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New Rules on Graduation Rates Anger College Officials

By Charles Ornstein

Washington, D.C. -- College officials are trying to fend off forthcoming government rules that would tell them how to measure graduation rates.

Officials of the Education Department outlined the regulations at a meeting in New Orleans of the Association for Institutional Research. The new rules would require colleges to keep track of the proportion of first-year students who graduate in 150 per cent of what is considered the "normal" time -- *e.g.*, in six years at a four-year institution.

While that requirement was expected, the following parts of the regulations, which would require much more data collection by colleges, caused considerable anger at the meeting and afterward:

* In addition to tracking rates of new fall freshmen, a college would have to gather information and compile separate rates for students who enter at any other point during the year or who transfer to the institution. As a result, the college would have to report multiple graduation rates, not just one or two.

* The definition of transfer students would include all students who come from another eligible institution where they were enrolled full-time. This would include incoming freshmen who completed courses at community colleges or a summer course before entering their first year at a four-year institution.

* A breakdown of students by ethnic, racial, and gender categories would also be required, as would a breakdown by different programs within a university.

Under the new regulations, reporting by universities would begin in 1998, but the collection of data would begin next year. The graduation rates would be available to the public and to government agencies responsible for accrediting and monitoring colleges.

The coming regulations will be the department's second stab at proposing rules to carry out a portion of the 1990 Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act that requires campuses to disclose the proportion of students who either complete or graduate from

their programs. The act also requires the disclosure of information relating to campus crime rates and security procedures.

The first set of regulations, released in 1992, was criticized by some for not including enough information on graduation rates of students who do not enroll as freshmen. The criticism prompted Education Department officials to reconsider.

That move has now inspired another set of complaints. Said Leone R. Nidiffer, assistant vice-president for institutional research at California State University at Hayward: "In trying to make everybody happy, they made everybody unhappy, or nearly so."

Among the unhappiest may be Division I members of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Because they already provide some graduation-rate data to the NCAA, they would have been exempt from filing another set of forms with the Education Department under the first set of regulations.

NCAA officials said they would work with the department when the regulations are released and seek to maintain the exemption.

Education Department officials said they were only trying to consolidate several graduation-rate measures into one, which would also be in compliance with the farther-reaching Higher Education Technical Amendments of 1991. That, they said, is why they are releasing a second set of proposed rules.

Comments on the proposed rules have already started to arrive at the department, although the regulations won't be formally released until the end of this month or the beginning of July. Paula M. Husselmann, a senior program specialist at the department, said, "We want the package to be as least burdensome as possible and as responsive to community needs as possible."

Ms. Nidiffer posted a message on the Internet with the registrar of Dickinson College, Ron E. Doernbach, to explain the changes and offer suggestions.

Mr. Doernbach said the new figures will not accomplish their initial purpose.

"I think the information that was originally intended to be provided -- the assessment of the likelihood of a student graduating from an institution in four, five, or six years -- was a bona fide objective," he said. "But now, with all the variations and variables that are attached to this very simple objective, people are not going to be able to find their way through to the information.

"What it does is provide a very confusing picture for the people who this legislation is mostly intended to serve -- students and parents -- to make a decision on institution choice."

Mr. Doernbach said the regulations would lead to statistics based on too few people to have any real value.

"When you have a female, Hispanic student as a transfer interested in graduating within two years, that person becomes a cohort in and of herself under this new legislation," he said.

Ms. Husselmann said she understood the complaints but felt they must be put in perspective. "I can see what they're saying, in that the department went too far in their perspective. But, there are conflicting needs in the same community."

For instance, she said, provisions on transfer rates that are expected to be in the regulations could have vastly different impacts on different types of colleges and universities.

The regulations probably will include a reporting system whereby institutions that accept transfer students must notify the colleges that the students previously attended.

After an institution received such notification, it could count the student as a "success" and report a "success rate" in addition to its graduation rate.

Institutions where many students start on a degree, but do not finish, could then point to their success rate as evidence of their quality, even if they had a low graduation rate.

That could be good news, for instance, for community colleges. Barbara Erdsneker, senior research associate in institutional research at Bergen Community College in New Jersey, said the ability to report transfer students was important because only "a small subset of our enrollment" graduates, so the rates would not be a good indicator of success.

But C. Anthony Broh, registrar at Princeton University, said institutions that enroll many transfer students would be burdened by the provision.

"If you are a registrar at any large state university, you probably have between 8 and 10 per cent of your students in any one year transferring from anywhere between 400 and 500 institutions," Mr. Broh said. "There is not even a *quid pro quo* that he can use to get his information for his transfers, and there is not an incentive for him to provide it."

Mr. Broh is co-chairman of an informal group of university registrars and researchers formulating a response to the regulations.

Ms. Husselmann of the Education Department acknowledged that the problem of tracking transfers was the "Achilles' heel" of the legislation.

She added: "The department recognizes the limitations of the statute and we really do want something that is as workable and not onerous as is legally possible."