

Written Testimony
Strengthening America's Higher Education System
Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Training of the
House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce

Submitted by
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Independent Colleges and Universities

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The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) is the leading public policy association for the nation's private, nonprofit colleges and universities. Its membership includes over 1,000 colleges, universities, and associations. Our 963 member institutions include major research universities, church-related colleges, historically black colleges, art and design colleges, traditional liberal arts and science institutions, women's colleges, two-year colleges, and schools of law, medicine, engineering, business, and other professions.

NAICU welcomes Congress' continued interest in transparency and accountability, especially in the form of consumer information. NAICU, and its membership, supports federal transparency initiatives that offer prospective students and their families valid information on colleges and universities that best fit their educational needs and goals. Prospective students and families currently have access to a wide array of commercial consumer information resources designed to help with the college selection process, but which often have added to confusion. The federal government, with its access to millions of college aspirants, and its credibility as an unbiased, statistical resource, could play a key role in helping families sort through the many wonderful and diverse post-secondary options available in our nation. Enabling them to go beyond the commercial ratings and rankings and rely on facts would be a great service.

One very visible example of our support for providing consumer data and qualitative information for prospective students and their families is the NAICU initiative University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN) which can be found at <http://www.ucan-network.org>.

U-CAN was developed by NAICU in 2007, during the last Higher Education Act (HEA) reauthorization cycle in response to calls for greater consumer transparency from the House Committee on the Education and the Workforce, the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions and former Education Secretary Margaret Spellings' Commission on the Future of Higher Education. As we watched the reauthorization process unfold, we saw a growing list of items that policymakers thought consumers should consider when choosing a college. As with many regulatory initiatives, the list was growing longer and longer, but there was no clear sense of what prospective students and families wanted to know.

So, NAICU took the ideas in the House and Senate HEA bills and the ideas in the Spellings Commission report, and conducted eight focus groups in four cities. There were four types of focus group participants: 1) high school students whose parents had gone to college; 2) high school students whose parents had not gone to college; 3) parents who had gone to college; and 4) parents who had not gone to college.

Here are the two key take-aways from students and parents that our research identified in 2007 after completing the focus groups:

1. **Be both long and short enough.** *Too little information can be misleading, too much can be overwhelming.* This is one of the biggest challenges for all of us in the policy world, as we debate how best to inform students and families about the opportunities available in higher education. While many of us have data points we believe are important to making an informed decision, we must find a balance to ensure consumers find the information they think is important.
2. **Include both quantitative and qualitative information.** *Beyond facts and data points, work in partnership with colleges and universities to provide information that prospective students want to know about the nature of the institution so they can determine “fit.”* This can be done by allowing institutions to tell their own stories through links on college profiles, so students can learn more about what each school is really like.

One of our focus group parents was particularly visionary about this concept, and was responsible for the three line description of each school on the top of each profile. As he put it, “if you give them only three lines to tell me about who they are, what they chose will tell me a lot about their values.”

The results of the focus group research and discussion with our member institutions led to NAICU’s development of the U-CAN online resource. U-CAN was designed to offer prospective students and their families a concise, Internet-based, consumer-friendly information source about the nation’s private, nonprofit colleges and universities in a common, easy-to-understand format.

Today, U-CAN includes over 800 participating institutions and nearly 600 college and university profiles. In the last year alone, U-CAN has received nearly a half-a-million page views and over one million “hits” to the website.

Praised by admissions counselors, students, policymakers, and consumer groups, U-CAN consists of institutional profiles displayed in a common template. Among the in-depth data points included in the template are: admissions, enrollment, academics, student demographics, graduation rates, most common fields of study, transfer of credit policy, accreditation, faculty information, class size, tuition and fee trends, price of attendance, financial aid, campus housing, student life, and campus safety. To

help students and families obtain a feel for the campus culture, 28 links are provided to the institution's website for detailed information on specific aspects of the college or university.

Through U-CAN, consumers have easy access to information on net tuition, average loan debt at graduation, and undergraduate class-size for hundreds of colleges. This information is generally difficult for consumers to find, and comes from the U.S. Department of Education's IPEDS survey and the Common Data Set.

Consumers also are able to search institutions by 17 variables, including tuition, debt at graduation, number of students, graduation rate, city, state, distance from home, affiliation, and more.

U-CAN is totally free - both to users and to the colleges and universities that choose to participate. Participation by NAICU member institutions is voluntary, and private colleges do not have to be members of NAICU in order to participate.

Our Most Recent Work

NAICU is currently working on updating the U-CAN web presence and site infrastructure. Prior to redesigning the website, we conducted a new round of focus group research to determine whether there were significant attitude changes from 2007 in what students and parents said were most important in helping inform their college searches, and if adjustments were necessary in the organization and presentation of the institutional profile. A few weeks ago, we completed eight new focus groups in four cities (Minneapolis, MN, San Francisco, CA, Atlanta, GA, and Washington, DC). Here are some preliminary findings from those groups.

- In general, the elements contained within the U-CAN institutional profile still seem to be the issues that most resonate with students and parents as being important considerations in their college choice. Participants were particularly interested in the links that provide access to an institution's website to find information that distinguished it from others.
- For students, their most important piece of information is majors and degrees offered. Also important are cost, academic reputation, location and enrollment.
- For parents, we have seen a rise in interest from 2007 in their desire to have greater access to qualitative information, including details on campus safety and graduation rates, price, majors offered, and academic quality among others.
- Finally, participants wanted more information for and about prospective students. Although U-CAN already includes admission rates, and SAT and GPA ranges, they also wanted to know about such things as admissions deadlines and requirements. To avoid too much clutter, we think this might best be solved by a direct link to institutional Admissions pages.

Limitations of U-CAN

As a free resource to both participating colleges and consumers, U-CAN has its limits. NAICU is only able to include institutions from the private, nonprofit higher education sector in U-CAN. We do not have an extensive marketing budget and we operate U-CAN in-house with limited staff. Our consumer groups found it useful but had not heard of it.

When we developed U-CAN, we had hoped it would serve as a way forward to a national conversation about consumer transparency. In that aspect we have been successful. During the last reauthorization, we were honored to have staff from both the House and Senate, both Democrats and Republicans, attend our Washington, DC, focus groups. The final consumer transparency language in HEA reflected our findings, and we supported last year's bipartisan legislation in the House in this regard, H.R. 4983, *Strengthening Transparency in Higher Education Act*. We hope to work with you again during the HEA reauthorization process.

We also hope that the net result in this reauthorization will be a dynamic resource for use by all higher education sectors that the federal government can make available to prospective students. Important groundwork was laid through the advent of COOL in the 1998 HEA Reauthorization and College Navigator in 2007. The President has been working on his own array of tools from the Scorecard to the Shopping Sheet to the controversial Postsecondary Institutional Rating System.

I encourage you to work with colleges and universities to cut through all the clutter and create a simple tool that engages prospective students and helps each American find their "best fit" college.