



Does the White House “College Scorecard” Need Fine Tuning?

NAICU Washington Update

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In February, the White House unveiled its new College Scorecard website, the administration's effort to provide more targeted and streamlined one-stop consumer information to aid in choosing a college. Better college-choice information for students and parents is welcome. However, the College Scorecard has drawn some criticism and concern from NAICU members because of its overemphasis on narrow return-on-investment measures that ignore the role of these institutions in shaping leaders, building an informed citizenry, and fostering service to society.

One of the most serious concerns is that the Scorecard suggests to consumers that the “value” of a postsecondary institution is defined by the level of return-on-investment outcome such as job placement and earnings. The data elements presented as paramount in guiding college selection are economically driven, quantitative measures. Such a quantitative emphasis marginalizes the important public purposes of colleges and universities to help create an informed citizenry, promote the values of civic engagement and volunteerism, add to collective knowledge through research and innovation, and support the principles of democracy.

The number of college information search tools, websites, and ranking publications has exploded in recent years, creating an unprecedented amount of information aimed at helping consumers navigate through the college search and selection process. But as the number of these tools has grown exponentially, many of them conflict with one another or have become overly complex, increasing rather than reducing consumer confusion.

On February 13, the White House joined in the fray, with the unveiling of its new [College Scorecard website](#). The administration's response to the need for more targeted and streamlined, one-stop consumer postsecondary education resources, comes on the heels of the State of the Union Address (*see related story*), and centers on a website that is more interactive and robust than its earlier, draft versions.

The goal of the College Scorecard is to make it easier for students and parents to find a college that is a “good fit,” as defined by affordability and value metrics. The five data points used in support of that effort are: average net price, six-year graduation rate, loan default rate, median borrowing amount, and national employment and career data (a temporary placeholder until institution-specific employment and wage data are available).

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NAICU members also note that equating college selection with economic success ignores research that clearly shows finding a “right fit” institution involves a complex array of both quantitative and qualitative factors, uniquely defined and prioritized by an individual student's needs and goals. High graduation rates are strongly correlated with a student feeling supported, academically challenged and engaged, connected to other students and faculty, and comfortable in the institution's environment. Student success is not only important to the individual, but also to the goals of our nation as a whole.

Finally, some have expressed concern over the quality of the [Scorecard's data](#), maintaining that much of it is outdated and misleading – unintentionally misrepresenting institutions because of the cohorts, formulas, and parameters used. Such inconsistencies and incomplete information could lead students and parents to make erroneous assumptions, and jump to conclusions that could steer them away from an institution that might, in fact, be just the “right fit” they seek.

Many of these issues could be addressed if the Scorecard provided institutional context, a link to an institution's homepage on its profile page, and/or allowed consumers to submit feedback and questions. NAICU will be working with the administration in addressing these concerns.

NAICU has been immersed in “right fit” concerns since 2007, when it launched its [U-CAN consumer information website](#). The site was created in response to growing demand by consumers and policymakers for information on

colleges and universities that is easily accessible, easily digestible and presented in a user-friendly format.

U-CAN's initial design was developed through consumer testing of policymakers' ideas as to what prospective college students and their parents want to know when selecting a college. When focus group participants demanded that qualitative information be added to the quantitative data presented, NAICU added its unique set of "click-through" buttons to college websites, thereby allowing each institution to tell its own story.

This broader approach has been embraced by both consumers and colleges. When launched in 2007, more than 600 private, nonprofit colleges and universities had signed up to participate; now that number tops 800. And in February 2013 alone, almost 73,000 visitors viewed more than 121,000 college profiles on the U-CAN site – the highest monthly traffic in the site's five-year history. To ensure that it remains up-to-date and relevant, the U-CAN site continues to evolve and is updated annually, with new data most recently published in late February 2013.

Contact

→ Wendy Weiler

wendy@naicu.edu

This information was found online at:

http://www.naicu.edu/news_room/detail/does-the-white-house-college-scorecard-need-fine-tuning