

Feds want to get to know each student

A proposed revision would provide the government access to individuals' data via their Social Security numbers

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A proposed change in the collection of data from higher education facilities could mean an invasion of privacy for college students.

The National Center for Education Statistics has suggested a revision of its Integ Postsecondary Education Data System.

IPEDS is a system the government uses to collect data about institutions that offer postsecondary education, such as student enrollment, tuition, race and gender, according to www.nces.ed.gov.

The NCES Web site states data is collected from approximately 9,900 postsecondary institutions. This data is submitted by colleges and universities as a whole, and not on a student-by-student basis. The suggested revision of the IPEDS system calls for colleges and universities to submit information on each individual student, and they plan to organize the system using student Social Security numbers.

The State Higher Education Executive Officers Association supports the revision of IPEDS.

Hans L'Orange, director of Data and Information Management, said the revision would help answer a lot of currently unanswerable questions.

He said the current system only looks at people who start and finish their postsecondary education at one institution and are enrolled full time. It does not take into account students who switch colleges or go to school part time.

If a student enrolls in a college, he or she is automatically looked at as a new student in the IPEDS system, and it is not known if he or she has attended previous colleges or taken years off.

"If we can look at students individually, then we can see what's going on and see if it took them more than four years to graduate or if they attended more than one school," L'Orange said.

He also said the revision would give the federal government a closer look at the tuition charged by colleges and universities.

"Right now we get information on average tuition," L'Orange said. "If we had more specific information, we could see if states are getting their value out of their institutions."

Communication junior Kelly Sexton-Caudillo said she doesn't see a problem with the proposed revision.

"Our social security numbers are issued by the government, so they already have them," she said. "I don't see the big deal if they use them to look at our school records."

The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities is the main opponent of the revision of IPEDS.

Its Web site, www.naicu.edu, states, "We do not believe that the price for enrolling in college should be permanent entry into a federal registry, and we fear that the existence of such a massive registry will prove irresistible to future demands for access to the registry for non-educational purposes."

The association fears the government will play a Big Brother role if IPEDS is revised, and it does not see a clear need for the government to collect this information.

"The proposed system, which would use Social Security numbers as identifiers, is a step backward for privacy rights," the association stated on its Web site.

L'Orange insists conversations are just starting and nothing would be done without an intense scrutiny of the privacy protections that would accompany the IPEDS system.

Biology junior Katie Hutton said she doesn't think the federal government needs to collect data on students on an individual basis.

"You fill out so many papers when you enroll in college," she said, "that they could just ask you the questions they wanted to know and still get their information anonymously."

L'Orange said NCES is in the process of working on a report to submit to Congress next year called a "feasibility study" to see if the revision can realistically be done. Congress will decide if it wants to approve and fund the program.

"If Congress agrees to fund the program," L'Orange said, "a pilot study would run on a sample set of institutions to see if the system is successful."

The pilot study is predicted to run in the fall of 2006, he said.

"My feeling is, if it gets to the pilot study, it's gonna go all the way," L'Orange said.

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