

---

## Regional

---

# College decisions require careful consideration

In the last few months a couple of developments regarding higher education have passed with little fanfare among the general public, but which can still impact the decisions students and their families make about where to go to college.

Both developments have to do with the decision by the Obama Administration to drop its initial plans of creating a college ranking system. The plan, initially announced in August 2013, was supposed to rank colleges and universities based on factors such as a college's average net price, student completion rates, the percentage of students receiving Pell Grants, labor market outcomes and loan repayment rates. The goal was for students to make better decisions about what school to attend while holding institutions accountable for their outcomes. The "teeth" of this initiative was to have Congress tie some portion of federal student aid to the ratings.

The plan was abandoned for multiple reasons. One was the almost unanimous opposition to it by numerous groups, including the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities and the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities. These groups argued, and rightfully so, that institutions of higher education in this country are so diverse that creating a single rating system for colleges with so many different missions, student profiles and resources would be next to impossible. For example, some colleges claimed that the plan would punish institutions that serve low-income students and those that prepare graduates for much-needed but low-paying professions. They said, among other things, that a rating system that does

### Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

not adjust for student demographics and institutional mission could compel colleges to turn away at-risk students, relax their graduation standards, or drop degrees in low-paying fields.

Additionally, this plan would have to be approved by Congress, whose Republican majority had already expressed their opposition by arguing that the federal government has no business rating colleges.

As we have mentioned in previous columns, the business of ranking colleges and universities is mined with pitfalls and methodological issues and fail, for the most part, to account for how effective colleges are in teaching students valuable hard and soft skills that will make a difference in their lives.

On Sept. 12, the White House unveiled a new college-information Web site in lieu of the rating system. The site, titled "College Scorecard" ([collegescorecard.ed.gov](http://collegescorecard.ed.gov)), actually is not entirely new since it replaces an older one with the same name. Yet, it has some new features and is much more user friendly. It seems the Administration learned from the disastrous experience launching the Web site for the Affordable Care Act.

One of the new features of the new Web site is the inclusion of measurements of students' earnings six and 10 years after they started at a college, along with data showing the proportion of the college's students who are repaying their student loans. Although most

of the other information provided was already accessible in existing federal databases, such as "College Navigator," the fact that you now can get all that information from a single site is a step in the right direction.

Yet, criticism has already surfaced of this scorecard system. One critic is the American Council on Education (ACE), a non-profit organization that comprises approximately 1,800 accredited, degree-granting colleges and universities and other related organizations nationwide. In addition to previous criticisms about the proposed ranking system, the ACE also says that not all graduates from the same universities should be treated equally.

This is a fair criticism since we all know that not all institutions of higher education have the same strengths across the board for all the disciplines they teach. Each one has stronger departments than others (most due to historical reasons) while other departments will always be weaker because they just support stronger programs by providing general education courses.

Surprisingly, this scorecard system lacks some other information that is relevant in assessing the long-term survivability of an institution of higher education, such as whether a college or university is under investigation by federal or state agencies or whether or not they have been censured by organizations such as the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) which keeps an eye on whether institutions keep up with good practices when it comes to academic freedom and labor issues. The site does, however, contain the list of colleges that

the U.S. Department of Education maintains of institutions they are monitoring because of financial or other reasons,

Another welcomed feature of the scorecard Web site is that it has been designed for use on mobile devices, which are the main vehicle used by today's students when accessing this kind of information. The site also has an extension labeled as "technical" aimed at researchers and policy makers, and contains analyses and additional data, such as college-graduation rates for students who receive Pell Grants.

Despite the fact that these efforts are to be applauded, two major issues remain.

To begin with we need to recognize that the vast majority of the American public lacks an understanding of how higher education works. In order to offer a full and fair

assessment of the data included on it, the site needs a more comprehensive interpretation of what all those numbers mean.

The other issue is that people need to understand that life-transforming decisions, such as where to go to college or which major to pursue, must be informed by data but not driven by them. There are many cultural issues that also play a role in this decision, such as location, institutional culture, demographics, history and even family ties to a particular college.

In other words, we should not allow computer programs to tell us where to go for an education.

*Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. is a writer and college professor with leadership experience in higher education. He can be contacted through his website at: <http://www.aromerojr.net>*