

**TO:** CHAIRMAN LAMAR ALEXANDER

**CC:** SENATOR PATRICIA MURRAY, MEMBERS OF THE HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR AND PENSIONS COMMITTEE

**REGARDING:** Response to Chairman Alexander's request for comment on the committee's consumer information proposal.

We write today on behalf of the Association of Big Ten Students, which represents half a million students nationwide who care deeply about their future success and ability to lead productive careers following their formal education. We write to express our concern about the lack of information consumers have readily available to them while they make critical decisions about how to spend their money effectively in pursuit of a quality education. While student and families have a working knowledge of an institution's value in terms of culture, online flexibility, and prestige they know and are able to access little information from particular institutions regarding graduation rates, job placement, and the ability to pay down their debts following graduation.

Senator Alexander, in your whitepages you discussed the need for the federal government to "develop data collection and reporting methods to add limited student level measures that provide information regarding the success of former students in the market."<sup>1</sup> We wholeheartedly agree with your vision to implement a student record system and want to express our support in its timely implementation.

Over the course of this academic year we've shown support for the student record system and we hope to have your support and the support of the committee in lifting the ban for the following reasons:

1. Congress already requires institutions that choose to offer federal loans and Pell Grants to report significant amounts of data to the U.S. Department of Education. Through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) the federal government collects information from more than 7,000 colleges and universities. IPEDS, however, were not designed to provide answers to questions that students, families, institutions, and policymakers now want about how well particular colleges and universities are serving their students.
2. A student unit record system (SURS) would account for non-traditional and transfer students while the IPEDS formula does not account for such shifts taking place in higher education. Additionally, a SURS would provide information from the student level rather than only the institutional level in an effort to provide accurate information about how current students at a particular institution are performing. Currently, many states are developing or have developed a tool to determine outcomes of students based on the programs they are in. House Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman Kline's home state of Minnesota has an excellent example of this. While these tools are useful to consumers, they do not have the same level of accuracy or ability to track students leaving or entering that did not graduate with a degree from the state. This demonstrates a federal level imperative to provide access to data that will allow states to populate their existing data sources with information about students they are currently unable to track.

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander, Sen. Lamar. "Federal Postsecondary Data Transparency and Consumer Information Concepts and Proposals." United States Senate HELP Committee. March 23, 2015.

3. While many detractors of a student unit record system cite the privacy of individual students as a main concern, it must be noted that this data is already subject to third-party viewing. Additionally, in a bill authored by Senators Rubio, Wyden, and Warner--The Student Right to Know Before You Go Act--student privacy was addressed by directing the Secretary of Education to publish for public comment assurances that the developed system would not disclose any personally identifiable information which complies with current law. Also included was a directive to create a policy that would protect personally identifiable information from usage outside of the institutions and persons referred to in the section.<sup>2</sup>
  
4. As it stands, there are many sources of data that purport to be accurate and able to inform students, parents, and consumers about the long term financial viability of different fields of study. Some examples include the Education Trust which has developed an online tool, College Results Online, that allows students, families, and others to compare colleges based on performance.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, many organizations like the American Institutes for Research and Optimity Advisors have developed online tools that draw on publicly available data. These sources use different formulas, data sources, and procedures for reaching their conclusions. A student unit record system would also provide further accountability and pure transparency for the billions of dollars in loans and grants the federal government administers each year.

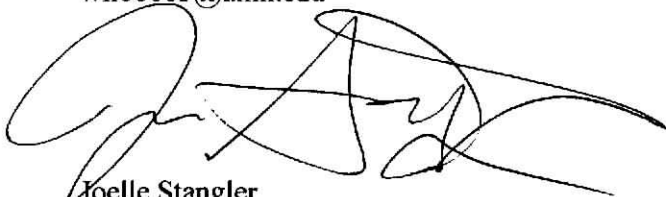
In an effort to provide additional, much needed resources and information for our constituents and their families we urge you to support the implementation of a comprehensive student unit record system that is accessible to consumers seeking information about the investment they and their families are making regarding higher education.

Best Regards,



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<sup>2</sup> Student Right to Know Before You Go Act, S. 915, 113th Cong. (2013).

<sup>3</sup> The Education Trust College Results Online