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Proposed Change in How Federal Government Collects Student Data Raises Privacy Concerns

By JOSEPH GIDJUNIS

The federal government is considering a plan to begin tracking the educational progress of every student enrolled in higher education as part of a massive overhaul of the database it uses to calculate higher-education statistics.

Officials at the Department of Education are studying the feasibility of requiring colleges to provide specific information about each of their students in order to create a "unit record" system. If the department moves forward with the proposal, it would largely scrap the current system that colleges use to report data in summary form about total enrollment, student aid, graduation rates, and other measures.

The Education Department says the proposed system would allow it to more accurately measure a college's performance by generating better information about retention and graduation rates, as well as, for the first time, tracking an institution's net price, or what students actually pay after financial aid is taken into account.




But the question of whether the federal government should demand unit records is causing a rift between higher-education groups. The topic is especially sensitive now because the Bush administration and Republican leaders in Congress are demanding that colleges become more accountable for the performance of their students.

Proponents of the change -- such as the American Council on Education, an umbrella group representing colleges, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and the State Higher Education Executive Officers association -- argue that the current system does not provide an accurate measure of how well colleges educate students.

"Republicans are asking what they are getting for their investment," says Travis J. Reindl, director of state policy analysis for the American Association of State Colleges and

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Universities. "For us in the public sector, not being able to provide a thorough answer is something that needs to be addressed."

Advocates for private colleges, though, object to the proposal. While they agree that a student-record system would lead to more-accurate higher-education statistics, the lobbyists worry about the risk to student privacy and the need to potentially make changes to their own campus computer systems to provide the data.

"The concept of having the government track an individual's behavior as a result of them enrolling in college troubles us," says Sarah A. Flanagan, vice president for government relations at the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

The ultimate decision on whether the change will be made rests with Congress. It has to give the Education Department the authority to build the new system in the upcoming reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, which governs most federal student-aid programs.

If lawmakers give the go-ahead and the needed money, 1,500 colleges will test the system during the 2006-7 academic year. If the test is successful, the system would be operational the following year. The Education Department would not comment on how much money is necessary to make the system operational, but higher-education lobbyists estimate the project will initially require about \$5-million.

Replaces IpedS

Under federal law, colleges are required to report enrollment statistics, institutional revenue and expenditures, tuition, and faculty-salary averages, among other data, for the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System survey. Known commonly as IpedS, the survey -- which is composed of about 10 reports -- is the only such central database and is heavily used by federal and state officials to develop higher-education policy.

In an effort to get more institutions to respond with complete information, Congress in 1992 tied completion of the survey to student-aid eligibility. Even so, the data that comes to the Education Department often presents an incomplete picture, particularly when it comes to graduation rates and net tuition prices.

Federal rules for calculating graduation rates do not track students who transfer from one college to another, so those who earn a bachelor's degree from a four-year college other than the

one in which they first enrolled are counted as dropouts. By collecting individual student records, Education Department officials say they would be able to track all students between institutions and throughout the life of their college careers.

"People are making decisions off of assumptions, and they will make better decisions if they have all of the information," says Paul E. Lingenfelter, executive director of the State Higher Education Executive Officers, a nonprofit group based in Denver.

Another measure that colleges say they do not get credit for is net price. Right now, colleges report to the government the tuition price they list in their marketing materials. Under the proposed unit-record system, the Education Department would be able to calculate net price since it would have access to tuition rates as well as financial-aid records. Even though tuition at public colleges increased by 10 percent, on average, this year at four-year public colleges and 9 percent at private colleges, according to the College Board, higher-education officials say the actual dollar amount most students paid decreased.

"Policy debates have focused almost exclusively on the sticker price when significant amounts of students don't pay those prices," said Brian K. Fitzgerald, staff director of the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, which reports to Congress on student-aid issues. "Many institutions feel, especially four-year private colleges ... that they are unfairly criticized by federal officials for high tuition when the lowest income students literally have a zero net price."

Still, with identity theft on the rise and a push for institutions to remove personal data, such as Social Security numbers, from student records, private-college and student organizations say the proposed unit-record system is a step backward for privacy rights.

"There is a lot that colleges and the federal government can do together to improve persistence and graduation rates," said Ms. Flanagan. "But tracking students is not the justifiable means to get to that end."

In addition to just tracking students, Mary M. Sapp, assistant vice president at the University of Miami, is concerned about the Education Department's proposal to keep student records indefinitely.

"How would you feel if the federal government tracked you and kept you in a database practically forever, and followed you from one school to another?" she asks. "I think it's a bit chilling."

Maintaining Privacy

In order to put the system in place, the administration would need to amend the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, or Ferpa, which forbids colleges that receive federal funds from releasing most student records without permission from parents or an adult student. Ajita R. Talwalker, president of the United States Student Association, says, "There is a potential for abuse by the government or by individuals who have access to this information."

C. Dennis Carroll, associate commissioner of the postsecondary studies division at the Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics, which is leading the project, said at a panel discussion with higher-education officials last month that the center will maintain privacy by forbidding access to other government agencies and even the institutions that submit the data for the system.

But Ms. Flanagan fears that the Education Department will not be able to adequately protect the information.

"We think NCES is a very good research organization, and we don't question their motives," she said. "But I don't think the statistical people at the Department of Education have the political might to keep away all of the political interests who will want this data."

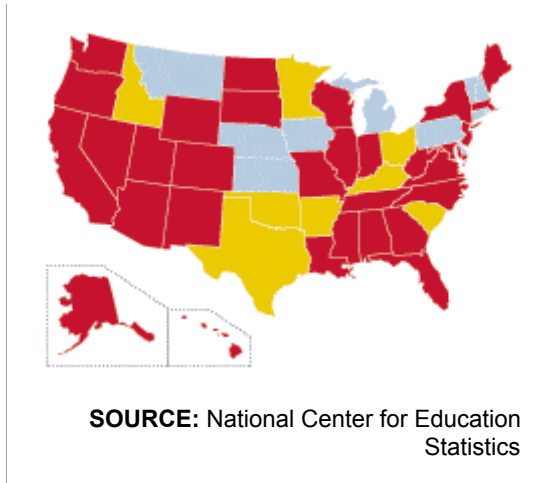
HOW STATES COLLECT STUDENT DATA

The U.S. Department of Education is considering a plan that would require public and private colleges to provide it with specific information about each student. The system would replace a current federal survey that collects the data in summary form. Most states already collect similar individual data, known as "unit records," from their institutions, but mostly only from public colleges:

Collect from public institutions only

Collect from public and private nonprofit institutions, but not from for-profit colleges

Do not collect data



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