

Obama's biased bashing of career schools

The US Department of Education proposes stiff rules on the for-profit schools of higher education while largely ignoring similar problems in state and nonprofit colleges and universities. An equal hand is needed.

By the Monitor's Editorial Board

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President Obama's Education secretary, Arne Duncan, deserves credit for breaking the ice on a touchy topic in Washington: making sure schools of higher education that rely on tax dollars or their tax-free status are held accountable for their results.

Certainly, the nation's desire to reduce unemployment requires that graduates be fit for jobs and not overly burdened by student loans. One federal study found joblessness would drop by one-third if workers' skills matched the jobs that employers are currently offering.

Unfortunately, Mr. Duncan is being too timid.

His department is oddly focused on making sure that only career colleges, or the for-profit sector of higher ed, are graduating students into "gainful employment" and with lower debt. Duncan must also aim his sights on state-run universities and the private, nonprofit schools that likewise gulp up education subsidies.

Those schools, too, often overpromise, underperform, and leave graduates short on career prospects and deep in red ink. Just ask many recent law graduates or anyone with a new bachelor's degree in, say, sociology.

President Bush tried to hold all higher education accountable. But Congress – which is beholden to powerful lobbies for the private schools – reacted swiftly. It put up barriers to probes into whether taxpayers are getting their money's worth in federal student loans, research grants, tax breaks, or other government benefits that flow to that sector of higher education.

This same lobby, which even bristles at colleges being ranked by US News & World Report, now casts a wary eye on the rapid success of the for-profit schools, which serve about 3 million students. These taxpaying institutions are especially good at attracting women; the poor; minorities; and busy, low-income workers – all of whom would suffer if the proposed regulations from the Department of Education went too far in suppressing the growth of the for-profit sector.

Some 2,800 of these schools offer degrees that range from an associate's in cosmetology to a master's in business – usually through convenient online teaching and usually not by constructing tuition-raising, bricks-and-mortar buildings with eye-popping athletic facilities.

While some overcharge or overhype the worth of their degrees, most are filling a void in the education market, as Duncan acknowledges. State-owned and nonprofit schools, meanwhile, are often slow to innovate because of their bureaucracies or the undue power of the faculty.

Of course, as with state and nonprofit schools, career schools do need a check on how student loans and other federal money are being spent. Their students too often take on too much debt for the type of work they aim for. The "learning outcomes" of their graduates don't always match jobs in the marketplace.

But such problems reflect the demographics of the students and the often-low admission standards of the for-profits as much as any neglect or abuse.

The Education secretary would certainly not target the historically black colleges alone for their failings, which are greater than other private colleges. Nor would he single out universities that pass along star athletes to higher grades when they don't

deserve it.

Then why pick solely on career schools?

Eliminating abuses in one sector of higher education requires eliminating them in all. What kind of lesson in fairness is Duncan's department teaching by its blatant discrimination and lopsided rulemaking? And Congress, too, needs to back off from efforts to toughen rules solely on career schools.

At a time when the nation needs better and more graduates of higher education to keep America competitive, the Obama administration needs to broaden its quest for accountability in this industry and not play favorites.

If any for-profit schools are committing fraud with students, then the Justice Department or the Federal Trade Commission needs to take on the burden of checking such abuses.

In the meantime, the Education Department must represent all students and all taxpayers in ensuring federal dollars are not wasted. That is the best way for Duncan to help his boss achieve his goal of America once again having the world's highest college graduation rate by 2020.

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