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Students Need Better Information on Earnings and Other College Outcomes, Senators Say

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Although several studies have documented the financial payoff of graduating from college, debate continues to swirl over whether higher education is a good investment. In those discussions, knowing what happens to the average college graduate is only so helpful. Yes, more students are taking on more debt, and the job market is weak. But also, not all college degrees are the same, and not all graduates fare equally well.

With that in mind, Sen. Ron Wyden, a Democrat of Oregon, and Sen. Marco Rubio, a Republican of Florida, introduced a bill this year that would create a state-based, individual-level data system to link information on college costs, graduation rates, and student debt with data on employment and earnings. Called the "Student Right to Know Before You Go Act" (S 2098), the bill would shift the data-reporting burden from colleges to states and provide prospective students and their families with real information on the outcomes of students in specific programs at particular colleges.

The senators discussed their proposal on Wednesday afternoon at a forum here that used it to start a broader conversation about higher-education accountability.

Information on college outcomes and on earnings is "strewn all over the countryside," Senator Wyden told the group, which was assembled by the American Enterprise Institute and the New America Foundation. "We wanted to put it all in one place."

The idea of shedding light on college costs and outcomes certainly fits in with recent federal efforts to provide better consumer information. But that doesn't mean such information can tell the whole story, or should be determinative, Senator Wyden acknowledged. The senator raised one possible criticism of the bill: that focusing on earnings could undermine the importance of the liberal arts. That is not the bill's intention, he explained, and the liberal arts and more-career-oriented degree programs are not mutually exclusive. "We want to empower people to make choices," he said.

Of course earnings are not the only important outcome of higher education, said Senator Rubio, but they do matter, because they affect students' ability to repay loans. He was speaking from personal

experience: He had borrowed \$125,000 for college and law school, he said, as he dreamed of becoming a prosecutor. And he hadn't realized that his debt load and desired line of work would be difficult to reconcile.

Those are issues prospective students should think through, Senator Rubio said. "You're making a decision about what you want to do for the rest of your life."

Efforts to show students' return on investment for different college programs are already under way, and panelists at Wednesday's event described some of them.

Mark Schneider, who is vice president of the American Institutes for Research and president of College Measures, a partnership of the institute and the consulting firm Matrix Knowledge, talked about his work with states to provide better data on student outcomes. College Measures released a report this week on the earnings of graduates of particular colleges and programs in Tennessee.

Still, agreeing on what students need to know and how to present it to them can be a challenge, another panelist pointed out. "There will be lots of debates about what is the right information," said Pauline Abernathy, vice president of the Institute for College Access & Success. "And it may not be the same for all programs."

Disclosure is tricky, and Ms. Abernathy used several visual aids to illustrate good and bad examples. She waved a car dealer's window sticker, a display of simple consumer information. Although choosing a college is much different from buying a car, she said, the government should set minimum standards in both cases and provide information to help consumers make good decisions.

A lengthy document may not be helpful, Ms. Abernathy said, holding up a hefty iTunes agreement. "No one is going to read through this," she said. "This is disclosure, but this is not meaningful disclosure."

When students begin college, many of them have a goal no more specific than graduating, said Anthony P. Carnevale, a panelist at the event and director of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. But graduating may no longer be enough to get them where they want to go, he said.

If colleges don't start providing more-comprehensive information to prospective students, said Mr. Carnevale, the government will step in. "If we don't get transparency, we're going to have to regulate," he said. "That's the bottom line here."