The Omnibus Bill and a Data Tradeoff We Don't Need To Make

By Amy Laitinen — January 16, 2014

This week, Congress unveiled its bipartisan omnibus spending bill for 2014. There is a lot for higher education to be happy about—the bill will restore some programs to pre-sequester levels, keep a projected increase in Pell Grants, generate new dollars for higher education innovation, and more. There's also another reason for higher education institutions to be happy with the bill. It requires reports and action on reducing burdensome higher ed regulations and data reporting requirements, an often-complained about topic from institutions. But the contradictory requests related to higher education data in the omnibus bill underscore that Congress itself is standing in the way of reducing burden on colleges and universities.

As anyone who's ever worked in higher education (or even just watched a higher ed hearing) knows, colleges and universities seem to be drowning in a sea of onerous, duplicative, and not-terribly-useful regulations and reporting requirements. Senator Alexander has been trying to fund a study on the burden created by these regulations for a while, and he finally got his wish: a $1 million study to be conducted by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences.

In addition to this study on burden, the omnibus bill requires the Department of Education to fulfill two reasonable, but contradictory, requests related to burden. One would be a "plan to minimize the burden" of federal data changes on higher education institutions. This should sound good to institutions, since who really likes burden? (Well, Congress, but that's another story. See here [www.edcentral.org/reporting-burden-in-higher-education-the-case-of-the-clery-act/] and here [www.edcentral.org/stop-drop-measure-institutional-outcomes/].) But then comes the next part of the request, "a proposal to improve the tracking of enrollment and graduation rates for students that transfer and nontraditional students."

As has been clear from every recent HEA reauthorization hearing on both the House and Senate sides, gone are the days when most students are 18-year-olds who study full-time for four years at the same residential school. Nearly 40 percent of today's college students attend part time, and nearly 60 percent end up attending more than one institution. But these students' successes don't "count" because the federal government only includes first-time, full-time students in its graduation rate calculations (exhibit A [higheredwatch.newamerica.net/blogposts/2013/congress_to_blame_for_0_graduation_rate-81656]: Marylhurst University and its "0 percent" graduation rate).

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This is about to change, however, thanks to an earlier combination of actions taken by Congress and the Education Department. Starting in 2015-2016, institutions will begin reporting

data on part-time students and students who are not first-time students (e.g. transfer students). That's the good news. The bad news is that institutions have to report this data in a new Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) survey. Institutions will spend nearly 150,000 hours the first year and nearly 75,000 each year after that to provide basic information on these 21st century students—above and beyond the 850,000+ hours they already spent on IPEDS.

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The problem is that IPEDS wasn't designed to capture the trajectories of 21st century students. In fact, it wasn't designed for most of the things it is currently doing. But Congress keeps asking more and more of IPEDS, creating a worst-of-all-worlds situation in which colleges and universities are drowning in paperwork but where we can't answer the most simple questions (like whether or not part time students are graduating). Even worse is that Congress itself has banned a federal student unit record system that would greatly reduce reporting burden for institutions and allow us to answer critical questions about how today's students are doing.

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The last time Congress created a committee [www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/acmss.html] to look at how to account for success of non-traditional students, the committee recommended revisiting the ban. But the ban remains. Unless Congress changes the law, all the Secretary can do is add to the existing data systems. And that means more burden. But rather

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than deal with the better-data-less-burden contradiction in a meaningful way by getting rid of the ban, Congress continues to say (as it has again in the current omnibus bill) "we want both: better data and less burden" without providing any feasible way of getting there.

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