



Highlights of [GAO-10-871](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) is the federal government's core postsecondary data collection program. Approximately 6,800 postsecondary schools are required to complete annual IPEDS surveys on topics including enrollment, graduation rates, and finances. As policymakers have sought additional data to increase accountability in postsecondary education, the number and complexity of questions on the IPEDS surveys have increased. GAO was mandated to examine: (1) the time and cost burden for schools completing the IPEDS surveys, (2) options for reducing this burden, and (3) the potential benefits and challenges of collecting additional graduation rate data. To do this, GAO interviewed staff from 22 postsecondary schools, reviewed existing estimates of the IPEDS time and cost burden, interviewed officials at the Department of Education (Education) and Office of Management and Budget, and interviewed higher education associations and higher education software providers.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Education reevaluate official IPEDS burden estimates, communicate IPEDS training opportunities to a wider range of schools, and coordinate with education software providers to help improve the quality and reliability of IPEDS reporting features. Education agreed with GAO's recommendations and plans to address these issues.

[View GAO-10-871](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact George A. Scott at (202) 512-7215 or scottg@gao.gov.

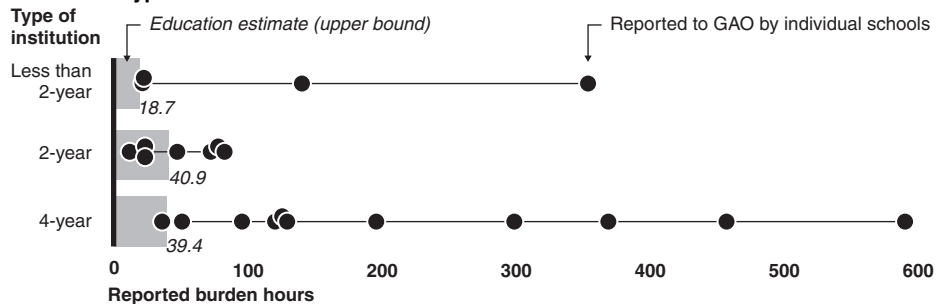
HIGHER EDUCATION

Institutions' Reported Data Collection Burden Is Higher Than Estimated but Can Be Reduced through Increased Coordination

What GAO Found

The IPEDS burden reported by schools to GAO varies widely but was greater than Education's estimates for 18 of the 22 schools interviewed. Over half of these institutions reported time burdens that were more than twice Education's estimates. Schools reported time burdens ranging from 12 to 590 hours, compared with the 19 to 41 hours Education estimated for this group of institutions (see fig.). Staff experience and school characteristics such as organizational structure appear to affect the burden. Education's official burden estimates may be lower than those reported to GAO because officials rely on potentially outdated baseline estimates and consult with few survey respondents (known as keyholders) about the impact of survey changes.

Time Burdens Reported by 22 Institutions Compared with Education's Official Estimates by Institution Type



Source: GAO analysis of Education documents and interviews.

Training, software, and administrative supports can reduce the IPEDS reporting burden and would be enhanced by increased coordination among institutions, Education, and software providers. Education is developing training modules targeting new keyholders, but some keyholders at career and technical schools are unaware of available training, which may be due to challenges Education faces in reaching these types of schools. Campus data systems may also reduce the burden through automated reporting features; however, few schools GAO interviewed use these features due to concerns that they do not always work correctly. One factor contributing to this is the lack of direct and timely coordination between software providers and Education to incorporate changes to the IPEDS surveys.

Collecting additional graduation rate data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and income could be useful but would increase the IPEDS burden. Graduation rates could be used to study achievement gaps, but they are a limited measure because they only account for first-time, full-time students. All 4- and 2-year schools are already required to report some graduation rates disaggregated by race and ethnicity to IPEDS, and staff at all types of schools told GAO they could do so at a modest additional burden. Reporting graduation rates by income is more challenging because income data are available only for the 71 percent of full-time students that apply for federal student aid. Keyholders said calculating graduation rates by income for these students would add a considerable burden by potentially requiring institutions to merge separate student records and financial aid databases.