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House Republicans Defend Proposals for Holding Colleges More Accountable

By [BRENDON FLEMING](#)

Washington

Colleges need to be held more accountable for their graduation rates, Republicans on the education committee of the U.S. House of Representatives said at a hearing on Wednesday -- and provisions in their party's bill to renew the Higher Education Act would help accomplish that, the lawmakers said.

In defense of the accountability measures in the bill, the College Access and Opportunity Act ([HR 4283](#)), Rep. John A. Boehner of Ohio, chairman of the Committee on Education and the Workforce, referred to 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.

"The graduation gap is, unfortunately, just the latest in a number of troubling signs that America's colleges and universities aren't accountable enough to the students they serve," Mr. Boehner said. "With tuition continuing to climb, America's higher-education consumers are beginning to demand greater transparency in everything from the cost of a higher education to what they can expect to get out of that education."

Democrats on the panel, however, said that instead of improving graduation rates, the bill would make college more expensive for many students.

"HR 4283 does little to actually improve graduation rates at colleges and universities," said Rep. Dale E. Kildee of Michigan, the ranking Democrat on the panel's higher-education subcommittee. Provisions in the legislation that affect student aid, including loan repayment and Pell grants, would make college more expensive and consequently hurt graduation rates, he said.

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 State Higher Education Executive Officers, told the committee that there needs to be a system through which institutions and researchers can 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.

Ross Wiener, policy director for the Education Trust, the nonprofit advocacy group that produced the report on degree-completion rates ([The Chronicle](#), June 4), told the committee that graduation statistics collected under the current system are limited but could still be helpful.

Those data are "sufficient to create the beginnings of an accountability system, particularly for four-year colleges," Mr. Wiener said. "Institutions have a responsibility to the students they admit to do what they can to support those students and to help those students graduate."

Mr. Wiener's organization supports improving the system for calculating graduation rates to obtain more-precise figures.

"By moving to a more streamlined, powerful data collection system that allows the tracking of student success at multiple higher-education institutions," he said in written testimony provided to the committee, "we could increase the efficiency and utility of the data collection process while reducing expense in the long run." Such a system would allow the calculation of graduation rates after taking into account transfer students.

Rep. Howard P. (Buck) McKeon of California, 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," he said.

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