

AAG Washington Monitor

BLS Terminates Collection of Labor Data on Women Workers; AAG Responds

On August 29, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) announced that it had recently decided to suspend the collection of data on women workers as part of the Current Employment Statistics Survey (CES). The move has drawn criticism from women's organizations as well as a number of academic associations, including the AAG.

The CES is a monthly nationwide survey of payroll records that covers over 300,000 U.S. businesses. Only one question in the survey is devoted to women workers—it asks for the total number of women employed at a given business. The BLS gave three reasons for the discontinuation of this question: 1) it imposed a significant reporting burden on survey respondents because payroll records do not typically include gender identification; 2) the women worker data were little used; and 3) BLS will continue to provide extensive labor market information on women, primarily through its monthly survey of 60,000 households (the Current Population Survey, or CPS).

The BLS justifications notwithstanding, the AAG has submitted a letter to Kathleen Utgoff, Commissioner at BLS, requesting that data on women workers continue to be collected. In addition, the Institute for Women's Policy Research, a public policy research organization dedicated to informing and stimulating the debate on issues of critical importance to women and their families, has written a letter to members of Congress informing them of the change and the need to restore data

collection. On October 12, the AAG agreed to sign on to the letter, which states:

- *There is no adequate replacement for the CES:* CPS data will not provide an acceptable substitute. One former BLS commissioner noted that the CES "provides more reliable information on the current trend of wage and salary employment" than the CPS.
- *The CES Survey is not burdensome for businesses:* The only organizations representing businesses that submitted comments to BLS about the discontinuation of this data collection all supported continuing the data collection. Not only are businesses able to respond to these queries easily, but the record shows that they want the data collection to continue.
- *Researchers Use This Important Data:* Many of the thousands of comments submitted to BLS in support of this data collection came from researchers at such organizations as the New York Federal Reserve Bank and the Consortium of Social Science Associations (including sociologists, political scientists, and others). (The AAG is a COSSA member.)

Commission on the Future of Higher Education

In a September 19 speech at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings announced the creation of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education. The nineteen-member panel is charged with developing a comprehensive long-range national strategy for postsecondary education and will submit a final report with specific findings and recommendations to Secretary Spellings

by August 1, 2006. It is the Bush Administration's first significant foray into higher education policy after five years in office devoted primarily to K-12 education and the signature No Child Left Behind legislation.

In general, leaders of the higher ed community have expressed pleasure that the administration is finally focusing on postsecondary issues. A few concerns, however, have been raised and bear watching in the coming months. There is some fear that the work of the commission will lead to increased federal intrusion into higher education. Additionally, there have been many questions raised about the membership of the body. Unlike past federal commissions, which have been primarily composed of and led by members of the academic community, the current panel includes five corporate executives and is chaired by Charles Miller, a private investor. This makeup raises the concern that the commission's recommendations are going to be focused on reworking higher ed as a training ground for business jobs.

Of note to the geographic community is that David Ward, President of the American Council on Education and former President of the AAG, is a member of the panel. The first meeting of the commission took place on October 17 in Washington, but served primarily as an introductory session. AAG staff will monitor future meetings of the commission, reach out to and work closely with various commissioners, and comment as appropriate on important topics raised for discussion. ■

John Wertman
jwertman@aag.org

Deadline for PG Book Review Editor Nominations Extended.

Please submit applications or nominations to profgeog@aag.org by Nov. 17, 2005.

See www.aag.org for details.