The Boston Globe

IDEAS

How much money do English majors make? Don't ask.

Publicizing the earning potential associated with various college programs would reinforce a narrow view of what higher education is all about.

By **Nicholas Tampio** Updated May 2, 2021, 3:00 a.m.

Boston University in April. ADAM GLANZMAN/BLOOMBERG

A bipartisan group of senators, including Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island, are backing a bill called the College Transparency Act. It would require public and private colleges around the country to report how many students enroll, transfer, drop out, and complete various programs. Then that information would be combined with inputs from other federal agencies, including the Internal Revenue Service, so that the "labor market outcomes" of former students could be tracked.

In other words, the act would create a system that publicizes how much money students make, on average, after going through particular colleges, programs, and majors.

According to Senator Whitehouse, "Choosing a college is a big decision, and yet too often families can't get the information to make apples-to-apples comparisons of the costs and benefits of attending different schools." The purpose of the College Transparency Act is to allow people to make these comparisons. Its other sponsors are Republicans Bill Cassidy of Louisiana and Tim Scott of South Carolina.

Unfortunately, the College Transparency Act could reshape how students, families, policymakers, and the public view the purposes of higher education.

To be sure, privileged students will still be able to pursue their academic passions, but many students will be channeled into paths with a higher payoff upon graduation. Many students who might want to explore geography, philosophy, or the fine arts will be advised to stay away from such majors that do not appear lucrative.

Allison L. Dembeck, vice president of education and labor advocacy at the US Chamber of Commerce, applauds the act for ensuring that "American students have access to accurate information on college affordability, employment, and income data by major." And the text of the bill says that this system will "focus on the needs of the users of the information."

But which needs are we talking about? The system would publicize only some outputs of college — especially how much money students make — and not, for instance, surveys of graduates' satisfaction. This would have the effect of nudging students and families into viewing college as being primarily about making money.

As a college professor, I have talked with students who wanted to major in political science but who pursued a business degree because of parental pressure. I fear that the College Transparency Act would steer many more students toward majors that lead to more money.

The increased pressure may not come from parents alone. The College Transparency Act could lay the foundation for the government to eventually refuse to pay for programs with modest student economic outcomes.

The Obama administration tried to create the Postsecondary Institution Ratings System, which would have rated colleges on graduates' income earned and then steered federal financial aid to students in schools that fared well on this measure. The administration went so far as to create a College Scorecard that reports median alumni earnings in the year after graduation for students who received federal financial aid. The College Transparency Act would capture much more detailed data, which could give Congress the ability to create a high-stakes accountability system in the next reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

require the commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics to provide report to each state's higher education body. In Florida, the legislature is considering a bill that would waive state university tuition and fees for students enrolled in academic programs that align with the state's "economic and workforce needs." The proposed data system would give states information that could be used to determine which majors to fund or not.

College can be a wonderful chance to explore academic options. Sometimes there is a direct link between a student's major and their career. But not always. Often enough, English majors go to veterinary school, theology majors go to law school, political science majors become priests, and cultural anthropology majors go into venture capital. If students learn to read complex texts and write research papers, practice public speaking, find a mentor, and make friends, then they often do well after college regardless of major.

American higher education's commitment to academic freedom means that professors get to choose what to teach and research, and students have options about majors and courses. There is a buzz on American campuses as professors and students do what

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Passion is not frivolous. Students who are fired up about learning go on to start businesses, become intelligence analysts or Peace Corps volunteers, raise families, and do other meaningful things. Do we really want central planners to set up a system that leads students to think more about their anticipated income? I agree with Stanford University Professor David F. Labaree that American higher education is "a perfect mess" and that this messiness contributes to it being "the most successful and sought-after source of learning in the world." Who knows what is the next major that America will need in the future, regardless of how well it pays now?

Does anybody doubt that engineering graduates earn more than comparative literature graduates, at least shortly after graduation? Most students already have a decent idea about what they will be able to do with their degrees. The College Transparency Act is not just about collecting and providing data. It is about building a higher education system in the image of economists and businesspeople.

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