

# Activist: Database violates student rights

By Makebra M. Anderson  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) — The federal government's proposed plan to create a national registry that would track every college student is drawing fire from student rights advocates concerned about the possible violation of students' privacy.

"The United States Student Association (USSA) opposes the creation of this new database because it infringes upon student privacy rights," says Jasmine Harris, Legislative Director for USSA. "There are few protections offered for students under this proposal. They don't have the opportunity to opt out — even students who don't receive federal student aid."

Under the proposal, all colleges and universities would be required to provide data on all of its students, even those not receiving federal financial aid. The information gathered would include each student's Social Security number.

"There is already a tremendous amount of information out there that doesn't violate students rights policies," says Mike Bowler, director of Outreach and Communications for the Institute of Education Sciences, the research arm of the Department of Education. "If this comes to pass, there are going to be many safeguards to ensure that students' information is safe. For example, there will be no one person that will have access to the entire database."

The United States Education Department says this system would make it easier for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to measure college's performance and would provide more accurate statistics about



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retention and graduation rates.

"Right now all the states do it differently and there is a need for a unified system of data collecting," says Bowler. "With this database, we would know really for the first time exactly what graduation rates are. It would give policymakers information about higher education that is more accurate and make it easier for colleges to report data because they will have better information."

An estimated 15.9 million people were registered college students in 2002, according to the United States Census Bureau. The Bureau also reports that roughly 7.1 million full-time college students received some form of financial aid to help pay for their education that same year.

The USSA, a grassroots organization that tracks and lobbies for federal legislation and fights for student rights, agrees that the NCES needs a better way of tracking student progress, but doesn't feel a federal registry is the best way to do it.

"NCES claims they would better be able to track students and what we're saying is that we know the graduation rates are inaccurate, but there are other ways to gain better information," says Harris. "They can't guarantee the information wouldn't be used for any other purpose than statistical analysis."

NCES is the primary federal entity for collecting and analyzing educational data. The center collects, analyzes, and reports statistics on the condition of American education and claims it has never been required to share student information with other agencies.

At present, colleges and universities are required to report tuition, faculty salary averages, enrollment statistics and other data for the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) established by the NCES. This is the core database used by the federal government to track trends in higher education.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) feels the current data system limits the ability to hold colleges accountable.

In a letter to Rep. John Boehner (R-Ohio), chairman of the House Education and the Workforce Committee and Howard McKeon (R-Calif.), chairman of the Subcommittee on 21st Century Competitiveness, Edward Elmendorf, senior vice president of Government Relations and Policy Analysis for AASCU writes.

"We believe, however, that the limitations of existing data systems prevent institutions from fully examining the progress of their students through the higher

education system, and that current accountability systems fail to capture the full measure of student progress and success on our campuses. We further believe that if institutions are to be held truly accountable, better data are needed, and that the best way to accomplish this is through the development of a comprehensive national data collection strategy."

Changes to the current system would allow the Education Department to calculate the net price of tuition instead of relying on the price that colleges report. For the first time, it would also allow the department to track students who transfer from one college to another.

Although the NCES promises that sensitive information will be protected, the National Association of Independent Colleges & Universities (NAICU) still objects to its creation.

"Right now students have to give written consent for educational and personally identifiable data to be transferred out of the college. With this new proposal, most of that power is given to the federal government," explains Sarah Flanagan, the group's vice president for government relations. "It is a private action to enroll in college, especially if you don't get federal assistance, and a database like this could discourage college enrollment. Researchers are always going to want to know more. When does it stop?"

To put this new system in place, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which protects the privacy of student education records, would have to be amended. Under FERPA, established in 1974, parents and students "have the right to inspect and review the student's education records maintained by the school and generally, schools must have written permission from the parents or eligible students in order to release any information from a student's education record."

Harris said, "It's hard to support this with all of the issues surrounding identity theft. Our biggest fear is that later down the road this database will be misused. In order for USSA to be on board about a new system we need to have conversation about alternatives and try to come up with other proposals that don't require information like social security numbers... Student's privacy right shouldn't be jeopardized in the name of providing better statistics."

# Dems launch probe of Ohio's elections

By NEDRA PICKLER  
Associated Press

The Democratic Party said Monday it will examine reports of voting problems in Ohio, where President Bush's victory clinched his re-election.

Outgoing Democratic National Committee Chairman Terry McAuliffe said the party will spend "whatever it takes" to study complaints from Ohio voters that included uncounted votes, long lines, shortages of ballots, understaffed polling stations and voting machine errors.

McAuliffe said the party is not seeking to overturn the result but to ensure that every vote is counted. He said the study will be conducted by nonpartisan experts to be announced later, with a report issued in the spring that recommends reforms to prevent such problems in the future.

Ohio Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell was expected to certify Bush's winning margin of about 119,000 votes on Monday, a margin closer than election night totals but not close enough to trigger an automatic recount.

The Green and Libertarian parties are raising money to pay for a recount that would be conducted once the results are certified.

Blackwell, a Republican, oversaw the election process while serving as one of several statewide GOP leaders who co-chaired Bush's campaign. The 2000 Florida recount was also administered by a Republican secretary of state, Katherine Harris, who is now a member of Congress.

In a conference call with reporters, McAuliffe said the panel needs to look at the practice of secretaries of state serving as campaign officials. He said he personally thinks it's a laudable goal for election officials to be nonpartisan.

McAuliffe said it's too early to tell if Republicans were behind any fraud that may have influenced the outcome in Ohio. When asked if the president supports an investigation into voting irregularities in Ohio, White House spokesman Scott McClellan said the election "was viewed as very free and fair."

"It was a clear victory for the president of the United States," McClellan said. "Now is the time for us to all look forward on how we can work together to get things done."

McAuliffe said he briefed Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry about the study Sunday night and Kerry will be monitoring the results carefully. Kerry often promised voters, particularly Black voters, that his campaign would examine any allegations of voter fraud.

Many Blacks said irregularities in Florida in 2000 kept their votes from being counted. Democrats want to ensure that Blacks do not give up on the voting process because they are such overwhelming supporters of Democratic candidates.

## Commission

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curry favor with anyone," she said in the interview.

White House spokeswoman Erin Healy said the administration considered the matter closed.

"We thank the commission members for their service," she said. "Their terms have expired and we have appointed new commission members."

Reynolds is assistant general counsel for Great Plains Energy Inc. in Kansas City, Mo. In addition to serving in the Education Department under Bush, Reynolds was deputy associate attorney general providing legal advice for civil litigation matters.

Berry has criticized every president since Carter, who appointed her and later drew

pressure from her over the levels of financial aid for the poor. President Reagan fired her but had to reinstate her after a lawsuit. Former Presidents Bush and Clinton weren't spared her criticism, either.

Bush also replaced the commission's staff director, Les Jin, with Kenneth Marcus of Virginia. Jin said Berry's and Reynoso's tenure dispute stems from a disagreement with the White House about when they began serving their six-year terms.

"The commission has had a long history of independence and of trying to protect civil rights," Jin said. "And it just seems like we would have been much better served if they (the White House) had tried to take the initiative to engage in a conversation about a smooth transition rather than try to heighten a battle over six weeks."

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