

The Truth Behind Higher Education Disclosure Laws

By Kevin Carey and Andrew P. Kelly



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Bridget Gartenmeyer, Olivia Meeks, and Mary Nguyen for their research assistance.

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Higher education is under growing scrutiny from policymakers who are dissatisfied with rising prices, stagnant graduation rates, and declining academic standards. Fixing these problems has proved difficult. Traditionally, autonomous colleges and universities tend to resist any kind of new government encroachment and public officials are often wary of diminishing the independence that has produced a diverse, well-resourced higher education system. In recent years, a familiar compromise between regulation and autonomy has emerged: require colleges to provide more information.

Recognizing that higher education is a market driven by consumer choice and loathe to directly regulate college behavior, state and federal policymakers have created a host of college information disclosure and reporting requirements. Armed with better data, the theory goes, students and parents will vote with their wallets, putting pressure on low-performing colleges to improve while avoiding direct government intervention. The 2008 reauthorization of the federal Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) included over 25 new information requirements on top of those that had been added since the law was first enacted in 1965.

Unfortunately, some of these provisions are not working nearly as well as intended.

In early 2011, we investigated scores of four-year colleges and universities to gauge their compliance with the information requirements of HEOA. The results were not encouraging. The large majority of colleges are in total noncompliance with some of the most widely cited provisions of HEOA: those meant to focus attention on the struggle of low-income students to graduate from college. And even when colleges are technically in compliance with the law, flaws in the way the statute was written and dubious decisions on the part of colleges have rendered much of the information all but useless for the sole function for which it was created: informing consumer choice.

As the Obama administration pursues an ambitious campaign to increase the number of Americans with

college degrees and legislators continue to wrestle with skyrocketing costs and anemic college results, it is crucial that they find a way to ensure real consumer choice. It turns out that the current compromise position is not a compromise at all. It is, in fact, worse than nothing: by creating an illusion of transparency and disclosure, these provisions are standing in the way of the true reforms students and taxpayers actually need.

The Survey

From December 2010 to June 2011, we contacted a stratified random sample of 152 public and private four-year colleges and universities to obtain information colleges are required to provide in order to be eligible for federal financial aid under Title IV of HEOA. We oversampled public colleges because the majority of students attend public universities (51 of the colleges analyzed here are private, 101 are public; see Appendix I: Methods). Our sample contained a broad swath of institutions, from some of the largest public universities in the country to small, private liberal arts institutions; from public flagships to nonselective regional state colleges; and from elite, private research universities to smaller, religiously affiliated private colleges. The sample is not designed to be “representative” in any technical sense. Rather, we set out to take a detailed look at how a diverse array of colleges and universities are interpreting and implementing the new requirements.

It is important to note that Congress has imposed several varieties of information requirements on colleges. For some data elements, colleges are required to “report” information to the federal government on a regular basis, using procedures and formats determined by the U.S. Department of Education, the organization tasked with ensuring that schools are adhering to the consumer information provisions. In other cases, colleges are only required to “disclose” information. Sometimes that disclosure can come in the form of posting the information on a public website. In other cases, colleges are only required to provide information when it is requested. The status of the requester matters, too. Colleges must provide some information to anyone who asks for it, while in other instances they only have to provide information to current or prospective students.¹ In some cases, the information must also be “made available” via publications, mailing, or electronic media.

There are many disclosure requirements, and we did not focus on all of them. (We did not ask about gender ratios among part-time assistant track and field coaches, for example.) Instead, we examined five areas of strong interest to policymakers and the general public, including several, such as Pell Grant graduation rates, that were created for the first time by the 2008 reauthorization of HEOA:

- **Pell Grant graduation rates:** Colleges must disclose to prospective students the percentage of students receiving Pell Grants and/or Subsidized Stafford Loans who go on to graduate, using standard federal graduation rate definitions. This study looks only at Pell graduation rates, leaving subsidized loans for future research.
- **Credit transfer and articulation agreements:** Colleges must publicly disclose their credit transfer policies, including any established criteria regarding the transfer of credits earned at other colleges and a list of other colleges with which institutions have established an articulation (i.e. automatic credit transfer) agreement.
- **Employment and graduate school placement:** Colleges must make available to current and prospective students “information regarding the placement in employment of, and types of employment obtained by, graduates of the

institution’s degree or certificate programs,” as well as the types of graduate and professional education in which their graduates enroll. In addition, colleges that advertise “job placement rates” as a *means of recruiting students* must provide prospective students with the most recent job placement statistics.

- **Textbook prices:** Colleges must disclose on the Internet course schedule used for registration purposes, the International Standard Book Number (ISBN) and retail price information of required and recommended textbooks and supplemental materials for each course listed.
- **Private student loans:** Colleges that give students information about potential private (that is, non-governmental) student loan providers must also inform students that they may be eligible for loans or other assistance under Title IV programs that may offer more favorable terms and provisions than private loans.

Our researchers first scoured each school’s website for these elements of the disclosure provisions. For those elements that were not publicly available, researchers contacted the colleges via phone or email. Our researchers represented themselves as prospective students when contacting colleges. This was to ensure that colleges received credit for providing information in all appropriate circumstances and to simulate the market interactions that the disclosure requirements are meant to improve. In the event of non-response, the researchers sent at least one follow-up email.

In calculating compliance rates, we had to decide how to count colleges that did not respond to our requests for information. We could have coded every non-response as noncompliance; after all, the law requires that this information be provided to prospective students. An alternative approach would treat those non-responses as “missing data” and calculate compliance rates based only on the schools for which we obtained a definitive answer. The latter approach is more charitable, as it drives compliance rates upward, but it also avoids equating missing data with noncompliance.

Rather than choosing one method or the other, we calculated two separate rates of compliance for those provisions that require data be disclosed upon

request: the “overall compliance rate,” which is based on all institutions in the sample, and the “confirmed compliance rate,” which is based only on those colleges that either posted the information online, provided the information upon request, or responded definitively that they did not have the information available. For those provisions that must be made publicly available, however, we only calculated the overall compliance rate, since failure to publicize the information is noncompliance by definition. We also collected data on whether the schools’ websites had a formal “Consumer Information” Web page dedicated to providing the required HEOA information.

The results varied by provision, but in many cases we found that the law is not being implemented the way lawmakers intended. We also found that when it comes to comparing colleges on common metrics like job placement or Pell Grant graduation rates, the variability in both compliance and implementation across campuses means that the consumer information provisions will be of little help to prospective students and their families.

“Consumer Information” Pages

College websites often contain a bewildering array of menus, sub-sites, and links to different kinds of information. For prospective students and their parents, it can be hard to locate the most useful, relevant information. Recognizing this, the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC), a voluntary organization of higher education institutions, agencies, and trade associations run by the National Center for Education Statistics, made a series of suggestions in its 2009 guidance to colleges and universities about how to implement the consumer information provisions. One of NPEC’s suggestions was to create one Web page where consumers can link to all of the requisite disclosure information (or at least figure out where they might find it).

After searching the websites of each college in our sample, we were able to find 73 colleges that had a functioning Web page designed to provide the required HEOA disclosures. These pages fell under a variety of titles (“Consumer Information,” “Required Disclosures,” “Notifications,” etc.) and were rarely accessible directly from the college’s homepage.

The consumer information pages rarely contained active links that took the consumer directly to each piece of required information. For instance, we logged the number of consumer information pages that had active links to four pieces of information in our study: Pell graduation rates, transfer criteria, employment placement, and graduate school placement. We found that only 11 of the 73 pages had active links to all four items; 12 more had direct links to three of the four. Most of these sites were still a work in progress. Many were still “under construction,” with data elements labeled as “coming soon.” Often, the links on the consumer information pages led to the landing page of another department (e.g. career services, institutional research) where the search for the requisite data would start anew. A prospective student trying to navigate these inconsistent, inadequate, or nonexistent consumer information pages would likely experience a great deal of frustration.

Seventy-nine institutions (52 percent of the sample) seemed to have no central clearinghouse for the required HEOA disclosures.² This made tracking down the disparate pieces of information much more difficult (if not impossible for even the most enterprising high school student). While colleges are not obligated to create a “one-stop” page for consumer information, doing so seems like an obvious first step to providing easy access to important information. Unfortunately for prospective students (and for us), despite an exhaustive search of the websites, it appears that just under half of the colleges we studied had done so.

Overall Survey Results

Among the major HEOA information requirements we studied, overall compliance rates ranged from almost universal on the requirement that schools post their credit transfer criteria (99 percent) to 25 percent of institutions on the requirement that schools disclose the six-year graduation rate for students who receive a Pell Grant. Table 1 displays the overall compliance rate and confirmed compliance rate for each requirement, as well as the total number of colleges eligible to report each piece of information.³

On the surface, the percentages in Table 1 suggest that most colleges are complying with most of the requirements, except for Pell Grant graduation rates.

Table 1. Compliance Rates Across Provisions

Data element	Overall compliance	Confirmed compliance
Pell Grant Graduation Rates	25% (38 out of 150 eligible institutions)	38% (38 out of 100 respondents)
Credit Transfer	99% (150 out of 152)	
Articulation Agreements	86% (130 out of 152)	
Placement of Employment	67% (101/151)	83% (101/121)
Graduate School Placement	60% (90/151)	83% (90/108)
Textbook Prices	97% (148/152)	99% (148/149)
Private Loan Disclosure	86% (130/152)	92% (130/141)

Note: Overall compliance rate equals the percentage of institutions providing information out of total number of eligible schools in the sample. The number of eligible schools varied for three of the provisions. Confirmed compliance is the percentage of institutions providing information out of the total number of eligible schools that either posted the information publicly, provided it via email or phone, or replied that they did not have the information available.

However, a more detailed look at how schools are actually implementing each element reveals that many are only complying with the letter of the law, and that the law itself allows so much variation in compliance as to render much of the information all but useless for students and parents choosing colleges. The percentages also fail to account for the considerable amount of time and effort often required to track down the information in question. As our analysis demonstrates, many colleges are providing less information than meets the eye.

Pell Grant Graduation Rates

Colleges and universities have reported graduation rates since the federal Student Right-To-Know Act was passed in the early 1990s. But while colleges have long been required to disaggregate their graduation results into a variety of student subcategories, including race/ethnicity, gender, citizenship status, and participation in various intercollegiate athletic programs, they had never been required to report graduation rates for low-income students. Given that graduation rates for low-income and first-generation students are often very low, this is an issue of great public concern. The 2008

HEOA reauthorization included, for the first time, a requirement that colleges disclose graduation rates for students who receive Pell Grants.

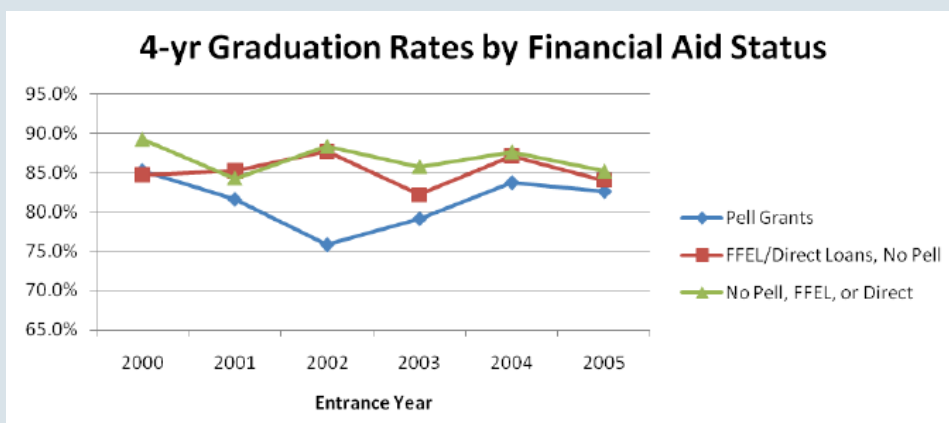
But Congress did not require colleges to “report” such data to the U.S. Department of Education—only to “disclose” it when asked. This was a mistake. Such “disclose” provisions turn out to be worth not much more than the paper on which they are printed. Overall, we were able to obtain Pell Grant graduation rates from just 25 percent of the eligible colleges and universities contacted in our study (38 out of 150). Even when we calculated the “confirmed compliance rate,” which is based only on the 100 colleges who either posted the information publicly, provided it upon request, or told our researchers that it was unavailable, the rate rose to just 38 percent. By our count, just 28 of the colleges posted their Pell Grant graduation rates on a publicly available website. The rest of the compliers provided the graduation rates over email.

One-third of the institutions in the eligible sample (50 out of 150) provided no information about Pell Grant graduation rates on their websites and did not return voicemail messages or respond to email requests for information. The regulations do state that colleges do not need to disclose the Pell Grant completion rate if the number of students in each group is not large enough “to yield statistically reliable information” or would reveal personally identifiable information. It is possible that some of the institutions that are not currently disclosing the information believe that they fall under this category. However, this exception was not cited by a single college as an explanation for the lack of Pell Grant data. In addition, just two institutions in the sample reported 45 or fewer Pell students in their incoming class in 2008 to NCES.

Among those colleges who did respond, there seemed to be confusion about the federal requirements. A handful of schools believed that this information was not required in any of their annual reports or by the Department of Education and that as a result they were not required to track this graduation rate. One college suggested that if it was not required by the federal government, it did not exist: “That information is not anything required on any of the annual reports that we complete, so it is not readily available information.” Another wrote, “The information you are requesting is not required to be available to a consumer by the Department of

Figure 1. Tufts University

Tufts University publishes 4-year graduation rates by student financial aid status.



Source: Tufts University, “Higher Education Act: Federal Disclosure/Reporting Requirement,” <http://institutionalresearch.tufts.edu/downloads/14-18GradByFinancialAid1.pdf>

Education. Since this is the case, we do not keep track of graduation rates of Pell recipients.” Another college highlighted a different explanation for the lack of Pell Grant completion data, one that surfaced more than once: “Part of the complication is that people may receive Pell Grants one year and not the next so we couldn’t calculate it.”

Other schools offered a mix of regrets and alternate perspectives. One respondent wrote, “Mmm....very high percentage of our students receive Pell Grants—but I mean what percent of them graduate?—why do you want this information?” Another offered the reassurance that the “graduation rate has little to do with family income if students work hard. I hope you’ll apply!” Several institutions said they would not consider the request until the prospective student had filled out an application for financial aid.

Colleges know which students receive Pell Grants, and they know which students graduate. Therefore, it is reasonable to ask them whether students who receive Pell Grants graduate. Tufts University, for example, publishes four-year graduation rates by student financial aid status and even cites its obligation to do so under HEOA. (See Figure 1.)

Northern Arizona University goes one step further, publicly posting tables that show not only graduation rates, but year-over-year retention rates for students who receive Pell Grants, those who receive Stafford Loans, and students who receive neither type of aid. These tables allow consumers (and other

stakeholders) to examine how graduation and retention rates for Pell Grant students compare to those of their more advantaged peers. (See Figure 2.)

The accessibility of the Pell Grant graduation rates varied considerably across those schools that had implemented the provision in good faith. Of the 28 colleges that had posted the information publicly, three-quarters (21) linked to it directly from their consumer information page. The other seven colleges posted the graduation rates in PDF format on the Office of Institutional Research’s Web page. In the most extreme cases, the information was buried at the end of a long compendium of statistical tables (page 135 of 136 in one case; page 128 out of 128 in another). While disclosing the information this way fulfills the technical requirement of the law, it clearly violates its spirit.

Knowing the percentage of students who receive Pell Grants and graduate from a particular college could be enormously helpful to low-income students looking for institutions that successfully serve students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds—but only if the information is available in a consistent format across colleges.

Credit Transfer

The majority of college graduates earn credits from more than one institution. As the number of higher education providers grows and more students

Figure 2. Northern Arizona University

Northern Arizona University publishes both graduation and retention rates by student financial aid status.

Cohort Year	Cohort Headcount	First Time Freshmen Financial Aid Awards-Pell Recipient											
		1 Year Grad	1 Year Retain	2 Year Grad	2 Year Retain	3 Year Grad	3 Year Retain	4 Year Grad	4 Year Retain	5 Year Grad	5 Year Retain	6 Year Grad	6 Year Retain
2003	562	2	361	18	270	42	229	134	111	198	42	222	22
2004	620	0	395	12	310	29	270	130	140	213	56	244	20
2005	470	0	310	10	248	28	212	102	121	164	47		
2006	583	0	363	4	283	18	248	108	132				
2007	710	1	441	7	355	19	315						
2008	780	1	522	7	442								
2009	1,168	0	786										
2010	1,545												
Cohort Year	Cohort Headcount	1 Year Grad	1 Year Retain	2 Year Grad	2 Year Retain	3 Year Grad	3 Year Retain	4 Year Grad	4 Year Retain	5 Year Grad	5 Year Retain	6 Year Grad	6 Year Retain
2003	562	0.4%	64.2%	3.2%	48.0%	7.5%	40.7%	23.8%	19.8%	35.2%	7.5%	39.5%	3.9%
2004	620	0.0%	63.7%	1.9%	50.0%	4.7%	43.5%	21.0%	22.6%	34.4%	9.0%	39.4%	4.5%
2005	470	0.0%	66.0%	2.1%	52.8%	6.0%	45.1%	21.7%	25.7%	34.9%	10.0%		
2006	583	0.0%	62.3%	0.7%	48.5%	3.1%	42.5%	18.5%	22.6%				
2007	710	0.1%	62.1%	1.0%	50.0%	2.7%	44.4%						
2008	780	0.1%	66.9%	0.9%	56.7%								
2009	1,168	0.0%	67.3%										
2010	1,545												

Source: Northern Arizona Institutional Research, “Student Financial Aid Undergraduate Retention and Graduation Analysis,” available via pull-down menu at: <http://www4.nau.edu/pair/RetentionAndGraduation/RetentionF.asp>

assemble credits from multiple sources, including online colleges, credit transfer will be a critical issue. The process of transferring credits is often opaque, cumbersome, and inefficient, resulting in billions of dollars in wasted time and money as students are forced to retake courses. Many students find, after transferring, that previously earned credits don't count toward their degree. Credit transfer policies are, or should be, an important decision-making factor for increasingly mobile students.

The HEOA requires that colleges and universities publicly disclose credit transfer policies and articulation agreements. Most colleges were already doing this because accepting transfer students is a basic element of the admissions process. For that reason, the rate of credit transfer policy disclosure is technically very high: 99 percent of colleges have a website providing information to prospective transfer students.

But close examination reveals that many colleges that appear to be in compliance with HEOA credit transfer disclosure requirements aren't providing information that matches the spirit of the law. Often, colleges meet their obligations by simply saying, in so many words, “We have criteria for accepting transfer credit.” They don't, however, say what those criteria are. For example, one college's disclosed policy begins as follows:

“Original copies of official college transcripts will be reviewed and course work evaluated before transfer credit will be posted to a student's permanent academic record. Courses that may have been accepted for credit by another institution will not necessarily be accepted by [the college].”

Or:

“The eligibility of your transfer credits depends on the subject matter of each credit and the accreditation status of the institution that awarded each credit. Credits in academic subjects are usually eligible for transfer if they were awarded by an institution accredited by one of the regional agencies recognized by the American Council on Education. Transfer course work will appear on your [university] transcript, however, the academic department offering your major will determine if each course will apply toward your degree.”

Or:

“To students pursuing a first bachelor's degree, the Office of Admissions awards transfer credit according to the guidelines discussed here. Admissions reserves the right to accept or reject credits earned at other institutions of higher education. In general, it is University policy to accept credits earned at institutions fully accredited by their regional

accrediting association for colleges and universities, provided that such credits have been earned through university-level courses appropriate to the student's degree program..."

These explanations are typical. Most universities describe the minimum qualities credits must possess in order to be *considered* for transfer— students must have earned at least a “C” or a “D,” for example, and the school must have some sign of institutional accreditation, with a frequent bias (as with the third example above) toward regional accreditation. Then, *after* students have transferred, their credits undergo an additional review based on undisclosed criteria that can vary idiosyncratically by academic department. Some credits are “accepted” but not for the purpose of fulfilling various requirements for earning a degree, which can be misleading given that college credits have no utility other than fulfilling degree requirements. Vague criteria and unspecified post-transfer evaluation policies do little to inform consumer choice.

Fewer colleges (86 percent) met the requirement to disclose a list of institutions with which they have established articulation agreements (essentially, automatic credit transfer for certain pre-established courses). Articulation agreements are likely to be more useful to prospective transfer students than vague statements about credit transfer policies, so the relatively high rate of compliance is promising.

Placement in Employment and Graduate School

Most students go to college so they can get a well-paying job. But higher education is not a purely vocational enterprise, and the way higher learning can enrich the aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual lives of students should not be ignored. Yet a cursory examination of what subjects students choose to study shows that higher education today is *primarily* job-oriented. As such, it's important for colleges to provide information about their graduates' success in careers and further education.

The HEOA added two new disclosure requirements on this front. The first requires colleges to provide “information regarding the placement in employment of, and types of employment obtained by, graduates

of the institution's degree or certificate programs.” The law is not clear on the format this information should take—placement rates, statistics on the industries that graduates wind up in and the salaries they earn, or a list of anecdotes about what recent graduates are doing. The guidance issued by NPEC, however, does encourage the use of placement rates, stating that although institutions are not required to calculate placement rates, if they do, they must disclose them. The second requires the disclosure of information on “the type of graduate and professional education” that graduates pursue post-college. In each case, the language is somewhat vague and schools have interpreted these provisions in very different ways.

About two-thirds of the eligible colleges (101 out of 151) provided information about the employment of recent graduates. Among those who responded or had posted the information publicly, the confirmed compliance rate was about 83 percent. Thirty of the eligible colleges did not respond and did not have accessible employment information on their websites. One grudging respondent accused us of “fishing for information.” A number of colleges said the information was available from their career services office—but only to students who had already enrolled. Many colleges noted that the availability of career information is inconsistent across the institution, with some departments gathering more information than others. Some said that they conduct a survey of graduates that includes employment information, but would not share the results.

Among the colleges that did provide some career information, the nature, format, and quality of the information was highly variable. We found a variety of approaches to compliance, ranging from the anecdotal to the systematic. For instance, 17 of the colleges in the sample simply post anecdotal information about the jobs and employers of recent graduates. These inspiring “Alumni Success Stories” describe high-paying jobs, prestigious postgraduate programs, and impressive lives of purpose. While truthful (we assume), these stories likely do not provide a statistically representative sample of alumni employment outcomes. None of the colleges in our study maintains a site describing “Alumni Failure Stories.”

It is also interesting to note that this type of disclosure—highlighting the great jobs of selected

graduates—is reminiscent of the recent debate over recruiting practices among for-profit colleges. In August of 2010, the Government Accountability Office’s secret shopper investigation of prominent for-profit colleges found that some institutions highlighted the successful employment outcomes of recent graduates, painting an unrealistic portrait of the returns to that degree program.⁴ Because the disclosure requirements for “placement in employment” are loose enough to allow for this kind of reporting, institutions of all types will have incentive to promote success stories and hide the areas where they fall short.

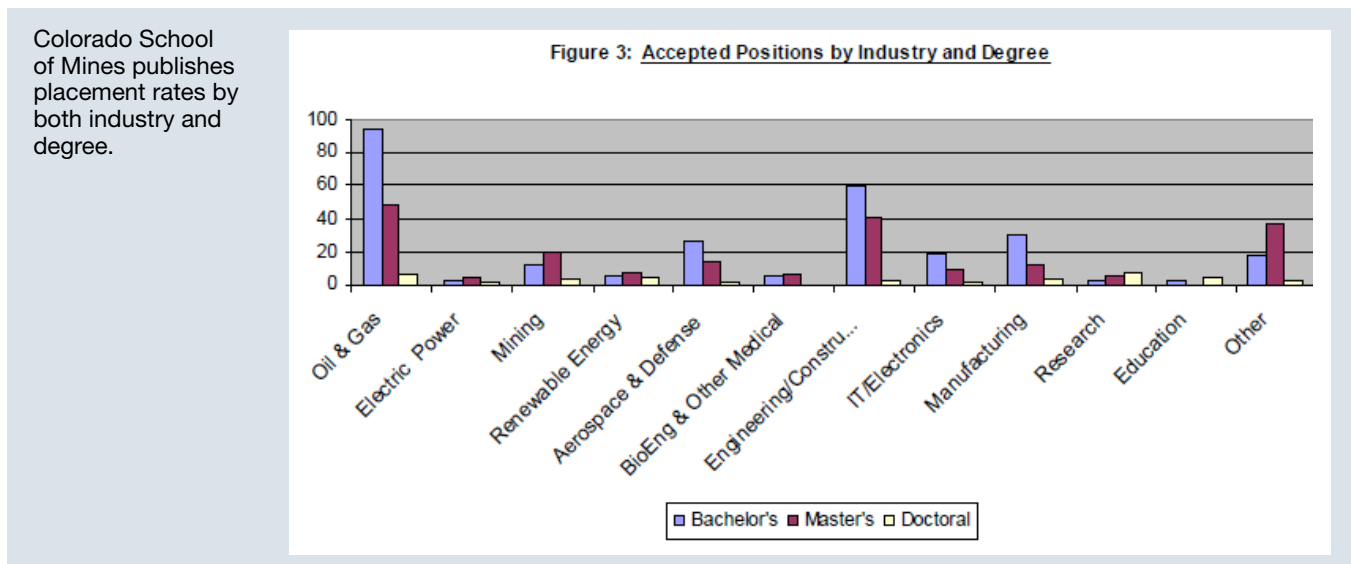
Other schools chose the equally dubious strategy of referring prospective students to the “Degrees, Areas of Study, and Future Plans” section of the “College Portrait” website maintained as part of the industry-supported Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA). The VSA is a cooperative effort run by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities that invites public colleges to provide a “college portrait” with an array of information about cost of attendance, enrollment, and student outcomes. The section on “future plans” in each college portrait includes survey data indicating what percentage of recent graduates *intend* to get a job or pursue further education. The percentage is generally quite high. The site, however, does not provide information about what percentage of students follow through on those intentions.

Most of the compliant colleges went beyond sunny anecdotes and future plans, using post-graduation surveys to provide more systematic information on placement in employment. Some simply posted or emailed a single number: the percentage of graduates employed in some kind of job at a certain threshold (e.g. six months) after graduation. Thirty-six percent of the compliant schools provided aggregate placement rates.

A subset of schools went much further, disaggregating placement rates by college and major, the industries in which graduates were working, the percentage of alumni working in a field related to their major, and some basic information on average salaries. About 28 percent of the compliant schools (28 out of 101) provided information that fulfilled at least one of these categories, and many included a mix of more detailed data points. These diligent schools provide evidence that the U.S. Department of Education could ask more of colleges. Colorado School of Mines, for instance, publishes information by industry and degree. (See Figure 3.)

Iowa State’s career services office provides information on the percentage of graduates from each college that are placed in jobs or further education, and the percentage of employed students who are working in a “major-related” field. (See Figure 4.)

Figure 3. Colorado School of Mines



Source: Colorado School of Mines, “2009-2010 Career Center Annual Report,” http://careers.mines.edu/Files/2009-10%20CSMCC%20Annual%20Report%20w%20Appendices_Pub.pdf

Figure 4. Iowa State

Iowa State provides information on the percentages of graduates from each college that are placed in jobs or further education, as well as graduates who are employed in a “major-related” field.

COLLEGE		NUMBER OF GRADUATES	SURVEY RESPONDENTS	EMPLOYED ²	—EMPLOYED— IN IOWA ³		PROF. ⁴	FURTHER EDUCATION ⁵	PLACED ⁶	SEEKING ⁷	NOT SEEKING
Agriculture and Life Sciences	Percent Respondents	612	605	98.9%	439	320	401	157	586	5	4
Business	Percent Respondents	733	670	91.4%	562	292	503	51	613	48	9
Design	Percent Respondents	316	224	70.9%	169	91	146	21	190	42	8
Engineering	Percent Respondents	723	604	83.5%	418	158	416	134	552	52	0
Human Sciences	Percent Respondents	635	391	61.6%	232	130	222	97	329	41	5
Liberal Arts and Sciences	Percent Respondents	1,131	977	86.4%	562	351	479	321	683	85	9
Total	Percent Respondents	4,150	3,471	83.6%	2,382	1,342	2,167	781	3,163	273	35

¹ Summary of graduates' first destinations; information from college Career Services offices' follow-up surveys conducted within six months after graduation.
² Graduates responding to survey who had obtained full-time or part-time/temporary positions.
³ Some non-Iowa employment locations may be for initial training but position assignments to be in Iowa.
⁴ Employed graduates securing professional or major-related employment.
⁵ Graduates responding to survey who were pursuing further education.
⁶ Graduates responding to survey who were either employed or pursuing further education (excludes non-respondents).
⁷ Graduates responding to survey who were seeking major-related positions.

Source: Iowa State Office of Institutional Research, “Post-Graduation Status of 2008-2009 Bachelor’s Degree Recipients,” available for download at: <http://www.career.iastate.edu/fileadmin/www.career.iastate.edu/FB11-074.pdf>

Oakland University in Michigan reports both the industries that graduates are working in and information about the average salary that graduates of particular schools (e.g., the College of Arts and Sciences, the School of Business Administration) report earning. The report goes on to provide a detailed breakdown of outcomes across majors within the different colleges. (See Figure 5.)

While post-graduation surveys can be useful to consumers, even the best executed will be incomplete and expensive. Systematic data on the salaries of recent college graduates seems particularly hard to come by (in the survey results that were made public, response rates on salary questions were often low). To address this problem, some states have created integrated education and employment databases that combine higher education records with employment information maintained by state unemployment insurance bureaus. The Arizona Board of Regents, for example, calculates short- and long-term wage information for the state’s three public universities. (See Figure 6.)

In Florida, the Education and Training Placement Information Program calculates employment rates,

median salary information, and the number of graduates receiving public assistance across the state’s public universities and community colleges. Prospective students (and other stakeholders) can compare labor market outcomes and continuing education rates across the campuses, and the state releases an annual report that allows for side-by-side comparisons on common metrics. (See Figure 7.)

Similar to employment outcomes, HEOA also requires colleges to disclose how successful graduates are in getting admitted to graduate and professional schools. The overall compliance rate for this requirement (60 percent) was lower than for the employment outcomes. Some colleges provided raw numbers via phone or email (e.g., “About 14 percent overall go to graduate school”), some referred to the College Portrait survey of graduate intentions (not outcomes), or to pages of alumni success stories. The HEOA gives colleges wide latitude in deciding how to comply with these provisions, so all such responses are included in the 60 percent. But it would be very difficult for consumers trying to choose among different colleges to make sense of and act upon information provided in such inconsistent and disparate formats. The state data systems

Figure 5. Oakland University

Oakland University in Michigan posts information on the industries that graduates are working in as well as their average salaries.

Employment industry: 525 (86%) of the 776 graduates indicated the type of employment they had secured. Table 4 shows the breakdown by employment industry.

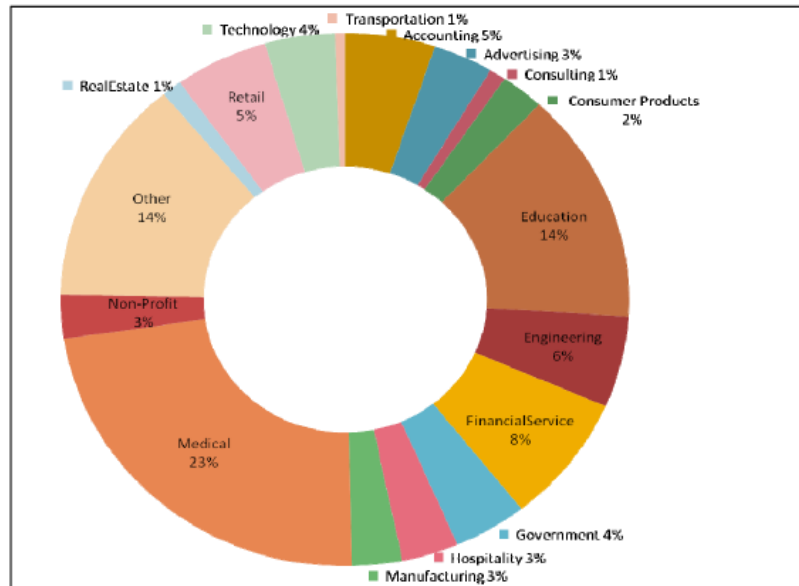


Table 4

Salary:

A total of 215 (28%) of the 1,216 survey respondents who were employed also reported annual salary information. Table 5 shows the break down by academic unit.

Reported Salary Data				
School	Size	Low	Average	High
CAS	64	\$30,000-	\$30,000 - \$34,999	\$70,000 +
SBA	58	\$30,000-	\$35,000 - \$39,999	\$70,000 +
SECS	29	\$30,000-	\$45,000 - \$49,999	\$70,000 +
SEHS	25	\$30,000-	\$30,000 - \$34,999	\$50,000 - \$54,999
SHS	7	\$30,000-	\$35,000 - \$39,999	\$50,000 - \$54,999
SON	27	\$30,000 - \$34,999	\$50,000 - \$54,999	\$70,000 +
UP	5	\$30,000-	\$40,000 - \$44,999	\$55,000 - \$59,999

Table 5

Source: Oakland University Career Services, "Survey Results of 2009-2010 Bachelor's Degree Recipients," <https://www2.oakland.edu/secure/careerservices/report/Bachelor%27s%20Degree%20Recipient%20Report%202009-2010.pdf>

cited above can also be used to collect graduate school placement. The state of Florida partners with the nonprofit National Student Clearinghouse, which gathers information about student enrollment nationwide for the purposes of tracking student loans, to document which Florida students enroll in graduate or professional school after graduation.

When it comes to accessibility, of the 73 schools that had an HEOA consumer information clearinghouse page that we were able to locate, just over one-third

of them (27 of 73) included a link that takes the user directly to the "placement of employment" information (either a link to a PDF report or another page containing the employment information). Many had no link for placement of employment or graduate school at all. Among those that did, the links often redirected users to the landing page for career services, forcing another round of searching. As with the case for Pell Grant graduation rates, the information might be there, but it is often difficult to find.

Figure 6. Arizona Board of Regents

Arizona Board of Regents calculates short- and long-term wage data for the state's three public universities.

Table II
Median Wages in 2007 for 2006 Bachelor's Degree Recipients
2006 Compared to 1991 Bachelor's Degree Recipients

	Median Wages of a Resident 2006 Bachelor's Degree Recipient	Median Wages of a Resident 1991 Bachelor's Degree Recipient	Difference
Arizona State University	\$37,936	\$64,072	\$26,136 (68.9%)
Northern Arizona University	\$35,010	\$55,338	\$20,328 (58.1%)
University of Arizona	\$34,885	\$60,935	\$26,050 (74.7%)

Source: Arizona Board of Regents, "2009 Annual Report on Wages Earned by Arizona University System Graduates," <https://azregents.asu.edu/boardbook/Board%20Agenda%20Books/2009-08-Meeting/Item-14-2009-08-AUS-Rpt-Graduate-Wages.pdf>

Figure 7. Florida Public Universities

For the state's public universities and community colleges, Florida calculates employment rates, median salary information, and the number of graduates receiving public assistance.



Florida Public Universities
2008-2009 Bachelor Graduates

2009 Fall Findings

University	Graduates	Continuing Education	Employed #	Employed %	Full Qtr Employed	% Full Qtr Employed	FQ Avg. Wages
Florida A&M University	1,395	313 22%	756	54%	552	73%	\$8,065
Florida Atlantic University	4,332	807 19%	2,879	66%	2,281	79%	\$9,749
Florida Gulf Coast University	1,330	299 22%	922	69%	698	76%	\$9,290
Florida International University	5,383	1,161 22%	3,549	66%	2,836	80%	\$9,821
Florida State University	7,363	1,422 19%	4,004	54%	2,720	68%	\$8,297
New College of Florida	158	21 13%	56	35%	21	38%	\$6,403
University of Central Florida	9,166	1,766 19%	6,036	66%	4,547	75%	\$9,106
University of Florida	8,883	2,346 26%	4,009	45%	2,517	63%	\$9,040
University of North Florida	2,877	472 16%	2,033	71%	1,548	76%	\$9,059
University of South Florida	7,262	1,462 20%	4,828	66%	3,698	77%	\$9,160
University of West Florida	1,775	334 19%	1,036	58%	769	74%	\$8,241
Totals	49,921	10,403 21%	30,107	60%	22,186	74%	\$9,110

Note: Graduates represent a total count of individuals by school with valid Social Security Numbers. All employment outcomes contained in this report are based on the October - December quarter of 2009. All continuing education outcomes are based on enrollment data for the fall semester of 2009 and preliminary winter/spring semester of 2010.

01/2011

Source: FETPIP (www.fldoe.org/fetpip)

Source: Florida Education & Training Placement Information Program (FETPIP), "Florida Public Universities 2008-2009 Bachelor Graduates," <http://www.fldoe.org/fetpip/sus.asp>

Textbook Prices

Price is a fundamental element of any market, and the price of taking a course includes the cost of purchasing mandatory textbooks that can cost hundreds of dollars. Particularly in public institutions, this is a significant part of the total cost of taking a course. HEOA requires colleges to disclose, for all courses listed, the retail price for required and recommended textbooks as well as for any supplemental materials. Compliance with this provision is very high, near 100 percent. Most institutions moved to online course registration and book purchasing some time ago, so it appears to have been reasonably easy for colleges to comply with this requirement. A number of colleges provide the information through external websites like www.bkstr.com, while others maintain individual campus-based websites.

It should be noted, however, that some colleges complied with the spirit of the law by providing textbook pricing information directly alongside electronic course catalogue entries, while a number of others simply provide links to an electronic bookstore, necessitating additional searching time.

Private Student Loans

More students are borrowing more money to go to college today than ever before. The federal government has long guaranteed and subsidized loans to college students, and with the enactment of comprehensive loan reforms in 2010 it now originates the large majority of new student loans. There are, however, limits to the amount of money that can be borrowed through federal programs, and the rapidly rising cost of college has put some students in a situation where they need to borrow additional money to stay in school. An industry of private (i.e., non-government subsidized or guaranteed) student loan providers has sprung up over the last decade to fulfill this role. After reaching a high point of over \$20 billion in annual loan volume in 2007 and 2008, these providers lent nearly \$8 billion in 2010.⁵

Federal loans are generally better for students than private loans—they usually carry lower interest rates, have more generous provisions allowing for deferment of repayment, and in many cases don't start accruing interest until after graduation. But not all higher

education institutions participate in the federal loan program, and past investigations have revealed inappropriate financial and personal relationships between college financial aid officers and student lenders.⁶ So Congress required colleges providing students with information about private student loans to also provide information alerting them to their potential eligibility for federal student loans and the possibly favorable terms they carry.

Eighty-six percent of colleges had a website that counsels students to pursue federal loans prior to seeking out private loans.

A Note on Compliance and Selectivity

Complying with many of these disclosures, particularly the key indicators of completion and post-graduation outcomes, requires extra data collection and research, along with new responsibilities for college staff. These things cost money. Faithful implementation also presents a risk for colleges and universities that do not look good on these outcomes when compared to their peers, particularly less selective institutions. Given these constraints and incentives, we might expect elite, selective colleges to be more proactive in providing and disclosing information than less prestigious schools with fewer resources and lackluster outcomes.

Yet, anecdotal evidence suggests that faithful, diligent implementation is not only the province of selective universities. Indeed, some of the least selective public colleges are doing better than their more prestigious peers in implementing the most important HEAO consumer information provisions. For instance, Western New Mexico University, a nonselective public institution, has a comprehensive consumer information page that links to a set of detailed college completion metrics that disaggregate retention and graduation rates by a large number of student characteristics (including Pell and Stafford Loan recipients). Bemidji State University in Minnesota, which admits about 80 percent of its applicants, publishes major-by-major “Career Outlooks” that contain post-graduation employment and graduate school information for recent Bemidji graduates, as well as projected demand for that degree in Minnesota.

Policy Implications

Our study reveals two major problems that Congress and the Obama administration should immediately work to fix.

First, there is widespread non-compliance with key provisions of the 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act. That law required that by October 2010, four-year colleges and universities disclose graduation rates for students with Pell Grants. Given the significant challenges that low-income students face in entering and graduating from college, this is vital consumer information. Yet only one quarter of the colleges in our sample provided this information.

The U.S. Department of Education is responsible for monitoring and enforcing these provisions. Clearly, such processes for integrity assurance are faulty, if they exist at all. We are aware of no instances in which colleges have even been publicly identified by the Department of Education as being in non-compliance with the disclosure provisions examined in this report, much less been fined or had their eligibility to receive student aid under Title IV of HEOA revoked.

Second, the information that is disclosed is provided through so many methodologies, formats, and descriptors as to render it all but useless for consumers who wish to compare colleges. The data is listed under different names (“Federal Compliance,” “Student Right-to-Know,” “Consumer Information,” etc.), calculated by different methods, and presented for different time periods. Finding it often requires the patience of a computer programmer and the diligence of a master sleuth. Our researchers sent emails, made phone calls, and endured transfers, dropped calls, and voice mail menus. They did this without having to contend with the competing work, school, and home life distractions that typical students and parents must face. And even when colleges did provide accessible consumer information Web pages, they rarely featured active, direct links to all of the critical information.

The “make the information available somehow, somewhere, and consumers will find it and act accordingly” theory of using federal transparency policy to improve higher education flies in the face of an emerging body of research about the way people in general, and higher education consumers in particular,

actually think and behave. Research conducted by Harvard University economist Bridget Terry-Long and Stanford University’s Eric Bettinger found that giving low-income families information about their eligibility for student financial aid is not enough to alter their likelihood of applying for aid and enrolling in college.⁷ Only the combination of that information and assistance in filling out financial aid forms was enough to change consumer behavior.

In another study, Andrew Kelly and Mark Schneider of the American Enterprise Institute found that giving parents of high-school-age children information about college graduation rates increases the likelihood of their choosing colleges with higher rates. Parents with less income, less education, and less knowledge of the college application process were particularly responsive to graduation rate information.⁸ Clearly, information matters. But mere availability isn’t enough. Graduation rates are *available* in nearly every conceivable format. Colleges have been publicly reporting graduation rates in a common format for nearly two decades. The information is part of the widely read *U.S. News & World Report* college rankings, is reproduced on the U.S. Department of Education’s *College Navigator* website, and is a staple of commercial college guidebooks. Nearly all universities make overall graduation rates available, and college guidance counselors have easy access to the information.

To matter, higher education information has to be affirmatively provided to consumers in a manner that explains both its meaning and how to use it. This comports with new research from behavioral economics, which has found that improved information about risks and outcomes alone may not improve consumer choices. To really change behavior, policymakers must figure out how to actively “nudge” people in the desired direction. The way in which options are organized and information is laid out—the “choice architecture”—is especially important in driving consumer behavior.⁹

On this front, policymakers at the federal and state level can learn from the states that are experimenting with new ways to improve consumer information. In New Jersey, the College Student and Parent Information Act requires public colleges in the state to report a series of student outcomes and to publish

those data in a report with a standard format. The state then publishes a yearly “Comparative Profile” that allows prospective students and their parents to compare schools side-by-side on a broad range of indicators. The New Jersey law has yet to include labor market outcomes in any meaningful way, so it is not as far-reaching as it could be. But the state’s approach to comparability is a step in the right direction.

In the absence of shared definitions, common metrics, and clear standards for how and where information is reported and presented, even the most ambitious disclosure policies will fail to achieve their ultimate aim—equipping students to be savvy consumers and unleashing market forces in higher education.

Policy Recommendations

Many of the most important “disclose” provisions of the Higher Education Opportunity Act are impotent when it comes to creating and disseminating useful consumer information. In some cases, such as Pell Grant graduation rates, they are often ignored outright. In others, such as the employment and graduate education outcomes, compliance occurs in a way that will not influence consumer choice. In fact, the HEOA “disclose” provisions are worse than ineffective. They provide the illusion that something has been done without the reality. They lull policymakers into the false belief that action has been taken to address issues of national importance. In this sense, the “disclose” provisions are not merely an ineffective tool in the effort to help more students graduate from college and get good jobs without unmanageable debt. By acting as a false alternative to real action, they are actively making those problems worse.

As a first step, Congress should convert all of the “disclose” and “make available” provisions in HEOA to “report” requirements. This means that colleges and universities will be required to report the information in question to the National Center for Education Statistics on a regular basis in a format that will allow consumers to compare colleges to one another. The key here is not only requiring colleges to report important information, but creating standard formats and definitions for each component.

Congress and NCES have experience with this kind of standard-setting: the 1990 Student Right-to-Know Act clearly defined the six-year graduation rate that is often used today to compare colleges and universities. Though the graduation rate is imperfect, it is consistent across institutions, unlike so much of the information that schools provide about post-graduation outcomes.

Requiring institutions to report clear, consistent consumer data to NCES is the minimum necessary action for federal policymakers to take if they want higher education information to have any impact on consumer choice. NCES has been collecting and publishing higher education data in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and its predecessor for decades. It is a trusted and secure source of information for researchers, institutions, and consumers. Regularizing this process would actually save colleges the time and expense of devising their own calculation and reporting methods.

In the interim, officials at the U.S. Department of Education should exploit the power of the Internet to ensure that important elements of consumer information are made more accessible to consumers. For instance, the major search engines (Bing, Google, and Yahoo) have recently come together to provide a common vocabulary and set of tools that webmasters can use to ensure that particular Web pages will appear in a Web search.¹⁰ Essentially, webmasters can “mark up” or “tag” their pages in ways that are recognized by these search engines so that they will be easy for users to find. One could imagine each college using a special tag to mark its “consumer information” page so that it comes up at the top of the search results whenever a prospective consumer searched for the college on Google. The Department of Education should encourage colleges to use these opportunities to lower search times and make information more accessible.

When it comes to graduation rates for Pell Grant recipients, there are opportunities for the federal government to collect these data directly. NCES could enter into a data-sharing relationship with administrators in the U.S. Department of Education who track federal student financial aid. The National Student Clearinghouse, which collects data on student enrollment and completion, is another

untapped source of data. Such data-sharing agreements could allow NCES to calculate Pell Grant graduation rates for individual institutions directly.

The recently enacted “gainful employment” regulations of career-focused higher education programs also offer a new opportunity to improve the quality of consumer information. To implement those rules, the U.S. Department of Education will begin sharing information with the Social Security Administration in order to calculate the average earnings of students who graduate from programs designed to lead to gainful employment. Once this process is in place, the universe of programs subject to this analysis could easily be expanded, saving colleges and universities the time and expense of conducting employment surveys of their graduates that often yield imperfect results. The Department of Education should give colleges the option of requesting student post-graduation earnings information for programs not currently regulated by “gainful employment,” with the proviso that the results would be publicly available.

Next, Congress and the administration should mount a serious effort to assist students and parents making choices in the higher education market. This means more than just making the data available—the research is clear that this is necessary, but not sufficient. The data should be used, discussed, and judged, in much the same way that academic performance data in K-12 education informs the way the public understands the problems of chronically low-performing schools. High school guidance counselors should be given a robust set of information tools that will allow them to guide students and parents toward the best colleges—and away from the worst.

Policymakers should also recognize the need to educate prospective students and families about the questions they should be asking and the data points they should examine closely. Instead of the characteristics that have been popularized by *U.S. News & World Report* rankings—things like student-faculty ratios and alumni donations—federal and state policies should focus attention on important outcomes like graduation rates and labor market success. By putting this type of information front and center on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), financial aid offer letters, and state-level

higher education report cards, policymakers can simultaneously aid decision-making and encourage prospective students to consider these metrics as an important component of their college choice. Mark Kantrowitz, an independent higher education analyst, has uncovered evidence that once the FAFSA began reporting six-year graduation rates of the colleges listed by students, students and their parents became much more likely to cite graduation rates as an important factor in choosing a college.¹¹

The preference of some colleges and universities that public information never be used to compare, judge, or rank them should be ignored. Though many colleges were responsive and helpful when approached for information, a non-trivial number responded defensively, demanding more information about the motives and background of our researchers rather than simply providing the data that they are legally obligated to provide. This attitude toward transparency must change. For too long, colleges and universities have successfully blunted efforts to collect more systematic, comparable data about student outcomes. But comparison, judgment, and ranking are an inherent part of a thriving consumer market. In the end, people choose. If higher education information isn’t gathered and utilized in a way that will plausibly improve the quality of those choices, then it is good for nothing. That describes far too many of the so-called transparency requirements on the books today.

Appendix: Methods

We began by drawing a stratified random sample of 300 four-year, primarily baccalaureate and above colleges that participate in Title IV from the IPEDS database. Because the majority of *institutions* in the country are private but the majority of *students* attend a public university, we opted to oversample public institutions, particularly the largest in the country. In addition to the sector (public vs. private), we used the preset “institutional size” categories available at the IPEDS data center to create our strata. The strata, and the number of schools drawn from each category, were:

- public institutions with 10,000 or more students (108)

- public institutions with fewer than 10,000 students (72)
- private institutions with 5,000 or more students (35)
- private institutions with less than 5,000 students (85)

From this stratified sample of 300 schools, we randomly selected 152 colleges to examine in the study (52 publics of 10,000 plus, 16 privates of 5,000 plus, 49 publics with less than 10,000 students, and 35 privates with less than 5,000 students). The objective was not to draw a sample that was representative of all institutions in the country, but to ensure that we included a diverse array of colleges that roughly reflects student enrollment patterns. We encourage other researchers to examine this issue with a different sampling strategy.

We scoured each college's website for a Web page dedicated to the HEOA consumer information disclosures and for each of the disclosures of interest. Colleges did not need to have a consumer information page to be counted as in compliance on any given indicator.

Researchers used the website's search function to search for key words and examined the Web pages of individual offices like institutional research, financial aid, career services, and admissions. If our researchers were able to obtain the information anywhere on the website or with the assistance of university personnel, the college was coded as having the information available. Our researchers made every effort to contact the appropriate office for each indicator. In the event of non-response, the researchers made another attempt to contact the appropriate department. Non-responding schools were not included in calculations of the confirmed compliance rate.

For each disclosure studied here, the researchers coded whether they were able to obtain the information (a binary variable) and collected more detailed information about how and where the data were found and the format in which it was reported. For colleges with consumer information pages, we also examined how many had active links to the disclosures of interest.

Notes

1. A comprehensive list of reporting and disclosure requirements can be found in National Postsecondary Education Cooperative, *Information Required to Be Disclosed Under the Higher Education Act of 1965: Suggestions for Dissemination (Updated)*, prepared by Carol Fuller and Carlo Salerno, Coffey Consulting, Washington, DC.
2. Four of these colleges had a "Student Right-to-Know" Web page that contained information required by the 1990 law of the same name (six-year graduation rates for all students and for student athletes by sport; campus security information) but none of the more recent requirements.
3. Two institutions were not able to calculate a graduation rate for first-time, full-time students according to the federal definition: one institution had graduated students but none that fit the first-time, full-time designation and the other had only graduated its first class in 2010. Both schools are omitted from the denominator in calculating compliance rates on the Pell graduation rate provision, and the latter is not included in placement of employment or graduate school compliance rates.
4. *FOR-PROFIT COLLEGES: Undercover Testing Finds Colleges Encouraged Fraud and Engaged in Deceptive and Questionable Marketing Practices*, Government Accountability Office, August 2010.
5. The College Board, *Trends in Student Aid 2010*, Table 1.
6. Jonathan D. Glater, "College Officers Profited By Sale of Lender Stock," *The New York Times*, April 5, 2007.
7. Eric P. Bettinger, Bridget Terry-Long, Philip Oreopoulos, and Lisa Sanbonmastu, *The Role of Simplification and Information in College Decisions: Results From the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment* (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2009).
8. Andrew P. Kelly and Mark Schneider, *Filling in the Blanks: How Information Can Affect Choice in Higher Education* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 2011).
9. Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New York: Penguin, 2009).
10. See more about the Schema.org initiative here: <http://schema.org/>.
11. According to the College Decision Impact Survey by Fastweb, when the Department of Education started posting graduation-rate information as part of "FAFSA on the Web," prospective college students began to rank graduation rates more highly in their list of selection criteria than they had before. See Mark Kantrowitz, "Summary and Analysis of Gainful Employment NPRM," FinAid.org, August 15, 2010, available online at www.finaid.org/educators/20100815gainfulemploymentanalysis.pdf.