

**msu is off campus around the state**



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## **Government looks into tracking student info**

By [JACLYN ROESCHKE](#)

The State News

Some higher education officials are saying the privacy rights of students could soon play second fiddle to the need of government officials to accurately collect enrollment statistics.

The U.S. Department of Education is looking into assembling a database to track students' progress in higher education by identifying them by their Social Security numbers.

In a story by the Chronicle of Higher Education, government officials say the move would allow them to measure retention and graduation rates, the amount of financial aid given to individual students and calculate a university's net price more accurately.

"Basically, we want better information so that better higher education policy can result," said David Wright, senior research analyst with State Higher Education Executive Officers, an association of higher education system heads in Denver. "Right now, (government officials) have questions about the performance of higher education that they have a right to ask based on their substantial investment in the enterprise."

Wright said the government contributes about \$81 billion to higher education, and officials should be able to track the progress of that investment. The new system, if adopted, would allow them to do that.

Currently, schools are required to turn over more vague information to the federal government, such as the number of students who entered a university during a certain year and graduated within five years.

But those samples do not accurately reflect graduation rates of public universities, government officials say. For instance, if a student leaves MSU after two years and transfers to another university, that student would be considered a drop-out at MSU even though he or she continued their education. If students are tracked by their Social Security numbers, they could be followed to different universities.

Sarah Flanagan, vice president for government relations for the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, said proponents of the system point to the fact that about 40 percent of students go through more than one school before earning a degree.

Even so, Flanagan said the system could infringe on privacy rights of students. Currently, privacy information is controlled by individual students through the Federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, or FERPA. A student has to agree to release directory or personal information to others. But, if the new system is instated, FERPA would have to be amended, Flanagan said.

She added there is some concern that in the future the system could be used to track student's unemployment records or driver license information.

Currently, some states do track student information much in the same way the new system would and Flanagan said there is pressure on these states to collect prison records using this information.

Michigan is one of a few states which does not require universities to report student data.

Officials at MSU said they are not sure how the new system could effect Spartans.


Currently, student academic history is released to administrators who have to demonstrate a specific need to view the information.

In addition to FERPA, the university has its own set of guidelines regarding the release of student information. How the new system could effect those guidelines is unknown, said Linda Stanford, assistant provost for academic services and registrar.

"The question that we would have is if there is a change in federal reporting, how this would effect FERPA and the MSU guidelines," Stanford said. "MSU is currently stricter than most regarding student privacy."

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