondents (%)
Manual processes/spreadsheets	114 (36%)
Difficulty obtaining data	65 (20%)
Coordination across campuses	31 (10%)
Limited leadership attention	29 (9%)
Other	21 (7%)
Respondents (n)	321

Note: Multiple response; percentages reflect share of 321 respondents who selected each factor.

Table B13. In the last two years, has your institution experienced any of the following?

Experience	# Respondents (%)
Increased reporting complexity	281 (87%)
Staffing reductions or vacancies	166 (52%)
New systems/transitions	161 (50%)
More internal review requests	125 (39%)
Greater difficulty meeting deadlines	119 (37%)
No major changes	14 (4%)

Experience	# Respondents (%)
Other	11 (3%)
Respondents (n)	322

Note: Multiple response; percentages reflect share of 322 respondents who selected each item.

Table B14. To what extent did ACTS reporting requirements affect your responses to this survey?

Response	# Respondents (%)
Significantly affected my survey responses	148 (46%)
Somewhat affected my survey responses	79 (25%)
A little effect on my responses	21 (7%)
Not at all affected	16 (5%)
ACTS does not apply to my institution	53 (16%)
Unsure/Did not work on ACTS reporting	5 (2%)
Total (n)	322

Table B15. Compared with standard IPEDS collections, ACTS reporting was:

Response	# Respondents (%)
Much more difficult	214 (66%)
Somewhat more difficult	36 (11%)
About the same difficulty	2 (1%)
Somewhat easier	2 (1%)
Much easier	0 (0%)
ACTS does not apply to my institution	59 (18%)
Unsure/Did not work on ACTS reporting	9 (3%)
Total (n)	322

External Support Needs

Table B16. Which external supports would most improve IPEDS data quality at your institution? (select up to three)

External support	# Respondents (%)
Clearer definitions/examples	228 (71%)
Earlier release of specifications/materials	193 (60%)

External support	# Respondents (%)
Longer reporting timelines	144 (45%)
Better documentation resources	127 (40%)
Improved validation tools	126 (39%)
More training/webinars	90 (28%)
More peer examples/promising practices	61 (19%)
Better Help Desk responsiveness	40 (12%)
Other (please specify)	24 (7%)
Respondents (n)	321

Note: Multiple response; percentages reflect share of 321 respondents who selected each support.

Table B17. Overall, how confident are you that current IPEDS processes support accurate and comparable data nationally?

Response	# Respondents (%)
Very confident	44 (14%)
Somewhat confident	141 (45%)
Mixed / unsure	94 (30%)

Response	# Respondents (%)
Not very confident	26 (8%)
Not at all confident	11 (3%)
Total (n)	316

Results by Institutional Sector

The following tables compare results across three institutional sectors: public two-year (n = 46), public four-year (n = 86), and private nonprofit four-year (n = 177). Private for-profit institutions (n = 9) and system offices (n = 9) are excluded from these comparisons due to small sample sizes.

Reporting Organization and Practices

Table B18. How IPEDS reporting is primarily organized, by sector

	Public 2-yr (n=46)	Public 4-yr (n=86)	Priv. NP 4-yr (n=177)	All (n=335)
Primarily one person leads	50%	33%	44%	41%
Small team within one office	17%	19%	14%	16%
Shared / central coordination	30%	37%	37%	36%
System office coordinates	2%	7%	1%	4%
Decentralized	0%	1%	3%	3%

Table B19. QA practices regularly used, by sector (multiple response)

	Public 2-yr (n=46)	Public 4-yr (n=86)	Priv. NP 4-yr (n=177)	All (n=335)
Prior-year trend comparisons	89%	79%	79%	81%
Manual data validation checks	78%	81%	76%	79%

	Public 2-yr (n=46)	Public 4-yr (n=86)	Priv. NP 4-yr (n=177)	All (n=335)
Written procedures or calendars	78%	77%	62%	70%
Reconciliation to internal reports	57%	77%	69%	68%
Cross-office review of submissions	39%	43%	53%	48%
Automated data validation checks	33%	51%	32%	38%
Post-submission review/lessons learned	37%	30%	24%	29%
Senior leadership review/signoff	22%	22%	31%	28%

Institutional Capacity and Quality Risks

Table B20. Mean scores on capacity and quality statements, by sector (1–5 scale)

Statement	Public 2-yr	Public 4-yr	Priv. NP 4-yr	All sectors
Significant burden on staff time and coordination	3.91	4.23	4.26	4.20
Definitions formally documented and consistently used	3.84	4.01	3.76	3.80
Sufficient capacity to produce high-quality submissions	3.70	3.77	3.62	3.68

Statement	Public 2-yr	Public 4-yr	Priv. NP 4-yr	All sectors
Internal roles and responsibilities are clear	4.24	4.38	4.30	4.28
Confident IPEDS supports accurate/comparable national data	3.79	3.70	3.52	3.57

Table B21. Factors creating greatest risk to data quality, by sector (multiple response)

	Public 2-yr (n=46)	Public 4-yr (n=86)	Priv. NP 4-yr (n=177)	All (n=335)
Unclear definitions/changing guidance	57%	59%	55%	58%
Limited staffing time	50%	37%	49%	47%
Staff turnover/training gaps	39%	45%	46%	44%
Compressed timelines/deadlines	22%	53%	37%	40%
Data system limitations	37%	28%	40%	36%
Manual processes/spreadsheets	30%	17%	41%	34%
Difficulty obtaining data	15%	26%	19%	19%
Limited leadership attention	9%	8%	9%	9%
Coordination across campuses	7%	14%	8%	9%

Table B22. Institutional experiences in the past two years, by sector (multiple response)

	Public 2-yr (n=46)	Public 4-yr (n=86)	Priv. NP 4-yr (n=177)	All (n=335)
Increased reporting complexity	70%	85%	89%	84%
Staffing reductions or vacancies	37%	53%	51%	50%
New systems/transitions	41%	49%	49%	48%
More internal review requests	37%	41%	39%	37%
Greater difficulty meeting deadlines	30%	33%	38%	36%
No major changes	9%	3%	2%	4%

External Support Needs

Table B23. External supports that would most improve data quality, by sector (multiple response)

	Public 2-yr (n=46)	Public 4-yr (n=86)	Priv. NP 4-yr (n=177)	All (n=335)
Clearer definitions/illustrative examples	65%	65%	69%	68%
Earlier release of specifications/materials	41%	62%	60%	58%
Longer reporting timelines	26%	44%	47%	43%

	Public 2-yr (n=46)	Public 4-yr (n=86)	Priv. NP 4-yr (n=177)	All (n=335)
Better documentation resources	39%	45%	33%	38%
Improved validation tools	35%	42%	38%	38%
More training/webinars	22%	28%	28%	27%
More peer examples/promising practices	24%	12%	21%	18%
Better Help Desk responsiveness	7%	17%	11%	12%

Table B24. Confidence that IPEDS supports accurate and comparable national data, by sector

	Public 2-yr (n=46)	Public 4-yr (n=86)	Priv. NP 4-yr (n=177)	All (n=335)
Confident (Somewhat or Very)	63%	57%	57%	59%
Mixed / unsure	26%	30%	31%	30%
Not confident (Not very or Not at all)	11%	13%	12%	11%

Note: Confidence figures calculated from valid responses; excludes non-respondents to this item.

Results by Enrollment Size

The following tables compare results across four enrollment size categories: under 2,500 (n = 102), 2,500–9,999 (n = 127), 10,000–24,999 (n = 66), and 25,000 or more (n = 37). Three respondents who selected 'Not sure' are excluded from size comparisons.

Reporting Organization and Practices

Table B25. How IPEDS reporting is primarily organized, by enrollment size

	Under 2,500 (n=102)	2,500–9,999 (n=127)	10,000– 24,999 (n=66)	25,000+ (n=37)	All (n=335)
Primarily one person leads	52%	44%	30%	11%	41%
Small team within one office	7%	19%	14%	30%	16%
Shared / central coordination	34%	31%	48%	30%	36%
System office coordinates	0%	1%	5%	22%	4%
Decentralized	5%	2%	0%	5%	3%

Table B26. QA practices regularly used, by enrollment size (multiple response)

	Under 2,500 (n=102)	2,500–9,999 (n=127)	10,000– 24,999 (n=66)	25,000+ (n=37)	All (n=335)
Prior-year trend comparisons	80%	80%	82%	81%	81%

	Under 2,500 (n=102)	2,500–9,999 (n=127)	10,000– 24,999 (n=66)	25,000+ (n=37)	All (n=335)
Manual data validation checks	76%	79%	80%	78%	79%
Written procedures or calendars	63%	70%	71%	81%	70%
Reconciliation to internal reports	68%	66%	70%	73%	68%
Cross-office review of submissions	40%	54%	45%	49%	48%
Automated data validation checks	25%	40%	39%	68%	38%
Post-submission review/lessons learned	27%	31%	29%	27%	29%
Senior leadership review/signoff	23%	28%	29%	41%	28%

Institutional Capacity and Quality Risks

Table B27. Mean scores on capacity and quality statements, by enrollment size (1–5 scale)

	Under 2,500 (n=102)	2,500– 9,999 (n=127)	10,000– 24,999 (n=66)	25,000+ (n=37)	All (n=335)
Significant burden on staff time and coordination	4.22	4.22	4.06	4.27	4.20

	Under 2,500 (n=102)	2,500– 9,999 (n=127)	10,000– 24,999 (n=66)	25,000+ (n=37)	All (n=335)
Definitions formally documented and consistently used	3.67	3.77	3.84	4.32	3.80
Sufficient capacity to produce high-quality submissions	3.57	3.50	3.97	4.14	3.68
Internal roles and responsibilities are clear	4.20	4.34	4.34	4.36	4.28
Confident IPEDS supports accurate/comparable national data	3.41	3.63	3.77	3.63	3.57

Table B28. Factors creating greatest risk to data quality, by enrollment size (multiple response)

	Under 2,500 (n=102)	2,500– 9,999 (n=127)	10,000– 24,999 (n=66)	25,000+ (n=37)	All (n=335)
Unclear definitions/changing guidance	53%	54%	64%	59%	58%
Limited staffing time	48%	50%	35%	49%	47%
Staff turnover/training gaps	49%	42%	42%	41%	44%
Compressed timelines/deadlines	32%	33%	53%	54%	40%

	Under 2,500 (n=102)	2,500– 9,999 (n=127)	10,000– 24,999 (n=66)	25,000+ (n=37)	All (n=335)
Data system limitations	42%	36%	32%	27%	36%
Manual processes/spreadsheets	47%	39%	18%	11%	34%
Difficulty obtaining data	20%	24%	14%	11%	19%
Limited leadership attention	8%	8%	11%	8%	9%
Coordination across campuses	4%	9%	12%	16%	9%

Table B29. Institutional experiences in the past two years, by enrollment size (multiple response)

	Under 2,500 (n=102)	2,500– 9,999 (n=127)	10,000– 24,999 (n=66)	25,000+ (n=37)	All (n=335)
Increased reporting complexity	87%	81%	77%	95%	84%
Staffing reductions or vacancies	50%	50%	48%	46%	50%
New systems/transitions	58%	43%	42%	46%	48%
More internal review requests	36%	40%	36%	32%	37%
Greater difficulty meeting deadlines	40%	35%	32%	32%	36%

	Under 2,500 (n=102)	2,500– 9,999 (n=127)	10,000– 24,999 (n=66)	25,000+ (n=37)	All (n=335)
No major changes	3%	2%	9%	5%	4%

External Support Needs

Table B30. External supports that would most improve data quality, by enrollment size (multiple response)

	Under 2,500 (n=102)	2,500– 9,999 (n=127)	10,000– 24,999 (n=66)	25,000+ (n=37)	All (n=335)
Clearer definitions/illustrative examples	66%	68%	68%	73%	68%
Earlier release of specifications/materials	55%	54%	58%	76%	58%
Longer reporting timelines	46%	36%	44%	51%	43%
Better documentation resources	31%	35%	53%	35%	38%
Improved validation tools	36%	39%	33%	41%	38%
More training/webinars	28%	31%	14%	30%	27%
More peer examples/promising practices	23%	20%	14%	8%	18%

	Under 2,500 (n=102)	2,500– 9,999 (n=127)	10,000– 24,999 (n=66)	25,000+ (n=37)	All (n=335)
Better Help Desk responsiveness	12%	13%	6%	19%	12%

Table B31. Confidence that IPEDS supports accurate and comparable national data, by enrollment size

	Under 2,500 (n=102)	2,500–9,999 (n=127)	10,000– 24,999 (n=66)	25,000+ (n=37)	All (n=335)
Mean confidence score (1–5)	3.41	3.63	3.77	3.63	3.57

Note: Scale mean shown; 1 = Not at all confident, 5 = Very confident.

Appendix C: Focus Group Guide

Purpose & Context

This guide supports moderated virtual focus groups (50 minutes each) conducted as part of the AIR background study for the June 2026 IPEDS Technical Review Panel (TRP). Groups are organized by institutional type and practitioner experience. The same core questions are used across all sessions; group-specific probes are flagged in shaded boxes.

Study goal: Gather directional, practitioner-informed evidence on how institutions organize, manage, and improve IPEDS data quality — with emphasis on practical strategies, common risk factors, and priority support needs.

Session Outline

Section	Time	Purpose
Intro & Ground Rules	~3 min	Welcome, confidentiality, logistics
Warm-Up	~5 min	Low-stakes introductions, open the conversation
Main Discussion	~35 min	Explore practices, risks, and improvement needs
Lightning Round & Close	~7 min	Priority recommendations, gratitude, next steps

Section 1: Introduction & Ground Rules (~3 minutes)

[Set up the Zoom meeting to use the waiting room and start the meeting a few minutes early so that it's available. Have recording running before participants enter. Script is provided as a reference; all points are necessary, but it does not need to be followed to the letter.]

Welcome, and thank you so much for joining us today. My name is [facilitator name], and I am facilitating this focus group on behalf of the Association for Institutional Research. [Brief intro to facilitator's background.] I will also be running the technical aspects of this session, so please bear with me if we have any technical difficulties.

We're conducting this focus group as part of a rapid background study for the Technical Review Panel on IPEDS data quality that will meet in June. The TRP will be discussing what it takes for institutions to produce high-quality IPEDS submissions — and your firsthand experiences are exactly what are needed to inform that conversation.

A few ground rules as we get started:

This session is being recorded solely for research purposes. The recording will not be shared, and it will be destroyed once the research summary is complete. I'm also using Zoom's AI feature to assist me with taking notes.

Everything you share is confidential. We will report findings in aggregate with no attribution to individuals or institutions.

There are no right or wrong answers — we want your honest perspectives based on your experiences with IPEDS reporting on the ground. We know that your individual experiences will have similarities and differences.

Please speak one at a time so we can capture your ideas accurately, but otherwise feel free to jump in and react to what others say. I know that it's sometimes tough in the virtual environment to know when someone else is going to speak, so I will help moderate that when necessary. Also, I do ask that you keep your camera on if possible, since your body language is also an important part of communication.

We have 50 minutes, so I may gently move us along if needed — not because each point isn't valuable, but because I want to make sure we cover all the questions. Similarly, I may call on specific people at times to make sure everyone has the opportunity to share their thoughts.

You may also use the chat as needed, especially to establish agreement with a point that's been made — not everyone needs to verbally respond to every question or every thought. Please know that I might miss items in the chat as I'm mainly focused on the verbal conversation, though. If I miss something that feels critical, I ask that someone call it to my attention.

[Note: amend as necessary for non-ACTS groups] And finally, we are focused on the entire breadth of IPEDS today. I know many of us may have thoughts pertaining to data quality on a specific new component that shall not be named. And it will be relevant today, but so will all of the other components, so please consider this your official warning that I will be redirecting the conversation with love if necessary.

Any questions before we dive in?

[Pause for questions. If none, proceed to warm-up.]

Section 2: Warm-Up (~5 minutes)

[Quick round-robin — keep it moving, 30 seconds per person]

To get us started, I'd love a quick introduction from each of you. Please share:

- Your name and role
- How many years you've been involved in IPEDS reporting
- One descriptive word or short phrase that comes to mind when you hear "IPEDS data quality."

[Go around the room. Capture the one-word answers if you can and share back any quick themes that emerge.]

Section 3: Main Discussion (~35 minutes)

[~10 minutes per primary question.]

Organizing for IPEDS Quality

Q1 Every institution tends to be a little bit different, so I would like to hear about how responsibility for IPEDS reporting is organized at your institution. In other words, who owns IPEDS, and how does accountability actually work in practice?

Probes / follow-ups:

- Is there a single person or office that coordinates everything, or is the work distributed around the institution? How well is that working?
- How are responsibilities divided between the IR office and other units (Registrar, Financial Aid, Finance, HR)? Are those handoffs ever a source of risk?

- Who reviews the submission before it goes in — and how rigorous or systematic is that review?

Systems / Multi- Campus

Probe: How does coordination work across campuses? What's the biggest source of inconsistency or delay in the multi-campus workflow?

Small Institutions

Probe: If one person is doing most of the work, what happens when that person is unavailable? How do you protect against institutional knowledge walking out the door?

Practices That Work

Q2 What internal practices or processes do you rely on most to make sure your IPEDS data is accurate?

Probes / follow-ups:

- Do you use internal documentation, checklists, or standard operating procedures for IPEDS reporting? How current are they?
- What does your quality-check process look like — are you comparing to prior-year, running edits, doing peer review?
- Have made any changes to your processes in the last few years that made a noticeable improvement? What were they?
- How helpful do you find the survey instructions when you need to resolve a question?

Experienced Practitioners

Probe: What did it take to get to the level of quality control you have now? What's the one investment — in people, process, or tools — that made the most difference?

Newer Practitioners

Probe: As someone earlier in your IPEDS career, what quality practices have you found most helpful to learn from? What do you wish had been documented or shared with you from the start?

Where Quality Breaks Down

Q3 Let's do something different for a moment. I'm going to ask everyone a question and I want you to type your answer into the chat – but don't send it until I say go. The question is: which survey component is toughest to get right for your institution and why? Remember, type your answer out, but don't send it until I say go. [Give them a minute] Okay, go! [Quickly review answers, read a couple aloud before proceeding to probes.]

Probes / follow-ups:

- Have you ever submitted and later discovered an error? What happened, and how did you handle it?
- Are there components where the definitions or instructions themselves create uncertainty or where you're honestly not sure you're doing it the same way as peers?
- (If they aren't covering components like Finance, HR or Academic Libraries) I haven't heard anyone mention [name component or components] – do they tend to be easier to manage?

Q4 Where do errors, delays, or uncertainty most commonly arise in your IPEDS reporting? What are the biggest quality risks at your institution?

Probes / follow-ups:

- Is it a particular a data handoff point, a staffing or training issue, a data collection or system issue, or a timing crunch?
- If you were advising a similar institution trying to improve their IPEDS quality, what's the first thing you'd tell them?
- Are there things smaller or larger institutions do that you've borrowed or wish you could?
- (If multiple systems come up) With multiple systems and data sources feeding your submissions, where are the biggest integration or reconciliation challenges?

Community
Colleges

Probe: Are there specific IPEDS components that feel particularly hard to apply accurately to the two-year context — completion rates, workforce programs, financial aid?

Experienced
Practitioners

Probe: Has the risk landscape changed over your career? What's harder now than it used to be, and what's gotten easier?

Section 4: Lightning Round & Closing (~7 minutes)

[Keep this brisk — one sentence per person per item]

We're coming up on time, so I want to end with a quick lightning round. I'm asking for single sentence responses to the prompt — the first thing that comes to mind. There are no wrong answers here.

Q5 If you could make one practical change to how IPEDS reporting works for next year, what would it be?

Q6 Before we close — is there anything important we didn't get to, or anything you'd want the Technical Review Panel to hear that we haven't covered?

Thank you all so much. Your insights are genuinely valuable. We will be reflecting on all you've said here and adding it to what we hear in the other focus groups. The results will be shared with the TRP to inform their discussion in June. As I said at the start, the findings will be reported in aggregate, with no attribution — but your voices will absolutely be represented.

If anything comes to mind after today that you'd like to add, please feel free to reach out to me at [facilitator email address]. Have a great rest of your day.

[Stay on for informal follow-up if participants linger.]

Facilitator Notes & Reminders

Pacing

- The 5 main questions are intentionally more than you can fully exhaust in 30 minutes.
- Prioritize depth on Q1 (structure/accountability) and Q3 (risk/errors) if pressed for time. Q2 and Q5 tend to generate the most actionable TRP recommendations.
- Use the lightning round to capture views from quieter participants who haven't spoken much.

Group-Specific Emphasis Reminders

- Small / Lean Capacity — Staffing fragility, knowledge continuity, workarounds
- Community Colleges — Definitional fit, workforce data complexity, resource asymmetry
- Large Public Universities — Multi-system coordination, decentralized accountability, scale
- Private Nonprofit Four-Year — IPEDS design fit, sector-specific challenges, governance
- Systems / Multi-Campus — Coordination overhead, consistency vs. campus autonomy
- Technical colleges and schools — Including program reporters
- Experienced Practitioners — Historical perspective, how the landscape has changed
- Newer Practitioners — Onboarding, resource gaps, reliance on informal knowledge networks

Things to Listen For

- Specific survey components that cause disproportionate difficulty
- Handoff points between offices as sources of error
- Staffing fragility (e.g., single point of failure)
- Workarounds that signal where official guidance is falling short
- Unsolicited comparisons to peer institutions — what are they watching?
- Tension between “we’re doing this right” confidence and “we’re not sure” hedging on the same question

If people get hung up on ACTS

- Refer them to volunteer for national study on ACTS experiences:
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/Y3M2BTZ>

Appendix D: Focus Groups Initial Thematic Summary

This synthesis integrates findings from seven focus groups conducted in April–May 2026 as part of the AIR background study for the June 2026 IPEDS Technical Review Panel. The study gathered practitioner-informed evidence from 54 participants across a range of institution types, sizes, and roles: small private liberal arts colleges, large public universities, community and technical colleges, multi-campus system offices, and one representative from the National Student Clearinghouse. Findings are *directional* rather than statistically representative; they are intended to surface themes, inform TRP discussion, and identify priorities from the field, not to make precise prevalence estimates.

Focus groups were conducted via Zoom. Thematic analysis was conducted using session transcripts and chat logs. FG3 and FG5 lacked chat logs due to technical issues. FG4 was originally scheduled, but lacked sufficient scheduled participants, so it was cancelled in advance, and participants were offered seats in other appropriate groups.

FG	Group Description	Sector / Type	Participants	Data Sources
FG1	Small private institutions; experienced practitioners	Small private 4-yr; 1 independent 2-yr	12	Transcript + chat
FG2	System/multi-campus coordinators	State university & technical college systems	9	Transcript + chat
FG3	Community colleges	Two-year public	5	Transcript only
FG5	Large public universities	Large public 4-yr; National Student Clearinghouse	5	Transcript only
FG6	Large public universities; consumer/benchmarking perspective	Large public 4-yr; some system-affiliated	7	Transcript + chat
FG7	Small private institutions	Small private 4-yr	9	Transcript + chat

FG	Group Description	Sector / Type	Participants	Data Sources
FG8	Community and technical colleges	Two-year public; technical colleges	7	Transcript + chat
Total			54	

The synthesis is organized around seven cross-cutting initial findings, followed by sector-specific findings unique to the community/technical college context, a section on field-generated best practices, and a prioritized set of initial recommendations. The next step is to triangulate these preliminary findings and recommendations with the survey data to generate the final report.

Finding 1: ACTS Exposed Systemic Fragilities — and Its Data Quality Implications Are Severe

ACTS is the defining recent experience of the IPEDS practitioner community. It appeared in every group except the two focused exclusively on community and technical colleges, where open-admissions status renders many institutions exempt, and its absence in those groups is itself informative. Where it did appear, ACTS generated the strongest emotional responses, the most detailed accounts of institutional struggle, and the most direct policy recommendations in the study.

Across groups, ACTS was described as a **failure of process**, and its data quality implications were described as severe. FG7 contained the most difficult accounts: two practitioners stated independently that the data they submitted is unreliable and they know it, and that the primary motivation for submitting was Title IV compliance rather than data quality. These statements were not challenged by anyone in the group and reflect genuine questions of data validity in a federal collection that NCES will presumably use.

"We got it done so that we could continue doing Title IV. I have no faith in what is going to come out of that survey."

The reasons for ACTS failure were consistent and cumulative across groups: historical data not preserved in operational systems; unclear and shifting definitions; a timeline too short to prepare; a reporting process that differed from all other surveys; cross-survey validations with other IPEDS surveys

without any tolerance for variance; and a rollout process that assumed institutional data infrastructure that many institutions simply do not have. FG2 system coordinators added the scale dimension: ACTS assumed individual institutions had admissions data consistently collected and ready to report up across dozens of campuses. This assumption was not true at any of the systems represented in the focus groups.

FG6 added a dimension not raised elsewhere: **definitions changed on a weekly basis during the reporting window itself**, making it impossible to know whether internal data challenges were separable from external definitional instability. One practitioner described ACTS as the case study for what not to do, and proposed that NCES communicate publicly how it plans to analyze and present the data — so institutions can at least understand what "right" looks like under the definitions that were in effect when they submitted.

From experienced practitioners across multiple groups, ACTS generated a consistent recommendation: **restore the review-and-comment process before new data collections launch**. This process was cited as having worked well historically. It gave institutions time to identify data gaps, align source systems, and establish consistent definitions before reporting began. The FG2 system coordinator explicitly compared FVT rollout support (which was adequate) to ACTS rollout support (which was not). The FG8 community asked for the ability to flag cohorts at time one and track them prospectively, so that longitudinal collections have valid data when the reporting window opens, rather than requiring impossible retrospective reconstruction.

Finding 2: The Snapshot Assumption — An Unstated Design Premise That Undermines Data Quality

One of the most important cross-cutting findings in the study is one that was never stated as a complaint but emerged repeatedly as a structural explanation: **IPEDS operates on an implicit assumption that institutions have frozen their data at a defined point in time and are reporting from a stable, non-changing extract**. In practice, many institutions do not have access to data warehouses or similar analytic layers and report from live transactional systems where data continues to change throughout and after the reporting window. IPEDS's cross-survey validation logic, its year-over-year comparison checks, and its expectation that numbers reported in one survey will match numbers reported in another all presuppose a data stability that many institutions do not have.

This assumption is not new. The Graduation Rates and Outcome Measures surveys have always required institutions to identify and track a defined cohort at a specific point in time and follow it. Institutions have been managing this requirement with varying degrees of infrastructure adequacy for years. What

changed with ACTS and the expansion of cross-component validation is that the assumption became **impossible to ignore**. ACTS required retrospective cohort reconstruction at the individual student level going back seven years from systems that were never designed to preserve that data. Cross-survey validation checks exposed inconsistencies that had previously been invisible because the other surveys previously allowed greater tolerance for variations.

"We're an institution that does not have a data warehouse, so we don't have those snapshots of the data. When they check the ACTS data against the admissions data survey we just submitted back in January, we don't have the exact same data count."

The consequences are multiple: cross-survey validation errors that are artifacts of data mutability rather than genuine quality problems; the impossible demand to reconcile two reports pulled at different times from a live system; and edit check flags that cannot be resolved without freezing data that has no freeze mechanism in the institutional infrastructure. One practitioner described being forced to redo the same report repeatedly within a short period because earlier pulls no longer matched later validations.

Two groups independently described a state-level solution to this problem that is worth noting nationally. In some states (FG3 and FG5), state regulatory agencies align their definitions with IPEDS and use official freeze dates for state compliance reporting, producing clean census files that do double duty as both state and federal submissions. This inadvertently solves the snapshot problem that IPEDS assumes but does not provide infrastructure for. It is not available in all states, and it took years of deliberate state policy to build, but it represents a model for what a systemic solution looks like.

The most forward-looking response to this finding came from FG5: if IPEDS were to encourage institutions to build a full longitudinal student view from admissions to completion, rather than reporting each survey in isolation from separate data silos, many of the snapshot and cross-survey consistency problems would be structurally resolved before they arise. One experienced practitioner noted that she has already started this work in response to ACTS and described it as infrastructure preparation for future federal reporting requirements. One veteran practitioner in FG8 went further, suggesting that moving to a unit record system with a defined census point would ultimately resolve most of the data quality problems documented across the study, though he acknowledged the statutory constraints that currently prohibit it.

Finding 3: Survey Architecture — The Timing and Interconnectedness Problem

A cluster of related concerns about how IPEDS surveys are structured relative to each other (and relative to institutional calendars) appeared consistently across groups and from different angles. Together they point to a shared underlying problem: **IPEDS is experienced as a collection of independent surveys, but it functions as an interconnected system whose interdependencies are largely invisible to reporters until errors fire.**

The invisible map problem

The single most consistent cross-group recommendation in the study (appearing in FG3, FG5, FG7, and FG8 lightning rounds, each independently) is a request for a visible map of how IPEDS surveys relate to each other. The specific form of the request varied by group: a flowchart (FG5, FG3), a catalog of cross-survey alignment requirements (FG7), published tolerance thresholds for cross-survey discrepancies (FG3), release of NCES's cross-survey quality-checking code so institutions can run it themselves (FG7), or forced consistency through the system itself (FG5). These are variations on a single diagnosis: practitioners are discovering cross-survey interdependencies reactively, through error messages, rather than proactively, through documentation.

"IPEDS is not a dozen-some independent surveys, but at the same time, it's not one cohesive survey. Help us understand the mapping between the data and where it needs to go."

"It's really difficult 6 years down the road when you find out, oh, this needs to match that thing you reported 6 years ago, and you had no idea based on the definitions."

The calendar misalignment problem

FG8 produced the most technically specific articulation of a timing problem that appeared in different forms in FG2, FG3, FG7, and FG8: **the sequential lock structure of IPEDS surveys prevents the cross-survey alignment that data quality requires.** For community and technical colleges with late enrollments, trailing disbursements, and non-standard academic calendars, the assumption that the financial aid calendar and the finance calendar are the same is structurally false. By the time finance closes, earlier surveys are locked and cannot be adjusted — producing systematic discrepancies that are structural mismatches rather than errors.

"While it's fine for IPEDS to say that the finance calendar is the same as the financial aid calendar, that's not how it works in practice. I think it's a fundamental flaw in IPEDS design."

Three groups from different institutional angles arrived at the same practical recommendation: allow all surveys to be open simultaneously, so reporters can work across them in parallel and adjust earlier surveys as later information arrives. FG7 framed this as consolidating all questions into a single post-census submission window. FG8 framed it as simultaneous access for real-time cross-survey alignment. FG2 framed it as redistributing the winter collection burden to spring. These are three expressions of the same structural problem: IPEDS's collection architecture is optimized for sequential submission rather than for the cross-survey coherence that high-quality data requires.

The growing burden of accumulation

FG2 raised a sustainability concern that connects to both timing and architecture: IPEDS keeps getting larger, meaning that new surveys are added and old ones are rarely removed. But institutional capacity does not grow with it. The result is accumulating burden, particularly for smaller institutions. One system coordinator described this as becoming "unsustainable for some of our smaller schools." The academic libraries discontinuation was cited as a positive model of workload relief and paired with a concrete suggestion to move a remaining survey from the winter collection to spring to rebalance the load. This requires no reduction in data collected, only a structural rebalancing of when it's due.

Finding 4: Definitional Inconsistency — Inside and Outside the Institution

Definitional inconsistency was the most frequently surfaced quality risk across all seven groups, appearing in warm-up responses before it was even asked about, and returning throughout every session. It operates on two distinct levels that were consistently distinguished by practitioners.

Internal definitional inconsistency

ERP systems are built to run the business of the university, not to satisfy IPEDS definitions. When the Registrar changes how a field is used without notifying IR, when HR codes employees according to business rules rather than IPEDS categories, or when Financial Aid classifies aid according to operational needs rather than IPEDS definitions, the person responsible for IPEDS reporting absorbs the resulting inconsistency silently, often without authority to correct it at the source. At small institutions without data governance structures, there is no formal mechanism to prevent unilateral field redefinition.

"The registrar had a meeting the other day, and they decided to switch the way they're using a field in the system, and you've relied on it for years — and now it's changed."

FG2 system coordinators described this problem at scale: an applicant status code that means different things across 20 campuses required the system office to trace the inconsistency back to data entry policy and rewrite system-level procedures before reliable reporting was possible. The data submitted was "the best we can do," which, coming from experienced system coordinators, is a significant statement about data reliability.

External definitional inconsistency

IPEDS definitions themselves are sometimes ambiguous, inconsistently interpreted by the help desk across calls, or changed without adequate notice. The request for consistent definitions was the **single most repeated substantive ask** in FG1, and it appeared in every subsequent group. FG5 raised a specific and pointed example: one practitioner called the help desk about student-faculty ratio methodology, received guidance that contradicted her reading of the written instructions, chose to follow the written instructions, and framed the inconsistency as a **competitive equity problem**, suggesting that institutions may game their interpretations of the rules for competitive advantages.

"I think the inconsistency in terms of definition — because we are in a competitive environment, if somebody only counts undergraduates and we count all students, that creates an unfair comparison."

FG2 system coordinators connected definition stability to infrastructure investment: changing definitions invalidates the query logic and extraction infrastructure that system offices have built over years. This is both an **accuracy concern** and an **investment protection concern**. FG6 added that changing definitions mid-collection (as participants reported to have happened with ACTS on a frequent basis) makes it impossible to know whether submitted data is accurate even after the fact.

Finding 5: Staff Turnover, Knowledge Loss, and the Documentation Gap

Staff turnover was the most frequently named quality risk at the institutional level, appearing in every group and describing different dimensions of the same structural vulnerability. The problem is not simply that new people need to learn IPEDS; it is that prior staff often left **no documentation, no saved data sets, and no explanation of past decisions**, making year-over-year consistency nearly impossible to reconstruct.

For individual institutions (FG1, FG7), the risk is personal and acute: one practitioner inherited a role where no prior numbers could be reconstructed; another described going through a third or fourth Financial Aid director without knowing how bad prior reporting may have been. For system coordinators

(FG2), the risk is multiplied: every keyholder change at a member institution triggers a system-office onboarding burden. For community colleges undergoing ERP transitions (FG8), the risk manifests as a documentation archaeology problem: undocumented judgment calls buried in decade-old Access queries that produced inconsistent results across colleges without anyone realizing it.

"My predecessor did not save data sets, SOPs or any information explaining how a number was obtained, so matching prior reports is nearly impossible."

FG6 identified a related but distinct problem: **decisions that were never documented in the first place** — not lost when someone left, but never written down at all. This is particularly acute in financial aid, where highly specific item-type classifications were made by one person years ago and the reasoning disappeared with them. The stale code problem identified in FG6 is its counterpart on the technical side: code written years ago that continues to run and produce consistent but potentially incorrect numbers, invisible to every QA process designed to catch changes.

Practitioners across the study have developed adaptive responses to turnover risk: detailed annual notes, ticketing systems with attached scripts, AI-generated SOPs, reporting calendars, and state-level consistency groups. These practices are genuine and effective, but their existence reflects a support gap as much as institutional sophistication: practitioners are engineering solutions to a structural problem that NCES has not formally addressed. The most actionable external lever is **accessible, high-quality training for new and intermediate keyholders**. This request appeared in FG1 (return of AIR training), FG2 (state coordinators' conference as a training and synchronization mechanism), and FG8 (state-level consistency infrastructure).

Finding 6: The Financial Aid Survey — A Universal Challenge With a Structural Root

Financial aid was the most frequently named difficult survey across groups that were not dominated by ACTS, appearing as the primary Q3 response in FG3, FG5, FG7, and FG8, and as a close second in every other group. The difficulty is not primarily about survey instructions. Rather, it is about **structural position**: IR offices are responsible for IPEDS compliance in a data domain they do not control and sometimes cannot access. The financial aid data lives in a system owned by the Financial Aid office, under policies set by the Financial Aid office, by staff who are (rightfully) operationally focused rather than analytically focused. At many institutions, none of that infrastructure is accessible to IR except through relationship and request.

"Our knowledge about financial aid lies in the financial aid team, but they don't own the survey. So it's a lot of me asking questions, trying to get clarifications, and then trying to fit what they're giving me into the IPEDS grouping."

The specific failure modes were diverse across groups: FAFSA changes disrupting data sources without adequate warning (FG1, FG3); turnover in FA offices producing documentation gaps (FG1, FG7); privacy culture within FA offices creating structural barriers to cross-functional access (FG7); institutional aid funds that don't map cleanly to IPEDS categories (FG3, FG7); cross-survey edit checks tying FA to GR surveys with logic that can't be replicated by the institution (FG3); and the FA/Finance calendar misalignment creating discrepancies that are structurally baked into the collection (FG8). What unifies these failure modes is not the survey instructions but the **handoff problem**: quality failures concentrate at the boundary between offices, and IR has accountability without authority.

One participant in FG5 confirmed this pattern from an external vantage point: IR offices are consistently caught in the crosshairs between registrar records and financial aid updates in NSLDS, and the inconsistencies are never fully reconcilable because the two systems are updated on different timelines by different people with different purposes.

Finding 7: External Support Infrastructure — What the Field Needs and What Has Been Lost

Across groups, a picture emerged of an external support infrastructure that was once more robust and is now considerably diminished, and whose absence is being felt acutely at a moment when new collections, changing definitions, and contractor transitions are creating heightened uncertainty.

Help desk: valued, capacity-constrained, and inconsistent

The help desk was the most complex topic in terms of sentiment across the study. Practitioners who have had positive experiences were genuinely grateful and advocated for the help desk as an institution worth investing in. But consistent concerns emerged across groups: inconsistent answers across different calls on the same question; inability to provide written follow-up due to call volume; and insufficient staffing near submission deadlines. The most alarming single help-desk-related account was the 1am hard lock in FG1: the system closing automatically at the submission deadline while a fatal error was still showing, with no help desk support available. FG8 described a system coordinator for 16 colleges in a single system needing to call the help desk separately and sequentially for the same override for each institution, which demonstrates how the help desk is not set up to respond to system-

level. The common thread is not that the help desk is bad but that it is **under-resourced** relative to the volume and complexity of questions it handles.

Several participants noted that the help desk is staffed by a third-party contractor, which will be transitioning from RTI to AEM, and not by federal staff. This was identified as the structural source of the inconsistency problem, and one Cal State practitioner with prior DOE experience made the most pointed ask of any participant in the study: "I'd love to see some federal staff on the IPEDS team next year." The request was not contradicted by anyone in his group and connects to a broader concern about whether the authoritative federal voice on IPEDS is structurally one step removed from the practitioners who need it. Other participants were not necessarily cognizant that the help desk is a separate entity staffed by a third party contractor and conflated it directly with the Department of Education.

The state coordinators' conference: a former national synchronization mechanism

The loss of the annual state coordinators' conference was raised with particular force by system coordinators in FG2. Their framing was specific and worth preserving: the annual conference was not primarily a training event, but rather as a **national synchronization mechanism**. It was the moment when every practitioner in the country heard the same answers to the same questions at the same time. System coordinators brought those materials home and used them to brief member campuses, creating a consistent interpretation that propagated outward from a single authoritative source. The loss of this mechanism, described by one 20-year veteran as "devastating," compounds every other consistency problem in the system: help desk answers vary, definitions shift, and there is no longer a national event that resets everyone to the same baseline.

Training and communities of practice

FG1 generated an explicit call to restore AIR-provided training, which provided not just courses, but a community of practice accessible to reporters at all experience levels, at no cost to institutions. The FG2 chat noted that the new keyholder course was described as "incredibly helpful" by a practitioner in FG2, suggesting that where training exists, it works. The gap is in access, since it has been cut back extensively and there are no more in-person trainings. FG2 also described extensive system-level onboarding infrastructure in some states as solid intentional models: dedicated pages, listservs, in-person convenings.

Import specification documentation: a simple fix, consistently requested

A specific, narrow, and highly actionable support gap emerged independently in multiple sessions: **the import specification is updated annually without documentation of what changed**. Survey instructions

document year-over-year changes; the import spec does not. Practitioners who rely on the import spec discover changes when things break, not before. One institution described reverting from automated upload to manual entry specifically because the import spec is less reliable than a human process. This is one of the easiest fixes in the study: a change log for the import spec, matching the documentation format already applied to survey instructions.

Sector-Specific Findings: The Community and Technical College Context

Three focus groups included community and technical college practitioners (FG3, FG8, and partially FG2), and their collective findings warrant treatment as a distinct cluster. The two-year sector is not an edge case in American higher education, since it enrolls a majority of all US postsecondary students, but IPEDS was designed around a four-year university model, and the fit is increasingly strained as the sector evolves.

IPEDS measures a minority of community college students

The most consistent finding from community college groups is structural and stark: **IPEDS metrics are built around first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students and this cohort that represents approximately 10–12% of community college enrollment** at the institutions represented in this study. Continuing education students, dual enrollment high schoolers, workforce certificate seekers, part-time returners, and non-degree credit-seeking students are the populations growing fastest at community colleges, and they are largely invisible to IPEDS data consumers who rely on standard reporting. This creates a persistent gap between what IPEDS says about a community college and what the institution actually does.

The Graduation Rates survey is the most visible symptom of this mismatch. Community colleges with predominantly part-time student bodies produce GR numbers that look bad and do not reflect institutional reality, but those are the numbers presidents quote and accreditors reference. The Outcome Measures survey was broadly recognized by community college practitioners as more appropriate, since it accommodates transfer-in and part-time progression, but it continues to lack the “brand recognition” to displace graduation rates in institutional or public discourse. Practitioners described spending significant time explaining denominators and asterisking metrics in internal conversations. One practitioner noted OM “needs a marketing plan” to raise its visibility.

Dual enrollment: a rapidly growing invisible population

The dual enrollment discussion in FG3 was the most extensive in the study and surfaced a specific and growing structural problem: dual enrollment students are among the fastest-growing populations at community colleges, but IPEDS captures them in only one or two fields across all surveys. At one large statewide system, dual credit enrollment is approaching 50% of 200,000 total students, meaning roughly 100,000 students at a single institution are invisible to most IPEDS quality-of-outcome metrics. This is not an edge case; at this scale, IPEDS is a reporting system for a minority population at a growing share of community colleges.

Definitional ambiguities compound the coverage gap when students are formally enrolled in associate's degree programs while also still enrolled in high school. As early college programs expand and dual enrollment approaches half of enrollment at some institutions, this classification problem will become increasingly difficult to explain to external audiences.

Four-year language in a two-year world

FG8 produced the most direct statements about definitional and instructional fit, and echoed themes that ran through FG3 as well: **IPEDS instructions, definitions, and structural assumptions reflect a four-year university model**, and community and technical colleges adapt to fit a framework that wasn't designed for them. Cohort definitions that assume standard term-based enrollment don't accommodate open-entry/open-exit programs. Apprenticeship programs with work-based components don't fit credit-hour or clock-hour classifications cleanly. The pace of innovation in workforce, non-credit, and continuing education programs is outrunning IPEDS's definitional update cycle.

Field-Generated Best Practices

Across all seven groups, practitioners described practices they have developed to improve IPEDS quality, often in response to the problems documented above. These are not implementations of a recommended framework, but rather adaptive strategies generally developed independently, often in response to a predecessor who left nothing behind. Several are sufficiently innovative and transferable to warrant highlighting as models.

AI-narrated SOPs. One practitioner described narrating her reporting process in real time to an AI tool (Microsoft Copilot), which converts the narration into an SOP. A new staff member then follows the SOP and verifies they get the same numbers, so they are simultaneously training and auditing the new SOP. This addresses the turnover/documentation problem in a novel, immediately replicable way.

Institutional ticketing system for survey documentation. One practitioner built a ticketing system for each IPEDS survey, with SQL scripts, notes, and decisions attached. The institutional system then holds the documentation in a centralized repository, so it survives staff transitions regardless of who holds the keyholder role.

Parallel verification reports. Running two independent reports from two separate offices and comparing results (e.g., for HR or enrollment) was described as a genuine checks-and-balances mechanism that can be simple, low-tech, effective, and applicable at any institution size.

State alignment with IPEDS definitions. Some states align their state compliance reporting definitions with IPEDS and use official census freeze dates, producing clean data files that do double duty for both state and federal submissions. It represents a policy model worth considering for states that have not yet aligned.

Saved population lists as prospective snapshots. Rather than re-querying data every year, one practitioner saves the population lists used for each submission and reuses them for subsequent surveys that reference the same cohort. This approximates a data freeze without requiring a formal data warehouse, and is directly applicable at institutions without dedicated data infrastructure.