

07/30/2026 18:45:46 [BGV] Bloomberg Government

Senate Panel Approves College Student Data Collection Bill (1)

By Tiana Headley

(Bloomberg Government) -- A Senate committee advanced a bill that supporters say would increase transparency around how college students fare as they move through higher education and into the job market.

The Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Thursday approved the College Transparency Act (S. 2511) on a bipartisan 21-1 vote, the first time an iteration of the bill has been approved by the panel in its nearly decade-long journey in Congress.

It marks a significant milestone for Senate HELP Chairman Bill Cassidy (R-La.), who has championed the legislation and will exit the chamber after losing his primary, but it still has a long road ahead before it can become law. The House first passed it in 2022 as an amendment to the America COMPETES Act.

Supporters say it would better inform the decision-making of prospective college students and their families and shine a light on whether individual schools are setting their students up for success. Tracked metrics would include graduation rates, student loan debt, job earnings, and employment.

"The bipartisan support for this legislation reflects the simple premise of the bill: Better data leads to better decisions," Kevin Carey, New America's vice president of education and work, said in a statement on the committee vote.

The bill aims to address current gaps in federal student outcomes data by lifting the current ban on the government collecting data on individual college students. It will allow the Education Department to use that information to create a public database on postsecondary student outcomes across individual colleges, degree programs, race, and gender. The public would only see the data in aggregate form, without personal identifiers.

Current Data Gaps

The department's existing publicly available databases don't reflect all students enrolled in higher education, leading to an incomplete picture of student outcomes, the bill's supporters say.

For example, the College Score Card presents profiles of individual schools and their graduation rates, average annual cost to attend, and the median earnings and student loan debt of their graduates. But the information is limited to students who receive some form of federal financial aid.

The department also gathers aggregate data from schools on their graduation and retention rates, among other metrics and institutional characteristics, through annual surveys that make up the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. But the graduation rates reflected in the system don't count transfer or part-time students.

Data Privacy

Some student privacy groups remain concerned about the range of data encompassed by the bill.

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Leonie Haimson, co-chair of the Parent Coalition for Student Privacy, said in an email the bill would result in an “invasive federal dossier on every college student, complete with sensitive personal information that could be breached or misused for political ends.”

But supporters say this version of the bill contains significant protections, including prohibiting the sale of the data and access by other law enforcement agencies.

Individual health information, exact addresses, citizenship status, national origin status, and course grades are also excluded from collection. Students will receive disclosures on the data being collected and how it would be used.

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(Updates with reporting in paragraphs three through 13.)