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Republicans Defend Accountability Drive

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Republicans on the education committee of the U.S. House of Representatives defended their party's efforts to make colleges more accountable for their graduation rates at a hearing last month.

Rep. John A. Boehner of Ohio, chairman of the Committee on Education and the Workforce, said a recent report by the Education Trust that found disparities in the degree-completion rates of students from different ethnic backgrounds and family-income levels showed that the issue needs attention.

But Democrats on the panel said provisions being pushed by Republicans to renew the Higher Education Act would make college more expensive and consequently hurt graduation rates. Critics have also complained that graduation rates are an unreliable measure of colleges' performance.

Under current law, institutions are required to calculate their graduation rates, which must be reported to the U.S. Department of Education, by tracking the number of students who graduate within six years of first enrolling at that institution. Students who transfer to another institution are counted as dropouts, even if they go on to receive a degree.

To more accurately track graduation rates, Paul E. Lingenfelter, executive director of the State Higher Education Executive Officers, told the committee that there needed to be a system through which institutions and researchers could both identify when a student began higher education and track that student throughout his or her college career, from one institution to another. Such a system would help determine which colleges contributed to a student's education and to what extent, Mr. Lingenfelter said.

Rep. Howard P. (Buck) McKeon, a California Republican who is chairman of the panel's subcommittee for higher education, said improving the accuracy of graduation rates would be difficult because of privacy concerns.

"We could give everybody a number, kind of like a Social Security number, and then we could track them by that," Representative McKeon said. "But I know we have people who have great concerns about being tracked."

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