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Gore Unveils Program to Give Students Web Access to Financial-Aid Accounts

By STEPHEN BURD

Washington

Vice-President Gore unveiled a program Friday that will enable students, for the first time, to monitor and control their federal financial-aid accounts over the World-Wide Web.

Mr. Gore, acting as host of an international conference on the use of technology to enhance government services, announced that eight colleges would participate in a pilot version of the program, called Access America for Students.

Each student attending an institution in the program will be given an account on the Web. Students will be able to apply electronically for federal financial aid, then be notified, by checking the site on the Web, about their eligibility. Each student will also receive a debit card for receiving aid funds and making payments for academic and living expenses. Through the accounts, the students not only will pay tuition, but also may file tax returns, apply for passports, learn about jobs and internships, and even make reservations at national parks.

Pilot tests at the eight campuses will be conducted this fall, with plans to extend the pilot project to 50 colleges in the fall of 2000. If the tests are successful, Mr. Gore said, he hoped to make the service available to all students with access to the Internet in 2001.

"With this new initiative, any student in the United States will be able to use a special Web site on the Internet to gain access to the services they need most," Mr. Gore said.

The eight institutions participating in the program are the DeVry Institute of Technology (Illinois campus); Iowa State University; New York University; Tarrant County Junior College; the University of Florida; the University of Missouri at Kansas City; the University of Northern Colorado; and Western Governors University.

Students at George Washington University and Tennessee State University will not participate in the program, but officials at the two institutions will provide advice to the Education Department on how best to design it. The participating colleges were among 13 invited by Vice-President Gore to help start the program.

The pilot program is the first part of a broader effort that

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Vice-President Gore is likely to make the centerpiece of his expected Presidential campaign: improving public access to government services by providing them electronically.

While administrators from the participating institutions attended Mr. Gore's speech, representatives of the leading higher-education associations here -- like the American Council on Education -- did not attend.

Over the last several months, these groups have expressed concerns about the proposal. They have worried that it would distract the Education Department from its efforts to integrate the 13 separate computer systems, controlled by different contractors, that run all of the student-aid programs. (See a story from *The Chronicle* on December 11, 1998.)

They also have feared that Access America for Students would give students -- and not student-aid administrators -- control over the disbursement of their aid funds, potentially minimizing the role aid administrators have played in preventing abuses in the aid programs. In addition, they have worried that the program would limit colleges' choices of lenders.

But in his speech, Mr. Gore sought to allay those fears. He said that under his plan, college-aid administrators would still be in charge of determining a student's eligibility and aid package, and of deciding when to release the funds to a student's account. He said that the role of the lender would not change in the new program either.

"It is important to note that we are not changing the roles or relationships of schools, banks, and the government," Mr. Gore said. "We are merely giving students what they want -- a simpler system so that they have more time to do what they went to school to do."

Background stories from *The Chronicle*:

- "Top Aide to Gore Is Named to Revamp the Delivery of Federal Student Aid," 12/11/98
- "Gore Plans Pilot On-Line Program to Ease Awarding of Student Aid," 11/13/98