

OP-ED

When Earnings Define Value, What Gets Left Behind?

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Before deciding how to measure the value of college programs, we should start with a more fundamental question: What kind of society do we want to build, and which programs help make that society possible?

Every community depends on people whose work may never make them wealthy, but whose contributions are indispensable. We need teachers in our classrooms, counselors for our students, social workers in our communities, public health professionals, and many others whose work strengthens the fabric of our lives.

I say this as someone educated as an engineer, a field with strong labor market returns, and as a former university chancellor responsible for a full range of academic programs. That experience made clear that some of the most essential programs are not the highest-paying, but they are among the most important to our students and communities.

The Department of Education's proposed rule on [accountability in higher education](#) brings this issue into sharp focus.

The proposal would rely heavily on whether graduates' earnings a few years after completion exceed a defined benchmark to determine whether programs remain eligible for federal student aid. On its face, this idea has broad appeal. Students and families

deserve transparent, honest information about outcomes, including what graduates earn.

Supporters argue this approach strengthens accountability and helps identify programs that are not delivering for students. There is some logic to that. In practice, however, the effects are felt at the program level, shaping what institutions offer and what students are able to study.

But this proposal goes further. It moves from using earnings to inform students to using earnings to make high-stakes decisions about which programs continue to operate with federal support. When one measure drives those decisions, it inevitably shapes what institutions offer and what students are able to pursue.

That shift deserves careful consideration.

Earnings are an important indicator, but they do not tell the whole story. They vary across fields, regions, and student populations. They often reflect early career choices rather than long-term trajectories. And they do not fully capture the value of professions that are essential to society but often begin with modest salaries that may not meet specific benchmarks in the early years, even as they grow over time.

The question is not whether earnings should be part of the conversation. They should be. The question is whether one measure, applied at one point in time, should carry so much weight in determining the future of academic programs.

What happens to programs that prepare students for careers in teaching, public service, or community-based work? What happens to institutions that serve students who choose those paths? What happens in communities that depend on graduates in fields where the need is high, but the pay is modest? How many ministers, teachers, or public servants do you know who went to college with the primary aim of financial gain?

These are not theoretical concerns. Over time, they will influence which programs institutions expand, which they scale back, and which they close.

A sound accountability system should recognize these realities, not work against them.

We need a more balanced approach. Earnings should be one important measure among several considered alongside student learning, completion rates, licensure outcomes, workforce needs, and longer-term career trajectories.

This is also where accreditation plays a critical role.

Accreditors evaluate quality in context. They assess whether programs are meeting their goals, serving students effectively, and improving over time. They bring peer judgment and a broader perspective that no single metric can provide.

If we are not careful, we risk creating a system that is simple, but too narrow. A system that is easy to explain, but incomplete in what it measures, and one that may unintentionally limit opportunities for students and weaken programs communities depend on.

As the Department considers the final rule, there is an opportunity to get this right.

We can build an accountability framework that provides clear information, holds institutions responsible for results, and still reflects the full value of higher education. That means using earnings thoughtfully, not exclusively, and preserving the role of accreditation.

In the end, this is not only a policy question. It is a question about priorities.

Some of the most important work in our society is not the highest paid, especially in the early years. What we choose to measure will shape what we choose to sustain.

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