

Gainesville Sun

Commission proposes federal tracking of students to improve colleges' accountability

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Despite, privacy issues, commission says tracking would improve colleges' accountability

A plan to track college students throughout their academic careers, and perhaps well into their time in the workforce, has some fearing that private student records will be exposed in a Big Brother-style program.

The Commission on the Future of Higher Education, appointed last fall by the U.S. Secretary of Education, is considering a system that would require colleges to submit individual student data to the federal government. Students' academic, enrollment and financial aid information all could be subject to federal scrutiny under the plan.

The proposal, made public recently in draft form, is being touted as a necessary measure to understand graduation and retention rates on a national scale.

According to supporters of the proposal, current data doesn't sufficiently track students who may transfer to multiple colleges across multiple states, making it impossible to determine if taxpayer-supported institutions are effectively fulfilling their missions.

"It's shameful how badly archaic this system is," said Charles Miller, who chairs the commission. "I think it's like a medieval trade union by comparison."

The commission plans to submit its report to U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings by September, but any creation of a database would likely require congressional approval.

Colleges and universities already submit data at the federal level through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, commonly known as Ipeds. But institutions compile Ipeds data independently before it's submitted, and they don't fork over individual student records, as the commission's proposal would have them do.

Joe Glover, associate provost at the University of Florida, said he shares concerns about protecting student privacy. On the other hand, Glover said, the current data on graduation and retention isn't telling the full story.

The state of Florida is a leader when it comes to tracking students who transfer within the state, but tracking becomes more difficult if students leave, he said. As a result, sometimes UF is unfairly penalized by the available data. If a student leaves UF for

perfectly good reasons and completes his degree at the University of Georgia, for instance, current data indicates that he simply dropped out.

"That's considered a failure," Glover said. "That shows up as a failure of the university."

The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, a national higher education group, has come out in force against the proposal. The proposal, which calls for federal analysis of "individual student records," would likely require institutions to provide students' Social Security numbers and their corresponding academic histories to a third party. The massive database is rife for abuse, and there's no compelling reason to create it, according to Susan Hattan, senior consultant for the group.

"The right to privacy seems to trump the federal government's need to compile this information," Hattan said Tuesday.

The student tracking database is not the first proposal from the commission that's been met with some resistance. The commission also floated the idea of widespread standardized testing for college students, but Miller says it was only discussed as a suggestion for colleges and not a mandate.

Miller, known as a staunch advocate for accountability, is a wealthy private investor from Texas who served as chairman of the board of regents for the University of Texas System. A campaign supporter of President Bush, Miller was intimately involved in the development of the Texas program that inspired the federal No Child Left Behind program.

Glover said that given the ideas that have already come from the commission, there's some concern that its report will ultimately infringe on the historic autonomy of colleges and universities.

"I think (there's) a little bit of trepidation that the federal government might be encroaching more than it has in the past on higher education," Glover said.

The commission will still have to vote on whether an overhaul of student tracking methods is necessary, but Miller said he believes there is support for the spirit of the proposal. In its infancy, the proposal is about tracking student data, but Miller said he would ultimately like to see it expanded to see how students fared once they graduated.

"I think that's what the ultimate goal would be," Miller said in a telephone interview with The Sun this week. "I think the first step is to get the data . . . It's just an archaic idea that you wouldn't want that information."

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