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## Federal Plan to Keep Data on Students Worries Some

By DIANA JEAN SCHEMO

**W**ASHINGTON, Nov. 28 - A proposal by the federal government to create a vast new database of enrollment records on all college and university students is raising concerns that the move will erode the privacy rights of students.

Until now, universities have provided individual student information to the federal government only in connection with federally financed student aid. Otherwise, colleges and universities submit information about overall enrollment, graduation, prices and financial aid without identifying particular students.

For the first time, however, colleges and universities would have to give the government data on all students individually, whether or not they received financial assistance, with their Social Security numbers.

The bid arises from efforts in Congress and elsewhere to extend the growing emphasis on school accountability in elementary and high schools to postsecondary education. Supporters say that government oversight of individual student data will make it easier for taxpayers and policy makers to judge the quality of colleges and universities through more reliable statistics on graduation, transfers and retention.

The change would also allow federal officials to track individual students as they journey through the higher education system. In recent years, increasing numbers of students have been attending more than one university, dropping out or taking longer than the traditional four years to graduate. Current reporting practices cannot capture such trends; a mobile student is recorded as a new student at each institution.

Under the proposal, the National Center for Education Statistics at the Department of Education would receive, analyze and guard the data. In making its case for the change, the center points to a history of working with student information and says it has never been forced to share it with law enforcement or other agencies. The proposal, first reported in the current issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, is supported by the American Council on Education, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, but opposed by other education organizations, like the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

A department overview of the proposal insisted that data would not be shared with other agencies and that outsiders could not gain access. By law, the summary says in capitals, "Information about individuals may NEVER leave N.C.E.S.," the National Center for Education Statistics.

But Jasmine L. Harris, legislative director at the United States Student Association, an advocacy group for students, said that since the Sept. 11 attacks, the balance between privacy and the public interest had been shifting. "We're in a different time now, a very different climate," Ms. Harris said. "There's the huge possibility that the database could be misused, and there are no protections for student privacy."

She pointed to the National Directory of New Hires, a register of people who re-enter the workforce, which began as an effort to track job trends. Since its creation, however, the database has also been used to track parents who fail to pay child support or who owe the federal government non-tax debt, she said. "The door is wide open," Ms. Harris said.

Luke Swarthout, higher education associate at the State PIRG for Higher Education, said his civic group, which has always monitored consumer issues and privacy rights, was of two minds about the plan. Improving the available data was important for Congress, policymakers and the public, who finance higher education through government loans and grants, Mr. Swarthout said. "But any time you're compiling a list of millions and millions of students, as they go through college, move and have Social Security numbers, we get concerns from a privacy perspective."

For colleges to hand over information on individual students, Congress would have to create an exemption to existing federal privacy laws, said Sarah Flanagan, vice president for government relations at the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

"The concept that you enter a federal registry by the act of enrolling in a college in this country is frightening to us," Ms. Flanagan said.

She said that officials from some states had already announced they would like to match the data against prison records. In states where such data is already collected from public universities, she added, there has been pressure to check the school data on students against housing records, driver's licenses and employment records.

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