

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION CONSIDERS ROLLING BACK COLLEGE REGULATIONS

The Education Department says relaxing some rules governing higher education would spur innovation; consumer advocates warn it could hurt pupils

By Michelle Hackman
May 10, 2018

WASHINGTON – The Trump administration is signaling that it plans to undo several rules governing higher education and student aid during the next year, a move the officials say will lead to more innovation but that consumer advocates warn could harm students.

The Education Department flagged its plans in a regulatory filing this week, saying it would target rules on subjects such as the credit hour – a unit measuring how much students accomplish in class – and the process by which colleges receive recognition that qualifies their students to get federal aid.

The moves go beyond previously stated plans to roll back two Obama-era regulations cracking down on for-profit colleges. The department plans as early as this month to rewrite both of those rules, which set earnings standards for for-profit schools' graduates and create a process for students failed by those schools to have their debt forgiven by the government.

The Education Department's latest filing suggests it is looking to ease requirements on online and for-profit programs in particular, such as a mandate that online courses include a certain amount of interaction between students and instructors. The department's in-house watchdog last year said a popular online school, Western Governors University based in Utah, should pay back \$712 million in federal aid for failing to provide adequate student-teacher interaction.

Such changes could boost innovative and non-traditional programs, including for-profit institutions, but critics say it could open the door to schools with lower standards.

Overall, the changes represent far-reaching revisions to higher education that would rethink how, and how much, the federal government funds college programs.

"The administration is basically, through regulation, changing the fundamental definition of what higher education is and what government will pay for," said Amy Laitinen, a former Obama-administration official who works on higher-education issues at the liberal-leaning New America Foundation.

Trump administration officials and their supporters say the push would allow colleges, particularly schools offering online degrees or other nontraditional programs, more freedom in how they structure their offerings.

They point in particular to a growing sector in higher education known as competency-based education – programs that advance students based on how much they know rather than how many courses they take – as an area hampered by the current approach.

“If you want a flexible system that allows for new models and new approaches, you can’t have really strict definitions for everything,” said Jason Delisle, who studies higher-education financing at the conservative-leaning American Enterprise Institute.

Some higher-education experts and consumer advocates warn that this would remove guardrails protecting the quality of college degrees, potentially hurting students enrolled in such programs and taxpayers who help fund grants and loans to the schools.

Barmak Nassirian, director of federal relations at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, said the department’s targeting of a wide swath of rules reflects an indiscriminate commitment to deregulation rather than a coherent philosophy. “As the emperor told Mozart, ‘Too many notes on the page,’ ” he said.

The administration also hopes to relax certain rules that restrict the number of colleges that qualify for the money. Officials plan to come up with less stringent definitions for the credit hour, for example.

In its regulatory filing, the Education Department said it plans to change the rules on the criteria for colleges and universities to qualify for federal dollars. Specifically, officials hope to revise the process for recognizing accreditors, bodies that evaluate school quality and provide stamps of approval that make schools eligible for federal aid.

In 2016, Education Secretary John King Jr. cut off a for-profit college accreditor, faulting the group for failing to prevent abuses by two for-profit college chains that had closed on the group’s watch.

Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has signaled she disagrees with Mr. King’s decision, believing it hasty, and her department may seek to reduce the administration’s ability to cut off accreditors in the future.