

Improve Postsecondary Data and Consumer Information Tools

Create a Federal Student-Level Data Network

The creation of a student-level data network with strong protocols for maintaining student privacy and protecting data security is key to increasing the comprehensiveness and comparability of postsecondary data. **Without such reform, important measures of student success and their relationship to student debt will remain out of reach of both students and policymakers.**

➔ **We urge Congress to pass the bipartisan, bicameral College Transparency Act (S.2511/H.R.4806)** to repeal the 2008 ban on a federal student-level data network and implement holistic reform of postsecondary data infrastructure while protecting privacy and prioritizing data security.

Improve Financial Aid Offer Communications

According to a [recent GAO report](#), 91 percent of colleges either do not include or understate their net price—the actual amount a student needs to pay—in their aid offers. More than half (55%) of colleges do not itemize key direct and indirect costs (including tuition, fees, housing, and transportation costs) in their financial aid offers, while nearly one-third (29%) do not itemize any costs in their aid offers, leaving students without even basic information on tuition and fees.

The GAO report came after years of research [documenting](#) a glaring [lack of transparency](#) in financial aid offer communications (often misleadingly called “financial aid award letters”).



Action

We recommend that Congress make the following common-sense reforms to ensure that colleges provide students with clear, transparent, and comparable information about college costs and the financial aid options available to cover them:

- ✓ **Pass the bipartisan, bicameral Understanding the True Cost of College Act (S.1558/H.R.3153)**, which would require colleges to provide students and families with clear and transparent information about costs and financial aid.
- ✓ **Require colleges and universities that participate in federal financial aid programs to take a standardized approach to financial aid offers**, and to provide one to every accepted student who applies for federal financial aid.
- ✓ **Establish basic minimums of information** that follow the best practices enumerated in the GAO report, including the full cost of attendance and a student’s net price, or the real amount they need to pay to enroll.
- ✓ **Require the Department of Education to establish a process to consumer-test the standardized financial aid offer** and use the results from the consumer testing in the final development of the form.