

Proposed college ‘shame list’ will not improve opportunities

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While there are good intentions behind the Obama administration’s proposal to use data to rank colleges, it will not enhance opportunities or improve higher education quality. Sadly, it is likely to produce the opposite result.

When evaluation based on metrics (such as graduation rates, student performance, and employment rates) begins, many schools will increase admissions standards. Under the pressure of the “shame list” and possibly losing the ability to disperse federal Pell Grant and student loan funds, we can say goodbye to reputable schools with open or liberal admissions. Colleges will begin looking at students like insurance companies look at potential customers. If you aren’t a good risk, they won’t want you. Students with strong credentials will be pursued and those in the bottom 50 percent with average- to-poor credentials are likely to find most doors to higher education closed.

This will create a chasm in higher education between reputable schools who recruit the strongest students and less prestigious schools who will need to accept the remaining average-to-poor students in order to survive. But, when the rubber meets the road and the rankings begin, schools that have given opportunities to more under- prepared students will, in most cases, have lower scores on national metrics. This will put some on the “shame list,” which will prompt students to shy away from these institutions. This will decrease the overall student quality further, keeping these institutions on the “shame list” until the school will no longer be able to survive.

However, before we give a big hurrah to the notion of many less prestigious schools closing their doors, understand that we will have created a



situation in which a huge percentage of young people will have little or no opportunity to access higher education. After some schools go under, as long as the “shame list” is still in place, reputable schools will continue to keep admissions standards high, as they will not want to risk their status.

Moreover, academic quality is likely to suffer even within stronger institutions. Faculty will be under pressure to give higher grades because senior administrators will not want to jeopardize rankings. Within the “shame list” system, faculty will no longer be free to have high expectations and evaluate students accordingly. Tough graders are likely to be confronted by department chairs or academic deans who will have been told by senior administrators to address anything that might lower the institutional ranking.

In his presentation, President Barack Obama spoke of weeding out schools who were “bad actors,” unfairly implying that the responsibility for student success lies with the institution. It is a mistake to blame colleges when students do not succeed. Lack of student success is most often due to one or more of the following variables: lack of adequate academic preparation or maturational readiness, lack of motivation or attendance, lack of time to complete assignments, and mitigating circumstances (such as serious health problems or death in the family).

Colleges and universities cannot fix all the academic deficiencies that weren’t addressed by parents or in the K-12 setting, force students to be motivated or prevent them from experiencing crises. Asserting that colleges are responsible for student failure is tantamount to claiming that only bad businesses have workers with performance problems and that those who fire employees should be blacklisted.

The proposed “shame list” will reduce educational opportunity and damage academic quality. We should remember that higher education is not an entitlement but an opportunity and we should keep the responsibility for student success where it belongs — with the student.