Christine: You are listening to Higher Ed Now, ACTA's podcast on issues and higher education. I'm your host, Christine Ravold. I'm joined in the studio today by two amazing guests. The first is ACTA's resident expert on trustees. Armand Alacbay is ACTA's Vice President of Trustees & Legislative Affairs. We also have Mr. Jerry Malitz on the show. Jerry Malitz is former Chief Information Technology Officer at the Department of Education's Institute for Education Sciences. He's currently an independent consultant for educational research. Armand, Jerry, thank you for being here.

Armand: Glad to be here.

Jerry: A pleasure.

Christine: Thanks so much. Let's start at the basics. What is IPEDS?

00:00:46
Jerry: Well, IPEDS stands for the Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System. I-P-E-D-S. It's the primary data collection effort through the U.S. Department of Education conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics and it's for all of Post-Secondary Education.

Armand: My understanding is you had quite a bit of a role in creating this system.

Jerry: Well, yes, sort of. IPEDS really is the successor to what was there before hand, which was the Higher Education General Information Survey, which was done for about twenty years from the mid-60s to the mid-80s. Like a lot of things, it became old and needed a change. Myself and a couple of other people were

ACTA
Higher Ed Now
Higher Ed Data 101

tasked with coming up with the new system and that was a long effort in doing it but the final result was IPEDS. That started in the mid-80s, about 1985-86.

00:01:58

Armand: Well, an invaluable resource to us and I just want to thank you for your work with that. IPEDS, just with trustees, it's something that—there's a wealth of information that's available on that data base that I think that many trustees just aren't aware of, information that's publicly available on a variety of topics: tuition, finance, graduation rates. In fact, it provides the metrics that we recommend that a lot of trustees pay attention to. ACTA just published a wallet card resourced called Getting the Data: Ten questions trustees should ask. And three of those questions just happen to be from data points that are in the IPEDS system. Currently the university system of Nevada is using this card for part of its regular checkup of institutions.

Jerry: Yes. If people knew what was available in IPEDS, I think more and more people would be using it. As you mentioned, there is enrollment data. There is the degree completion data. There is staff data, finance data, institutional characteristics data, graduate rate information. It just goes on and on and most of it's collected every year so it's not as if people have to wait a long time to get more recent information. It's there and it's readily available and many easy-to-use data tools that can be found on the web.

Armand: And every title for a participating institution has to report to IPEDS, or NCS.

Jerry: That's right. And there are about seventy-five hundred institutions right now in the IPEDS universe.

00:03:41

Armand: With our trustee audience, in particular, you have a pretty complex data base here. We're not really talking about having trustees pull up the site and query their ports themselves, but what do you think is the best use for this data? What's the takeaway for trustees and the availability of IPEDS?

Jerry: First, I think there are a lot of very, very easy to use data tools that could give them a good idea, a picture, of an institution or a series of institutions if they want to look at some of the peers from the institution that their most familiar with.

Christine: What is a peer group?

Jerry: A peer group? Well, a peer group could be any number of things but it's typically institutions that are similar to your institution in a variety of ways that that institution would really come up with themselves. So it could be size. It could be endowment. It could be a lot of things that comprise what they think is their group of peers. The group of peers is how they're represented, not what they…. You could also come up with a group peer is that you strive to be like, but that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about the ones that are most similar to them right now.

Christine: So we can kind of start comparing apples to apples with the peer groups?

Jerry: Absolutely. They're self-defined apples.

Christine: Okay.

Armand: Speaking of apples to apples in comparisons, how standard are the definitions for each of the variables in IPEDS?

00:05:22

Jerry: One-hundred percent standard. That's one of the great things about IPEDS. First, IPEDS has a glossary that's available for everybody to see so they know exactly how a data element is defined, how a characteristic of a survey is defined. There is no question about any of these things and it's really become the gold standard in all of these. Some of these definitions have been around for a long time. For instance, the Classification of Instructional Programs, otherwise known as CIP, has been around since 1980 and it's really the way that everybody recognizes how institutions categorize degrees in any number of fields. And something that's been around thirty-five years, you can have a lot of faith in trend analysis when you're talking about something like that.

Christine: Outside of the trustee area, there's other people who could use this data if they knew it was around. Who would you say could most benefit from using it?

Jerry: Parents and students, certainly. Parents and perspective students. So one of the best uses of IPEDS data is through a very popular web application called The College Navigator. That's been around for about nine years.

Christine: it's one of your brain children, isn't it?

Jerry: It is. You can have an idea but you still need the people that know how to work with technology to make it happen for you. I was very fortunate to have a great team of people. One of those people is still the Director of Technology at IES, Brian Taylor. So he's been around from the inception of it and he's still there, so it keeps getting better and better every year.

Christine: How can people use the navigator?

00:07:23

Jerry: They can simply look at variables for one institution or several institutions side-by-side-by-side. So this includes not only the IPEDS data, which as we've said includes enrollment data, graduation rates and so on, but it also includes your information from elsewhere in the Department of Education, like campus security, accreditation, college athletics. And it also includes some information from the Federal Student Aid Office. This is really one-stop shopping to find out as much as you can about an institution or a group of institutions. One of the ways parents and perspective students look at it is if they're ready to start looking at colleges that they might want to attend, they can go to this and they can bring out the list of institutions to meet their criteria. It could be location. I could be the type of degrees they have. It could be athletics that they have there – any number of things. They could get that information, they could look at this. And even more than that, they can then download that information so they don't have to just look at it on a computer screen. If they're a lot of searches they want to do, they can have all of these right in front of them to help them make these decisions.

Christine: That's got to be really helpful for students.

Armand: What are some of the other areas that are captured by College Navigator that would be useful to a wider audience?

Jerry: Really, everything that is in IPEDS is reflected in the College Navigator and it's not just data, but there's charts and graphs that you can get also. It's not just – somebody doesn't want to look at a lot of numbers, they look at pretty pictures instead and get an idea of what's going on there.

Armand: One of those areas that I think a lot of people would be interested in, particularly trustees, is higher education finance. Could you help us understand what's available in IPEDS with regard to that? How are the data broken up with finance?

00:09:32
Jerry: Sure. In finance, there's both revenue pieces of information along with the expense information. For expense, there is functional expense categories. These are groupings of expenses by major classes of programs and supporting systems. Within IPEDS, there are a few others besides the ones I'm going to have to mention, but these are the primary ones. You have institutional support. You have academic support, instruction, operation and maintenance of plant, public service, research, student services, net grant aid to students, and a few others as I said previously. But in looking at all of these, there are any number of interesting analyses that one can do. I believe you're looking at some of that right now, aren't you Armand?

Armand: We've worked with this data quite frequently: our series of State Reports and two of our more recent reports, Getting What You Pay For, and Education or Reputation. We looked at several of the functional expense categories to help trustees understand the trends in instructional spending versus administrative spending, so we took a couple of the categories and created those metrics. Right now, we're looking at a broader project. We looked at the instructional and administrative expenditures at over eleven hundred colleges and universities and identified those that could use some extra special attention, so to speak, for those particular trends: ones with high administrative growth with relative low instructional growth. In some cases, it decreases in instructional spending.

Christine: Really? So people are experiencing a decrease in instructional spending and an increase in administrative costs? What about tuition? Is that going up?

00:11:29

Armand: Tuition's going up almost universally at these institutions. But really the point here is that we ant to help boards start asking the question: Why is this happening? These aren't just positive metrics by any means but they're very important in pointing out just areas where trustees can jump in and work collaboratively with their leadership at their institution to find those answers.

Jerry: And one of the unique things about that analysis that you're doing, because IPEDS has such set definitions and they've been standard for so many years, you can do significant trend analyses with this data. So you're not just looking at one year or two year, you could look at five years. You could look at ten years if you wanted to and you can see how the numbers in these categories change over time. And you could spot where jumps might have happened between year six and seven and it doesn't continue through year ten so there's a lot of very interesting things that could analyze when you're looking at this information to give people a much more robust picture of what's going on at their institution.

Armand: How much easier is it today to do this type of analysis than it was, say, when IPEDS first started?

Jerry: Anybody can do these analyses online with all the tools that National Center for Education's statistics provides. There's tools that allow people to create their own tables. There're tools that allow people to look at one institution in trends over time. There are tools that allow people to actually examine the information that an institution submitted in their own survey form. So there are

any number of things that you could use them. For a more sophisticated user, there's the ability to create your own data files that allow you to pull in data from different surveys. So you could have staff information along with the finance information along with the enrollment information so you don't have to keep going back and forth to different data sets. You can create your own data file for analyses.

00:13:51

Armand: What are some of the hidden gems in a data base that people aren't using right now?

Jerry: Everybody's using something but the pieces of information that most people use are the more general ones. So if you read the newspaper often or read anything online that's talking about education, you'll usually see tuition and fee information. You'll see enrollment information. You'll see degree information about how many people are graduating with degrees in which area. So those are the most popular, the ones that you'll see stories about. You don't see many stories on the finance information. You don't see many stories on staff information. Not as much on graduation rates as I would expect. So they're not really hidden gems because somebody's using them, but they're not the ones that really hit popular culture the most.

Christine: What I'm hearing is that accountability isn't as far off as we think it is, that the information is available to use if people want to find it.

Armand: Pretty much. It's all publicly available information. I think the thing that I'm most impressed with IPEDS is just the speed with which you're able to query large time scales of information across a variety of institution. I mean, we're talking thousands in many instances.

00:15:29

Jerry: And because IPEDS is collected over three points of time in a calendar year, February, April and October, it makes the availability of the data – you don't have to wait for everything for a long period of time. There's new data always available in the different data sets.

Armand: So, Jerry, this is all very helpful. You'd be surprised at the responses, or maybe not surprised at the responses, that we get from trustees when it comes to the federally reported data. I can think of just a couple of instances where we've worked with trustees and the two most common objections that we get, either from trustees or from institutions, is that either, number one, IPEDS data aren't reliable proxies for institutional performance or even just not having an understanding of what is available and what level of deep dive trustees need to have in the IPEDS system.

Jerry: That's surprising that they don't think the IPEDS data is reliable since they're the ones that are reporting that data, the institution is. Maybe if people use that data, the data would get a little bit better and then they wouldn't worry about if it was reliable or not, and it would help with some accountability as well.

Armand: That's really the function of the board and our hope is to help promote accountability.

Christine: Armand, what would a trustee need to know in order to start using this information to start improving their school?

Armand: Well, the biggest thing is just understanding what's available in the database. The major things that come up are tuition trends, the finance issues that we've discussed, what are the balance of administrative and instructional

expenditure, graduation rates, of course, staffing issues. But just knowing what the universe of information is in the database.

00:17:27

Jerry: It's interesting. Recently, I served on the American University Alumni Board. We had several meetings a year and I always would try to get some questions answered from the administration: a vice president or whoever was attending one of our meetings. Those questions always had to do with data. I came there thinking I knew everything about data from my background and I had questions that I knew that the data that they had at the institution itself might be valuable to analyze. It would certainly be valuable to the Alumni Board. It'd be more valuable to the Board of Trustees. I was never able to get that data. We always tried to get those questions asked either through our own meetings or as a representative going to one of the Board of Trustees meetings, but that never really took place either. I always had the feeling that the Board of Trustees would be very well served by, one, knowing the data that was available to them, two, asking the right kinds of questions about that data, and then three, making more informed decisions based on data rather than through anecdotal information.

Christine: Well, I guess that's just proof about how important these meetings are. People are trying to keep this information hidden. It definitely needs to be brought into the light. The transparency that you get from publicly available data is very useful but not always perfect.

Armand: And that's our hope with a lot of our publications and our upcoming project in administrative expenditure, that we get more eyes on the data. That's really the most important thing here is that it becomes a more commonly used and visible tool because it's there and it's powerful.

00:19:23

Jerry: And the more the data is used, the better the quality becomes and the more accountable people are to how they report that data based on the feedback that they get about that data.

Christine: And then we can start making positive change?

Jerry: Hopefully.

Armand: That's the intent.

Jerry: …to help with that.

Christine: All right. Armand, thank you so much for being here. Jerry, thank you for all of your sense of knowledge about IPEDS and NCEFS.

Jerry: It was great. I had a lot of fun. Thank you.

Armand: My pleasure.

Christine: If you're interested in how institutional data can be used to affect change at colleges and universities, please see Implementing Governance for a New Era on our website. It's on www.goacta.org. Or, by all means, email us at info@goacta.org and we'll be happy to answer any questions or comments. I'm your host, Christine Ravold. You've been listening to Higher Ed Now.

[End]