



February 10, 2023

Mr. Jean-Didier Gaina,
U.S. Department of Education,
400 Maryland Ave. SW, Room 2C172,
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Mr. Gaina,

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, we write to offer comments in response to the Department of Education's (Department) Request for Information (RFI) on ways to identify low-value postsecondary programs as detailed in Docket ID ED-2022-OUS-0140.

Comprehensive and reliable data on the outcomes of students in postsecondary programs would have tremendous value to students, policymakers and the public. For students, such information could inform choices not just of a particular field to enter, but also the relative merits of specific programs. For institutions, these data may help determine where resources could and should be allocated among their academic offerings. And for policymakers, an ability to meaningfully compare outcomes would help them identify areas of concern that require greater scrutiny.

To be useful, such information would need to: be valid and reliable; account for the relevant factors that influence outcomes; be comparable across similar programs; and be inclusive of all outcomes. Helping students avoid unaffordable debt by providing them with relevant information is an admirable goal and one that the undersigned organizations wholeheartedly support.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to establish a metric or metrics that will fully capture all of the relevant information - both qualitative and quantitative - that would theoretically be used to determine value. The RFI seeks the public's help in identifying which specific metrics should be used to make the calculation as to whether a program is of low financial value. By asking these questions, it appears that the Department's intent is to make use of existing data, which has significant limitations generally, and particularly for this purpose. Even if additional data were collected, similar limitations would apply.

For example, the small size of many programs may mean that data cannot be collected without compromising the anonymity of personally identifiable information. Many programs, specially at the graduate level, will have cohorts that fall below a reasonable threshold for evaluation. This concern is reflected in the Department's question regarding

which level of Classification of Instructional Program (CIP) code to use. The Department appropriately intends to use six-digit CIP codes, which will allow for more specific identifications of the programs, making the data more comparable across programs. This will also result in smaller sample sizes though, likely excluding numerous programs from consideration as a result.

An additional challenge to creating such a list is that multiple factors must be considered that would have a significant impact on the outcomes of students, but which the Department has limited data for. Some of these factors, such as regional variations in earnings, could be addressed by the inclusion of other federal datasets. Other factors, such as the impact of discrimination on earnings and employment, cannot be accounted for in a systematic way, especially at the level of individual programs.

Even assuming the data were comprehensive, reliable and accounted for important variables, the design of such a system as proposed in the RFI will require the Department to make specific choices in calculating the financial value of a program. These choices will meaningfully alter the outcomes, depending on what the Department chooses to do. For example, if you measure earnings two years after completion, that may represent an accurate time frame for determining the economic benefit of a trade-specific certificate program. Using that same time frame to evaluate an MD program would result in significantly misleading data about that program's economic return. Given the incredible diversity of postsecondary programs at all credential levels, it would be almost impossible to establish criteria that work equally well in evaluating each program.

Perhaps the most significant concern is one the Department raised in the RFI itself, the idea that the merits of an educational program cannot be reduced to just its financial return. Or, as the RFI noted "some higher education programs promote goals other than financial returns for students." There is no place in the list the Department envisions to identify the other significant benefits many educational programs offer. The list the Department contemplates is very likely to be disproportionately represented by certain fields, such as social work, counseling and public health, where the economic returns for professions that require advanced training are low. Society has a vested interest in seeing people enter and succeed in these fields, and identification as low-financial-value programs will act as a powerful disincentive to students to enroll.

These are difficult comments to offer, because we share the Department's desire to help inform students and to shed light on bad actors. But unless the significant data gaps and fundamental flaws can be resolved, moving forward with such a list as a public tool intended for consumer information is likely to do far more harm than good.

We appreciate your attention to these comments.

Sincerely,



Ted Mitchell
President

On behalf of:

ACPA-College Student Educators International
American Association of Colleges and Universities
American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers
American Association of Community Colleges
American Association of State Colleges and Universities
American Council on Education
American Indian Higher Education Consortium
APPA, “Leadership in Educational Facilities”
Association of American Universities
Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities
Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges
Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities
Association of Public and Land-grant Universities
CCCU - Council for Christian Colleges & Universities
Council for Higher Education Accreditation
Council for Opportunity in Education
Council of Independent Colleges
NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education
National Association of College and University Business Officers
National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators
Phi Beta Kappa Society