

Postsecondary Institutional Ratings System (PIRS) Update February 2014

The Postsecondary Institutional Ratings System (PIRS) is a US Department of Education (USED) initiative designed to assess the performance of all institutions of higher education with the stated goals of advancing institutional accountability while also enhancing consumer information. The Department intends, through these ratings, to compare colleges with similar missions and identify colleges that do the most to help disadvantaged and underrepresented students, as well as identify colleges that are improving their performance. In the upcoming reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, we anticipate that the President will propose allocating financial aid based upon these college ratings by 2018. More general background information from the Department can be found at <http://www.ed.gov/college-affordability/college-ratings-and-paying-performance>

The ratings will be available for students who are choosing colleges in the 2015 school year and a significant amount of work needs to be done under a very tight schedule in order to be operational by that time. Several opportunities for community feedback have taken place. The USED convened a listening tour in November 2013 to gather feedback on the proposal and a blog from Deputy Undersecretary Jamieenne Studley summarizes both the Administration's goals for PIRS and the feedback they received on the tour. <http://www.ed.gov/blog/2013/12/college-ratings-listening-tour-college-value-and-affordability/>

As part of the information gathering process, the Department of Education also recently asked for written input on the data elements, metrics, methods of data collection, methods of weighting or scoring, and presentation frameworks needed for a PIRS. The five categories of questions the Department addressed in their Request for Information (RFI) provide some insight into the directions the PIRS is likely to take.

1. Questions Regarding Data Elements, Metrics, and Data Collection
2. Questions Regarding Weighting or Scoring
3. Questions Regarding the Development of Comparison Groups
4. Questions Regarding the Presentation of Ratings Information
5. Questions Regarding Existing Ratings Systems

While the formal request for information has closed, the RFI provides a great deal of additional background information on the questions and is available at <https://federalregister.gov/a/2013-30011>. Many higher education organizations and institutions took the opportunity to respond and it's worth reviewing those comments to appreciate the wide range of reactions. All of the comments are available at <http://www.regulations.gov/#!docketBrowser;rpp=25;po=0;dct=PS;D=ED-2013-IES-0151>

On January 22, NCES convened a Symposium featuring a technical panel of 17 experts from institutions of higher education, foundations, and other organizations (including SHEEO) to provide additional input into these questions. Takeaways from the presentations included agreement that this is a complex challenge and NCES is being asked to address it in a very short time period, using data for both

accountability and consumer information will be difficult, a “one size fits all” single rating is unlikely to be effective, there are existing models (including state systems) that can be informative, and there is value in starting simply. The Symposium was recorded and the Department will make the recording and submitted comments available soon.

The Chronicle of Higher Education reported/blogged on the Symposium (including some live comments) (<http://chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/live-blog-the-education-dept-s-technical-symposium-on-college-ratings/72377>) and the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) also provided a nice summary: <http://www.airweb.org/eAIR/specialfeatures/Pages/Postsecondary-Institution-Ratings-System.aspx>

There is understandable anxiety over the unknown and there is still a lot we don't yet know about the actual implementation of PIRS including data sources, the methodology for developing the ratings and the framework for presenting those institutional ratings. However, I fully expect PIRS to move forward in some form and rather quickly. President Obama has addressed the issues of access, affordability and accountability frequently and the directive to establish PIRS comes from the White House. More clarity is likely to emerge in the next couple of months as NCES creates a development and implementation strategy; this is very much a work in progress and we will continue to monitor events and share information as we have it.