U.S. To Release More FAFSA Data, May Open Form To Web Developers

January 16, 2014

The U.S. Education Department plans to provide guidance counselors and state agencies with more information about students who are filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, known as the FAFSA, Obama administration officials said Wednesday at the department's so-called "Datapalooza" event.

The goal is to boost the rate at which students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, complete the FAFSA.

The department will "responsibly" share data with high school guidance counselors on which of their students have begun the FAFSA so they can work with those students on actually completing the forms, according to a department fact sheet. Department officials will also share that information with state student aid agencies "early" this year, the White House announced separately on Thursday.

The department is also eyeing the development of a FAFSA Application Program Interface, a set of web protocols that would allow developers to build third-party services and applications that work with the complicated form, which is currently available only through the government's website, FAFSA.gov.

Officials will soon issue a formal request for information and feedback on how the department might develop feeds (known as application programming interfaces, or APIs) of "key education data, programs and frequently used forms," including the FAFSA, the department said.

James H. Shelton, the department's assistant deputy secretary for innovation and improvement, told attendees that a FAFSA API would be useful in expanding the way students, families and others use the form. For instance, he said, the department has talked with KIPP charter schools, for instance, about how they might be able to submit all of their students' FAFSA forms at once.

The announcement came at a symposium Wednesday where Obama administration officials highlighted companies, nonprofit and academic groups that have used government data to build products and services aimed at helping students prepare for, apply to, and select a college. The Datapalooza event on Wednesday attracted more than 500 entrepreneurs, software developers and education technology experts.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan told attendees that his goal was to reduce the amount of time it takes to obtain degree and promote competency-based education. The administration is currently soliciting ideas on how it should waive federal student aid rules to certain colleges who want to experiment with innovations that will reduce the cost of higher education.