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Wrangling Over Unit Records

Nearly anything said, murmured or leaked by the [Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education](#) draws close scrutiny these days, just months before the scheduled release of the independent body's final report.

So it comes as no surprise that the commission's rather rough [draft report](#), which endorsed the idea of a national "unit records" database that would track students' performance throughout their academic careers, has reinvigorated the debate over whether such a system would help or harm higher education.

Supporters of the centralized database, including the chairman of the commission and a number of community college leaders, say it is the only true way to get an accurate picture of the postsecondary landscape, as the proposed system would track college students who are currently missed in the reporting process — including those who are part-time, enrolled in courses at multiple institutions, or drop in and out of college.

Private colleges have been the most outspoken opponents of the tracking system. Many officials say that the reporting requirements would violate student privacy, and that sufficient enrollment and financial aid information is already provided to states by individual colleges.

"We believe the proposal inherent in the Spellings Commission is so egregious and ill-conceived that it is necessary to express the views of the public," David Warren, president of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, said Thursday during a news conference to announce the [release of a poll](#) showing that the majority of Americans surveyed oppose the unit records idea.

The poll was taken starting the day after the commission's report was released. Coincidence? Not exactly, said Warren. He said his association and the polling company had drafted the questions in advance, and that Warren had pushed for immediate surveying after reading the commission's draft.

More than three out of five people in the poll said they opposed "requiring colleges and universities to report individual student information to the federal government," and 45 percent of the 1,000 people surveyed said they "strongly opposed" the plan.

Results also showed that a majority of those asked said enough data is already being collected at the college level, and that the proposed data collection doesn't address or solve public policy issues. Many also expressed concerns over safeguarding the data.

"It seems overwhelmingly clear that the public opposes the idea that once a student signs up for a course, he or she is thrust into a federal registry that may well follow them throughout their life," Warren said.

But Travis Reindl, director of state policy analysis at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, who supports the tracking system, said the [three-question survey](#) is inherently flawed.

"Several questions are leading and misleading. There are details that are intentionally left out," Reindl said. "The bottom line on this is that the study doesn't accurately represent the story."

Reindl said he takes issue with wording in one question that says the data would be linked "potentially to information from the student's high school and elementary school records," when he said the conversation thus far has focused on postsecondary tracking. He said earlier language in that passage implies that "the federal government will be running around telling everyone to release individuals' information to everyone, which simply

isn't true."

The proposed tracking system would follow guidelines for the release of information in student records set forth in the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act](#), Reindl said.

Susan Hattan, a senior consultant for NAICU, said that when the association worked with the company that does the polling, they "tried hard to have neutrally worded questions, as opposed to a push poll."

The debate over the proposed federal tracking system kicked into full gear [more than a year ago](#) when the Education Department's [National Center for Education Statistics released a feasibility report](#) that called for an overhaul of the way education data is received and reported.

Although program details are still somewhat vague, it is widely accepted that students would be entered into a national registry and assigned an identifier — almost certainly not a Social Security number for privacy reasons. Gwen Dungy, executive director of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, said she only supports a system in which students aren't identified by a Social Security number.

The system would give the federal government and institutions information about financial aid, transfer rates and graduation rates for full- and part-time students. More information would be provided than what is now available in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (commonly known as IPEDS), which all public and private institutions are required to submit to the federal government.

The student unit record plan would require Congressional approval. Congress gives the Education Department authority to build a new system in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, which governs the majority of federal student-aid programs.

Charles Miller, chairman of the federal higher education commission, said the tracking system is an answer to what he calls a "serious records gap." Miller said the growing number of students who take classes part-time and who are "untraditional" students are falling through the cracks.

"We lose out on a great part of data that's pertinent," Miller said. "We are making higher ed decisions and we don't have all the resources to do it. If we don't have information on when students enter and when they leave, our findings are incomplete."

Paul E. Lingenfelter, president of the State Higher Education Executive Officers, said concerns that the federal government wouldn't know what to do with an influx of new data are unfounded. "We already put enormous resources behind an ineffective system — individually designed reporting systems across the country. "If we can have enough discipline, we can create a data set that's simple enough."

Miller said some states have put in place effective systems to track students through their education. He mentioned Florida as an example. Jay Pfeiffer, who oversees that state's unit record system, said his state's data collection methods allow for tracking of almost every student who remains in Florida for college.

Pfeiffer said he is "not convinced that a federal student record database gives us more than we already have."

Rep. Howard P. "Buck" McKeon, chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives Education and the Workforce Committee, came out strongly against the Education Department's proposal last year. He said in a written statement that "language in the recently passed higher education bill reflects the belief that creating a federal database of personal information is not necessary for evaluating academic institutions or informing the American public. In fact, many members have been vocal in saying that it is a direct violation of students' personal privacy."

The privacy card has been played by many during the unit records debate. Rebecca Thompson, legislative director of the United States Students Association, said during Thursday's NAICU press conference that she is troubled by any proposal that allows the government to follow a student from "the time we enter elementary school until the day we die." She said another concern is that the government would use the database information for non-germane purposes.

Throughout its meetings this year, various commission members, including those who work for technology

companies like IBM, have assured the public that privacy issues can be handled if the proposal is adopted.

Added Miller: "I'm cautious about protecting privacy, but we have to assume we can develop an adequate system. Is having students' information at 4,000 different places more safe? I don't think so."

Peter McPherson, president of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, said the goals of the unit records system are worth working toward. "There may be 15 percent more students graduating than the current records reflect, and we don't know the pattern of student movement. I keep wondering if there isn't a way to work through the privacy issues to find a way to get this information."

Both David Baime, vice president for government relations for the American Association of Community Colleges, and Eduardo Marti, president of Queensborough Community College, said the national database would be helpful, but only if useful information such as retention records are reported back to the colleges.

"It's going to be good for community colleges," Marti said. "We are at the beginning stages of a student's education. This can enable us to prove and track when we are successful. Right now we are missing some key information."

Marti and Miller both said they would like to see a system that also tracks students when they start their careers. "The important factor for us is to see how our students are being trained for the world of work," Marti said.

Baime said it is "inevitable" that the country is moving toward a centralized database of information, whether in two years or in 20. "The system would demand it," he said.

Still, some are not convinced. Christopher Nelson, president of St. John's College, called the proposal "Orwellian."

"The beauty of higher education is we believe that nobody has all of the answers," he said during the news conference. "The more we try to bring about a single federalized way of looking at each unit, each piece of the labor force, the more we are headed toward a system that stifles innovation and competition."

— [Elia Powers](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2006/07/07/unitrecord>.*

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