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## What high schoolers need: Cheat sheet on universities

Pity the poor high schooler shopping for colleges. Even the U.S. secretary of Education had trouble making a smart choice.

Margaret Spellings went college shopping last year with her daughter. She discovered what parents have despaired over for years: Information on dining plans and intramural sports is everywhere, but data about graduation rates or instructional quality are hard to come by.

Without such information, comparison shopping is difficult. Currently, tuition-paying parents and students have a lot more facts about what students know going into college (SAT scores, grade point averages, etc.) than on what they know coming out.

A commission Spellings organized is looking at ways to make higher education more accountable and to measure the "value added" it provides to students. These are important questions to raise, and Washington's huge financial support for higher education justifies federal involvement.

The USA has some of the finest universities in the world, but many others fail their undergraduates. The recent National Assessment of Adult Literacy, for instance, found that only a third of college graduates qualify as "proficient" readers able to handle complex English texts. And a PBS documentary, *Declining by Degrees*, reported on large universities where research-oriented professors make few demands of, and hand out inflated grades to, students in big lecture classes.

Parents can't easily learn about such things. Instead, they rely on data supplied by colleges that's often self-serving. Private enterprise has not stepped in to fill the gap. The most popular college guides depend either on student gossip or ratings that mostly measure test scores of incoming freshman and a school's popularity in the eyes of other college officials.

Surely parents and young adults deserve more. At a minimum, they should know whether some colleges are better at graduating their students in four years (thus saving tuition money). Finding a way to track students through college is a proper governmental role if it can be done without compromising privacy.

Tracking college students' academic progress doesn't require mandatory standardized tests, like those used in elementary and secondary schools. That option, at odds with the specialized nature of higher education, has drawn heavy criticism even before Spellings' commission makes any proposal. Instead, testing can be private and voluntary.

More than 100 colleges are experimenting with a privately funded test, called the Collegiate Learning Assessment, that attempts to measure critical thinking skills. A separate effort, the National Survey of Student Engagement, attempts to measure the quality of a student's education. That survey, sponsored by several higher education foundations, could eventually replace less effective college guides.

With more information, parents and students would be better able to judge whether, say, four years at Penn is really worth nearly \$100,000 more than four years at Penn State.