



West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission

Higher Education
News Clippings

Week of March 29, 2009



April 1, 2009

Promise bill OK'd with new limit Legislation guarantees at least \$4,750 in tuition

Mannix Porterfield, Register-Herald Reporter

CHARLESTON — Senators agreed Wednesday to make a new promise to West Virginia high schoolers bound for college — a scholarship that puts up at least \$4,750 toward tuition.

Without dissent, the upper chamber approved a remake of Gov. Joe Manchin's bill that eyed a \$4,500 cap on tuition available under the Promise program.

To make sure there is sufficient cash to guarantee the minimum, or "floor" amount, the bill takes another \$2 million from video poker proceeds, moving the total to \$29 million.

By 2011, the scholarship fund will have some \$46,200,000, Senate Education Chairman Robert Plymale, D-Wayne, said.

Another provision scraps the Promise board in favor of a revived student financial aid advisory board, he said.

"This is a merit-based scholarship," Plymale assured Minority Leader Don Caruth, R-Mercer, after he interpreted the bill to mean it was shifting to needs-based.

"This legislative body in previous years voted to put this as a merit-based scholarship. It will remain a merit-based scholarship."

Students can cover tuition under the "floor" at all but four institutions — West Virginia University, Marshall University, Fairmont State University and Shepherd University.

Plymale acknowledged WVU and Marshall have welcomed the lion's share of Promise students — 4,200 in Morgantown and 1,600 in Huntington.

Altogether, some 8,800 scholarships have been awarded since the Legislature, under former Gov. Bob Wise, legalized an illicit industry — video poker — and used money from the slot machines to finance Promise.

But the education chairman emphasized it is possible a student could get more than the guaranteed minimum of \$4,750.

"You cannot go below it," he said.

Plymale told Sen. John Unger, D-Berkeley, he didn't believe the four schools with tuition above the "floor" would be hard put to attract Promise students since the schools can offer additional scholarships to make up the difference.

“I think it’s a possibility some will still get a full tuition paid,” he said.

But Unger saw the bill as revolutionary from the original concept.

“We’re making a major philosophical shift,” he said.

“The idea was that if you played by the rules and made good grades, we promised you a full tuition and fees. This is not the case any more. We might be able to provide full tuition and fees. But we no longer provide a full promise when we started out years ago with this program.”

Changing times, and with that, higher costs, made a switch necessary, Plymale responded.

“Had we not had the increase in tuition over a period of time, we would be well within the realm of being able to pay for this on an ongoing basis.”

Sen. Mike Oliverio, D-Monongalia, who offered the “floor” amendment to succeed Manchin’s proposed cap, said the bill puts the Legislature back in the driver’s seat on controlling money given to Promise.

“The ultimate responsibility lies with us,” he said.

“We control the power of the purse. And if it’s important for us to fully fund these scholarship programs, we’ll find a way to do that.”

The bill stipulates a minimum 3.0 grade-point average and a 22 score on the ACT.

What’s more, Oliverio said, the bill imposes no dramatic changes in what students must achieve to qualify for a scholarship.

“Students in rural areas of the state would be unfairly punished if significant dollars were not allocated to the program and standards had to be raised,” he said.

Oliverio said the bill encourages high schoolers to “take a rigorous curriculum, prepare for college, achieve on their college aptitude test and then be in college on a Promise program that requires them to maintain a GPA through their college experience.”

“In doing so, we will encourage them to be successful,” he added.



April 1, 2009

Revamping of the HSC presses on New model unites 2 operations as WVU Healthcare

BY CASSIE SHANER The Dominion Post

Leaders at WVU's Robert C. Byrd Health Sciences Center (HSC) have begun developing a new organizational model for clinical operations, and they're slated to update the WVU Board of Governors on the progress of their restructuring effort Friday.

Under their plan, WVU Hospitals and University Health Associates, the university's clinical practice arm, will operate jointly as WVU Healthcare, and that entity will be responsible for quality improvements, expanding services, and providing support for education and research.

Faculty members will have greater involvement in governance of WVU Healthcare and the West Virginia United Health System "to assure that all clinical activities are aligned with the missions of the schools," according to a memo provided to The Dominion Post by HSC spokeswoman Amy Johns.

Dr. Fred Butcher, interim vice president for health sciences, is part of a 15-person team of HSC leaders — called the Integration Working Group — that has been working with The Chartis Group, a health care consulting firm, since December to develop a more unified structure.

He said the elements of their proposal, which were agreed on at meetings held in March, will help the university's health sciences enterprise move forward.

"There is a great deal of enthusiasm and excitement in the group about the opportunity to position the organization for continued success in a manner that takes advantage of changes in health care delivery and maximizes the resources that can be generated to support all our missions," Butcher said in the memo.

HSC consultants and administrators plan to develop the proposal further as remaining questions are answered and talks with key stakeholders continue.

The agenda for Friday's Board of Governors meeting includes an update on the status of the restructuring effort from Butcher and interim WVU President C. Peter Magrath. Johns said additional details will be released after the board gets a chance to look at the proposal.

WVU is seeking a new health sciences chancellor who will be involved in implementing the restructuring plan. At a WVU Faculty Senate executive committee meeting Monday, Magrath said the search to fill that position has been moving slowly, but for good reason.

"I didn't think you could get people really interested until they knew who the new president was going to be," Magrath said.

Interviews will likely begin in the coming weeks, Magrath said, and the search committee is on track to identify two or three finalists for WVU President-elect James P. Clements to interview in June.

"That's the plan, but it could take longer," Magrath said.

WVU initially hired a Pittsburgh consulting firm — R&V Associates — to examine HSC operations last year, but the firm was fired a few months later. WVU officials said that an interim report issued by the firm contained several inaccuracies and failed to provide solutions to ongoing problems.

The report detailed staffing shortages, financial shortcomings and leadership and structural problems across several departments at WVU Hospitals, the WVU School of Medicine and University Health Associates.

The Chartis Group will provide a report that includes recommendations, the rationale for each one and an implementation plan once its work is complete. WVU Hospitals and University Health Associates will pick up the tab — up to \$315,000.

Information about WVU's restructuring plans, including the memo provided to The Dominion Post, has been posted to a Web site accessible to HSC faculty and staff only. The idea is to increase transparency, keep employees informed and allow for anonymous feedback.

The 15 people involved in the process represent a broad range of HSC interests, Johns said, but there have been many opportunities for faculty and staff to get involved, too.

About 200 people participated in 16 small group discussions as part of the restructuring effort, and several town-hall-style meetings have also been held with employees.

March 30, 2009

WVU still can't explain awarding of 118 degrees

By The Associated Press

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. -- After a second review, consultants still cannot explain how 118 undergraduate and master's degrees from West Virginia University were awarded between 1998 and 2007, even though the students apparently didn't have enough credits.

In each of those cases, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers said Monday, there are no records to either prove or disprove that students earned the required hours.

But project director Bob Bontrager said the second review, which built upon one made public in February, concluded there was no pattern of malfeasance or favoritism. Rather, he said, "well intentioned and careful" faculty and staff were forced to contend with a "a records management system that has been fundamentally flawed for a number of years."

WVU officials said changes are under way to repair that system, and they are committed to ensuring degrees are never wrongly awarded again.

"Our goal is to achieve the gold standard in records management so everything we do from here forward is of the highest quality and beyond reproach," said interim Provost Jane Martin.

The reviews were prompted by a scandal surrounding the retroactive awarding of a master's degree to Mylan Inc. executive Heather Bresch, daughter of Gov. Joe Manchin. The furor over the addition of courses and grades to her transcript in the fall of 2007 ultimately led to the resignation of former president Mike Garrison and the demotions of several others.

Fourteen of the apparently unearned diplomas were executive master's of business administration degrees, the kind awarded to Bresch.

The consultant said in February it had found 288 questionable undergraduate and master's degrees, including 27 eMBAs. On Monday, however, it said it reviewed 383 cases, including 79 eMBA degrees.

The questionable undergraduate degrees accounted for less than 1 percent of the 36,661 degrees issued during the decade.

The consultant's investigation found that in many cases, students had earned the required hours, but they were not properly recorded. In other cases, university officials simply "exercised discretion" by waiving credit hours.

But in 104 cases, the report said, "a lack of documentation made it impossible to determine with any certainty why students were certified to graduate."

"That, of course, is something we are going to make sure never happens again," the president said.

Bontrager said "it's actually reasonable" that certain academic records weren't retained by individual colleges. However, they should have made it into a central database.

His company's first report faulted the university for too often relying on paper-based systems in individual schools, where records can be incomplete and accountability for changing them nonexistent. Rather, it said, all schools should consider WVU's central database the official academic record.

The consultant also cited the lack of a uniform policy for how long faculty should retain grades and student work, how grades can be modified, and how to hold people accountable for entering grades. While teaching assistants and administrative staff can enter grades using a faculty member's ID and password, that common practice makes it impossible to tell who entered the grade.

The consultant said Monday its eMBA review found that most of the degrees in question were legitimate, involving cases in which the students had earned credits that were either not recorded or transferred properly. In some, the academic work was completed, but there were problems with tuition payments.

That left just 14 cases in which the transcripts showed a credit-hour deficiency. The College of Business and Economics could not locate either paper or electronic records that show students earned the hours they needed, the report said, yet in each case WVU conferred a degree.

Magrath said again Monday that the disputed degrees will stand.

WVU's consultants have warned the university might have a difficult time proving "just cause" for revoking the degrees, such as fraud, deceit or error by the student. Graduates, however, might have grounds to sue for breach of contract if the degrees were revoked.

WVU's board did revoke Bresch's degree last year; Magrath has said hers was not awarded until years after she left the program, while others were awarded in a timely way.



April 2, 2009

WVU reps want Lang petition dismissed Say he's getting same treatment as everyone else

BY CASSIE SHANER The Dominion Post

Attorneys for the WVU Board of Governors (BOG), interim President C. Peter Magrath and academic integrity officer Marjorie McDiarmid have filed paperwork in Monongalia County Circuit Court to dismiss a petition filed by former Provost Gerald Lang.

Lang filed a petition in February to stop an academic integrity hearing related to WVU's decision to award Heather Bresch — the daughter of Gov. Joe Manchin and chief executive officer of Mylan Inc. — an executive MBA degree that an investigative panel concluded she did not earn.

Lang claimed several officials involved — including McDiarmid, WVU Vice President for Legal Affairs and General Counsel Mary Brandt and Deputy General Counsel Beverly Kerr — have a conflict of interest due to their involvement in the Bresch matter.

He also alleged that Magrath, the board and the other respondents in the case violated his due process rights by scheduling the hearing when he and his attorney would be unable to attend.

But McDiarmid's motion to dismiss — filed Tuesday by her attorney, Scott Curnutte — claims that Lang's petition doesn't meet the requirements for the relief he's seeking, as Lang would have a chance to appeal any decision made as a result of the hearing.

Lang fails to make a substantive complaint against her and does not prove that his due process rights have been violated, according to the motion.

It states: "Petitioner Lang is not really claiming that he has not received due process: he is receiving precisely the same due process other respondents received when he was the provost, administered by the same people.

"What Petitioner Lang is really claiming is that he is not receiving different process. He does not want to be treated like the other respondents whose cases he considered as provost, he wants to be treated specially."

McDiarmid's motion indicates that WVU's academic integrity policy has been applied consistently in Lang's case, the same as it was "during the thirteen years when Petitioner Lang participated in the procedure as Deciding Officer."

The deciding official — a designee of the president — determines the institution's final course of action in response to allegations of academic misconduct, according to WVU policy.

A hearing on McDiarmid's motion is scheduled for April 8. McDiarmid and Curnutte could not be reached for comment in time for this report.

Samuel Spatafore and Kristi McWhirter, assistant attorneys general, filed a combined motion to dismiss Lang's petition on behalf of Magrath and the BOG on Tuesday.

According to their motion, Lang failed to notify Magrath or the BOG of his intent to file the petition, as required by law, and they are not involved "in any substantive manner" with WVU's academic integrity policy.

It states: "Respondent McDiarmid, in her capacity as the Academic Integrity Officer, reports directly to Respondent President, who in turn is accountable to Respondent Board. However, to ensure the integrity and confidentiality of the academic integrity process Respondent McDiarmid executes her duties as the Academic Integrity Officer independently without influence or involvement by Respondents Board and President."

In addition to asking that the case be dismissed, the motion asks that Magrath and the BOG be awarded "any other relief that the Court deems just and proper."

They are seeking an opportunity to participate in the April 8 hearing scheduled for McDiarmid's motion.

Spatafore did not return a call to The Dominion Post to comment in time for this report.

Lang responded to an e-mail on Wednesday; however, he said he had not seen the responses and had "nothing to add."

He did not respond to a question from the newspaper about whether the academic integrity hearing at issue in his initial petition — scheduled for spring break, which was held March 16-20 — proceeded as scheduled.

Lang's attorney, J. Michael Benninger, also did not return a call for comment in time for this report.

WVU spokesman Dan Kim has said that academic integrity hearings are closed proceedings, as they are confidential and personnel related. McDiarmid has said that WVU's academic integrity policy prohibits her from discussing any pending matters.

Charleston Daily Mail

DAILYMAIL.COM

April 1, 2009

COMMENTARY:

Scott M. Hurst: Tech, community college are symbiotic
Integrating them would help students and the community

At least three bills have been introduced in the state Senate and House of Delegates that could impact the relationship between the West Virginia University Institute of Technology and the Community and Technical College of WVU Tech.

This administration enthusiastically supports legislation that will integrate Tech's Community and Technical College into the same institution as the West Virginia University Institute of Technology.

This will not only benefit students at both institutions, but state taxpayers and the economies of Montgomery and Southern West Virginia.

If passed, this integration will result in a single WVU Division that includes three colleges: the College of Business, Humanities and Social Sciences; the Leonard C. Nelson College of Engineering and Sciences; and the Community and Technical College.

Tech and community and technical college faculty would be combined - along with the physical campus facilities - and remain in Montgomery.

For students, it will mean easier access to a broad range of academic programs and student services. With more academic options from which to choose, students will be able to select the academic major(s) most compatible with their interests and abilities. Also, should they change fields of study while they are at WVU Tech, students would be in the best position to lose few or no course credits, as may happen with transfers to other colleges.

Students will be able to move seamlessly across disciplines and programs - certificate to associate degree to bachelor's degree (or possibly the reverse) - as they discover their true career interests.

Associate degree students, in particular, will realize unique and valuable benefits by way of this integration.

First, associate degree students would be eligible for services currently available only to Tech's students - notably tutoring, career counseling and placement.

Secondly, associate degree students would also be eligible to participate in Tech's student life programs - college athletics, intramurals, convocations, social organizations and extra-curricular academic competitions such as Tech's SAE Formula One Car and the Baja Buggy.

The taxpayers will realize significant, direct financial benefit because fewer dollars will be required from the state.

It would be necessary to fund only one set of admissions units, faculty, buildings, laboratories, registrars, specialized equipment, infrastructures, residence halls and back-office operations.

In fact, reduced spending for operations would be almost quadrupled because WVU's main campus is currently carrying out billing, business office, human resources, financial aid, social justice and information technology services, and others, across campus.

Savings should also be realized when the engineering and engineering technology degree programs are reviewed by the Technology Accreditation Commission of ABET, Inc. Because these three associate and seven bachelor's degrees share staffing, facilities, maintenance and lines of reporting, the accreditation review process currently in place is about as streamlined and cost-effective as possible.

Students, too, will realize direct financial benefit. With a larger student population to utilize residence halls, cafeteria services and activities, the cost to each individual for these services will be appreciably reduced.

Finally, Montgomery and southern West Virginia will benefit financially. Faculty and staff will continue to patronize local businesses, and Tech will continue to incorporate the needs of the community into plans for campus facilities - such as the renovations currently under way at the campus swimming pool.

Under the integrated model, Tech will be in its best position to become a viable, long-term partner in the region in economic and community development and in employment readiness.

There will also be opportunity to investigate and address needs like teacher preparedness in math, science and technology; health and long-term care; and green technologies.

This approach truly reflects Tech's mission "to prepare students for careers (in engineering and science, and in business, humanities and social sciences) and to enrich the socioeconomic and cultural lives of students and members of the communities of Southern West Virginia."

We urge swift passage of this legislation, knowing the significant benefits that would result.

Hurst is campus provost at the WVU Institute of Technology in Montgomery.

March 30, 2009

Marshall develops virtual coal mining

By The Associated Press

HUNTINGTON, W.Va. -- Marshall University is developing a virtual world to help train coal miners how to survive a disaster.

Retired quantum chemist Jack Smith is using 14 cameras to create 3-D images of moving bodies for a simulated training exercise.

The images will be installed into a virtual world that mimics the inside of a coal mine.

Organic Motion President Jonathan Rand said his company's technology is cheaper and easier to use than a widely used marker system that uses black suits and Ping-Pong balls attached to every joint.

That system costs about \$1 million, compared to about \$100,000 for the markerless system.

The simulated training is funded by a \$4 million economic development grant. Marshall plans a public unveiling in June.

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

April 3, 2009

The Complicated Task of Simplifying Student Aid

The U.S. Education Department examines 2 ways to make it easier for families to apply

By KELLY FIELD

The first time Kathy Peterson saw the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, the six-page form that the government uses to assess student need, she felt overwhelmed.

"I just kept going from one screen to the next, wondering, 'When is this going to end?'" said Ms. Peterson, an office manager for a telecommunications trade association, whose son will attend Old Dominion University in the fall.

She says she spent at least 20 hours completing the electronic form, 20 times as long as the government estimates it should take.

Ms. Peterson was one of the persistent ones. Each year more than 40 percent of college students, nearly eight million, fail to file a Fafsa, even though most of them would be eligible for aid, according to the U.S. Education Department. The agency doesn't know how many students start the process and give up, or how many never even begin because they're intimidated by the form's length and bureaucratic language.

With those students in mind, the Education Department is studying ways to streamline the form, such as pre-populating income fields with information from families' tax returns and simplifying the formula used to measure need. The latter change would be subject to Congressional approval.

Though neither approach would fulfill President Obama's campaign promise to do away with the form altogether, both changes would ease the burden on students, and on parents like Ms. Peterson, researchers say.

But simplification isn't simple, and both approaches have their drawbacks.

Tightening the formula used to calculate the "expected family contribution" would shorten the form, but it would also redistribute student aid, giving more money to less financially needy students and driving up the costs of the federal programs. Pre-populating the Fafsa with income information would save families time, but it would also cause some students to receive more or less aid than they would otherwise be entitled to, since it would rely on two-year-old income, rather than on an estimate of the prior year's earnings.

Still, a growing consensus among policy makers and researchers is that the tradeoffs would be worth it, and some changes are expected this year. Education Department statistics show that only 7 percent of students from the lowest socioeconomic quartile obtain bachelor's degrees, compared with 60 percent of students from the highest quartile. While inadequate preparation among low-income groups is a major factor in this disparity, lack of resources is another. Low-income students who expect to receive financial aid are more likely to attend college than those who don't, research shows.

"You have to be willing to accept some slop to get simplification," said Mark Kantrowitz, publisher of FinAid, a Web site about student aid. "If you have more low-income students graduating because of a simpler form, isn't it worth spending a little extra on people who don't really deserve" that much aid?

Longer Than the 1040

The complexity of the Fafsa has been well documented and exhaustively discussed: At six pages and 120 questions, it is longer than even the 1040 tax form, with its two pages and 76 questions (not including schedules). The Fafsa's length and unfamiliar language — terms like "emancipated minor" and "unaccompanied youth" — intimidate and confound families and may discourage some people from applying for aid altogether. And the "expected family contribution," which the form yields, tells families how much they must contribute to college but nothing about how much aid they are eligible to receive.

Ask almost anyone, and they'll say something has to be done to simplify the form. Commissions have studied how to do it; Congress has tried to legislate it; presidential candidates have promised it. At his confirmation hearing, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan quipped that "you basically have to have a Ph.D. to figure that thing out."

Some desperate families have even begun paying professionals for help with the form, much as they do with their taxes. At Student Financial Aid Services Inc., which charges first-time clients \$99 and repeat clients \$49 dollars for help with the Fafsa, call volume is up more than 20 percent this year, says Craig V. Carroll, its chief executive. He attributes the growth to the rising cost of college and families' falling incomes. Nationwide, Fafsa applications are up 21 percent this year, according to the Education Department.

That's not to say that there have not been substantial improvements, particularly for low-income students, since 1992, when Congress created the Fafsa. In 1998, Congress established two simplified formulas for assessing need, permitting low-income students to skip many of the financial questions. In 2007 it raised the income cutoff for using those formulas, making 44 percent of students eligible to use them.

Last year Congress directed the Education Department to create a two-page "EZ Fafsa," for some families earning less than \$50,000 a year.

Meanwhile, the Education Department has incorporated "skip logic" into the online Fafsa, allowing filers to bypass questions that don't pertain to their situation. That can reduce the total number of questions answered to between 25 and 90. The department has also created a "Fafsa4caster" that lets high-school students predict how much aid they will be eligible to receive by filling out a portion of the questions on the Fafsa.

Sally Skene, a student-aid counselor with College Access Fairfax, a nonprofit organization in Virginia that helps students fill out the form, says the current version of the Fafsa is quite easy to complete once filers overcome their initial anxieties.

"A lot of people are just intimidated by the idea of it," says Ms. Skene. "They're always amazed when we sit down and they see how easy it is."

But researchers and lawmakers say negative perceptions of the Fafsa continue to discourage many families from applying for aid, and they advocate additional improvements.

Talking With Treasury

In Washington, Education Department officials have been meeting with their counterparts in the Treasury Department to discuss how the agencies might share information from families' tax returns.

At its broadest, the plan would abolish the Fafsa and distribute aid strictly on the basis of adjusted gross income and family size, or another simple set of factors. A more modest approach would use IRS tax data to pre-populate some of the form's financial questions.

Supporters say pre-populating the forms would save Fafsa filers time and frustration while reducing the transcription errors that can occur when parents and students copy information from their tax forms onto the Fafsa. It would also reduce the need for "verification" — the process by which student-aid offices cross-check Fafsa applications against students' tax returns — saving colleges \$90 per application, or \$432-million a year, according to an analysis by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, which advises Congress on student-aid policy. The Education Department estimates that the change would free up 1.75 million hours of aid officers' time.

But that approach has some drawbacks. For one thing, it would rely on tax data that would be two years out of date by the time the applicants enroll in college. That means that students whose incomes, or whose families' incomes, rose or fell significantly during that time period could receive too much or too little money. In an economic downturn like the current one, millions of laid-off workers could lose out on aid.

Even some supporters of simplification say this is not the time to experiment with pre-population, given the nation's financial condition.

But advocates of the idea counter that two-year-old tax data are no worse at predicting current income than are the estimates of the prior year's earnings that the government now uses to gauge need. They say the government could use three or five-year averages of income to smooth out bumps and dips in income and point out that student-aid offices could use "professional judgment" to adjust award levels once updated tax information became available.

Some student-aid counselors wonder whether families will be comfortable letting the IRS share their tax data with the Education Department. "A lot of people won't like handing over their tax returns," says Dale R. Schmidt, who works with Ms. Skene in public schools in Northern Virginia.

There are technical and bureaucratic barriers as well. The IRS and the Education Department define terms like "dependent" differently, and the Treasury Department has historically been reluctant to take on the added workload.

Right now the likeliest compromise is a pre-population pilot program. The Institute for College Access and Success, a nonprofit advocacy group, suggests that the

government also add a check box to the tax form so that families can receive early estimates of aid eligibility. Both steps could come in the next few months.

Equity vs. Efficiency

The other option being weighed in Washington is changing the formula used to award aid. The Fafsa now asks 45 questions to determine expected family contribution. Reducing the formula to just two questions — adjusted gross income and number of exemptions claimed on federal tax forms — as former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings proposed last year, would pare the form to two pages.

That would make the Fafsa much less intimidating, but it would also direct more money to less financially needy students and drive up the cost of federal-aid programs. "You're trading equity for efficiency" said Donald E. Heller, director of the Center for the Study of Higher Education at Penn State.

Still, there is some evidence that the redistribution of aid would be relatively modest. In 2007, two researchers, Susan M. Dynarski and Judith Scott-Clayton, calculated that if 90 percent of the questions used to determine a family's expected contribution were thrown out, the average Pell Grant for families receiving them would change by only \$54 a year, in part because many assets are already excluded from the formula.

Another concern is that states and institutions might reject the Fafsa if it becomes too simple. Congress created the Fafsa to be a "catch-all form" and allowed states to add questions to it to encourage them to use the Fafsa in awarding state aid.

But not all states do, and more than 550 colleges, universities, graduate and professional schools, and scholarship programs use the College Board's 20-question "profile" instead of the Fafsa to award institutional aid. Those numbers could increase if the Fafsa formula becomes less discriminating.

"It does little good to simplify the federal form if students still have to fill out a 100-question form for their state," said Mr. Heller. He suggests that the government offer incentives for states to piggyback on the federal form, such as larger grants through the Leveraging Educational Assistance Partnership Program, in which the federal government matches each dollar that states commit to need-based aid.

But some aid administrators and Education Department officials are beginning to wonder whether it's really critical to have a single form. They say it may be time to move beyond the "universal form" mantra.

"You might want to ask, 'Do you really want to stay wedded to a single-form concept if one form has only 20 questions?'" said Daniel T. Madzellan, director of forecasting and policy analysis at the Education Department.

In the meantime, thousands of parents like Ms. Peterson will continue to pull their hair out over the Fafsa.

"I never dreamed in a billion years it would be this complicated," she said. "I'm just glad I only have one child."