

Feds shouldn't bury colleges in red tape

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Americans need affordable, accessible and high-performing colleges and universities, but the regulations being pushed by the federal government would only hinder reaching that goal. U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings is lobbying for congressional approval of the creation of a national database that would track the progress of individual students through college. The information theoretically would be used by consumers to assess the universities' performance.

Spellings has been unable to get Congress to pass legislation requiring the database, so her U.S. Department of Education is seeking to collect similar information through regulation. If the department succeeds, the feds would begin requiring universities to provide a mountain of statistics and reports to a massive federal database, according to reports released this month.

Congress has blocked Spellings' efforts for good reason: A federal database would be a costly, intrusive burden for universities. The expense would be passed on to already overburdened students.

Spellings' motivations are commendable, but her methods are poorly chosen. The ambitious secretary wants to apply No Child Left Behind-like performance measures to higher education and provide a way for students to compare colleges nationwide.

However, it's inappropriate for No Child to be expanded to colleges and universities. There's a critical difference between K-12 education and higher education. A public school student often has no other choice but to attend his or her neighborhood school. But college students have unlimited choices, from state universities to private colleges. They aren't trapped in failing schools.

Also, private institutions provide comparative analyses of U.S. colleges for potential students and their parents. And private businesses and states are increasingly filling the need for Web-based information centers on college performance.

If intense assessment is needed of how well a college is serving its customers, then states are best positioned to fill that role. The federal government should focus on improving the services it provides to college students.

The federal student-aid system is one place where Spellings should start. The system's application, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid - commonly known as the FAFSA - is a complicated and confusing form. Most colleges use it to determine a student's eligibility for financial aid.

The form is so cumbersome, it takes an average of 10 hours to complete. By never explaining how much aid a student will receive, its wasteful process actually discourages many families from applying to college, a report released this month by Harvard University scholars finds.

Spellings should be attacking that sort of government red tape, not expanding it.

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