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Quad 136

It s like Rating a Blender

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"It's like Rating a Blender"

In a [recent editorial](#), the *New York Times* Editorial Board weighed in on educational policy in support of the Obama Administration's proposal to have a rating system for colleges. More importantly, they support the idea of using "the ratings to help guide the allocation of federal student loans and grants."

[They note](#), accurately, that college presidents finds the proposal "immensely controversial."

There are two basic concerns:

1. What standards to use?

The outcomes from a college education are hard to measure for any single school, though [schools, such as CSB/SJU, try](#). It becomes much harder to find good outcome measures when the educational mission varies across the 4000+ post-secondary schools. The Ivies are not doing the same thing as big state schools or small liberal arts schools, to say nothing of two year schools. It is not heartening to university administrators or faculty to hear an Obama administration official say, "It's like rating a blender. This is not so hard to get your mind around," as Jamieenne Studley, a deputy undersecretary at the Education Department, recently told college presidents after a meeting in the department's Washington headquarters in November.

Yes, it is like rating a blender if Hamilton Beach or Oster got to pick their consumers and could prevent anyone from buying their blenders if they thought the customer might give them a bad review on Amazon. It is surprising and slightly depressing to discover that Ms. Studley is a former college president. I hope she did not view Skidmore graduates as household appliances when she was in Saratoga Springs.

No simple rating systems will adequately capture the subtlety of the diverse and hard to measure benefits that accrue over a lifetime from a college education. As one college president said, any rating system would necessarily be "oversimplified to the point that it actually misleads."

2. The incentive problem.

The bigger issue for college presidents and society at large is that any rating system will set up incentives that will harm students that the *NY Times* Editorial Board, the Obama Administration and all of us should care about. Among the suggested metrics for a rating system are graduation rates, employment rates, earnings or debt loads. If such metrics determine federal loans or grants, school will simply respond by limiting the enrollment of students who might hurt their



ratings by dropping out or not finding employment, etc.

Who might these students be? It seems obvious that they will be minority students, those from disadvantaged backgrounds and first-generation students. Exactly the students whom we hope will benefit from the returns on a college education. The implications for income inequality and economic stratification should be quite obvious, even to non-economists.

Whatever challenges the higher education system has and whatever problems we need to address will not be solved by a simplistic ratings system, and the outcomes for the least advantaged students would likely be worse than they are presently.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | July 14th, 2014 | Categories: [Economics](#), [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).