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PAYING FOR COLLEGE

Comparing College Costs the Easy Way

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Your Money

By **RON LIEBER**

If you're a shoestring start-up trying to get noticed in an enormous industry, there's nothing that helps more than having big players try to ban you. But from financial services to airlines, the pattern repeats itself again and again, as the lumbering giants seek to destroy rather than cooperate.

And so it goes with higher education, its trillion-dollar student debt tally and a tiny little outfit called College Abacus. It has a web tool that allows people applying for college to enter financial and other personal data. Then it spits out three estimates of the price they might actually pay once colleges offer them scholarships. It does so by harnessing calculators on individual colleges' websites. And it turns out that many of those colleges don't like the idea very much.

Just over a year ago, schools from Spelman to Wesleyan to the University of Oregon to Texas Christian University blocked College Abacus from pinging their websites. So now that some time has passed, I wondered: How could institutions in the business of information dissemination justify blocking families who are trying to make one of the biggest financial decisions there is? And might they be willing to reconsider?

Last year's collision course began innocently enough on two separate tracks. In 2011, colleges accepting federal money had to start posting a tool called a net price calculator on their websites. Students and families can enter their financial information and get a sense of the price they might pay after all grants and scholarships are factored in. The hope was that the calculators would help lower-

income families avoid sticker shock at list prices that now top \$65,000, as their actual price would most likely be much lower than that.

That's Track 1.

On Track 2 was the co-founder of College Abacus, Abigail Seldin, 26, who has spent her life on a very fast track of her own. She skipped sixth grade, co-curated an exhibit at the University of Pennsylvania museum at age 20 and became a Rhodes scholar. In England, she met another Rhodes scholar, Whitney Haring-Smith, whom she later married. His mother happened to be the president of Washington & Jefferson College, and she fretted aloud about the families who were going to have to put all of their data into net price calculator after net price calculator until their eyeballs melted.

As the college president, Tori Haring-Smith, described the problem during a long, rainy car ride in 2011, Ms. Seldin and her future husband looked at each other and realized that they could solve for that. And so they did, hiring coders to build an aggregation engine that would take in the prospective applicant's data, put all of the right data into the calculators hosted on the websites of up to three schools at a time, fetch the results and present them all in one place, where they could be easily compared.

What they came up against very quickly was pushback from the handful of vendors supplying the calculators to many schools.

Wes Butterfield works for one of them, and he remembers the ruckus College Abacus caused in its early days. "As soon as we heard about it, my phone started ringing off the hook with people asking us for a solution," he said, noting that they weren't sure whether they wanted to allow College Abacus's tool to grab data from their own calculators or block it.

Mr. Butterfield, an associate vice president for a firm called Noel-Levitz, wasn't in favor of schools' blocking College Abacus. "If students are using an aggregator because they think it's going to be easier, then hopefully they'll come back to the college's own site for more rather than feeling blocked or censored," he said. Still, his firm chose to offer a tool to block College Abacus that colleges could turn on if they wanted to. Fewer than 10 percent of its clients ever switched it on.

Other consultants took the opposite approach. When I asked Oberlin about its block of College Abacus, I got a response noting that a firm called Hardwick Day administers its net price calculator. "Hardwick Day tested College Abacus and

found the results to be inconsistent and less accurate than outcomes that result when Oberlin's net price calculator is directly accessed," according to a statement by Rob Reddy, the college's director of financial aid.

I asked Hardwick Day for some proof, twice, and but they did not offer any.

Another consultant lobbed similar accusations, according to Cameron Feist, director of financial aid at Hamilton College. "The last time we evaluated College Abacus, we took the advice of our vendor, Student Aid Services, that we should not permit College Abacus access to Hamilton's net price calculator," he said in an emailed statement. "Their primary concern was accuracy of data."

Matthew Summer, vice president of business development for Student Aid Services, sent me screen shots and summaries of tests the company had done that showed College Abacus results varying by several hundred to a few thousand dollars from the results produced by the colleges' own net price calculators.

That isn't supposed to happen. College Abacus sends the data it collects to those colleges' calculators; it doesn't crunch any numbers itself. Moreover, every time it adds new schools to its tool, it claims that it tests the results to make sure there isn't any variation like the ones Student Aid Services found.

One possible explanation is this: College Abacus, in combining the inputs for three universities, sometimes rewrites the different questions schools ask when those schools are all actually seeking the same single piece of information. If Student Aid Services' testers misunderstood College Abacus's rewritten questions, then the results would be wrong. Indeed, I found College Abacus's questions about retirement assets and 529 plans to be confusing, and I think about this stuff for a living.

Ms. Seldin noted that the schools' own questions on the calculators they control were often hard to decipher, and that she couldn't always get clarification since some of the people at the colleges won't speak to her. She added that she welcomed inquiries from any university confused about College Abacus's questions and results, given that it does her and her users no good at all for her results to be off even a bit. (Let's also stop and remind ourselves that we're talking about estimates here; even if there is a difference in results, both estimates will usually prove to be wrong once the actual financial aid offer arrives.)

In the last year, Ms. Seldin has done a few things to try to get more universities on her side. She pledged not to sell families' data, ever. Then, she and

her husband sold the service to the nonprofit student loan guarantor ECMC, because she believed it would allow her to keep the service free forever. ECMC has a reputation for roughing up troubled borrowers and playing fast and loose with the facts, but Ms. Seldin said it had kept its promises to her so far.

Several universities chose not to block College Abacus. A Washington University spokeswoman said it didn't want to stand in the way of families trying to navigate the sometimes overwhelming process of shopping for an affordable college. A Yale spokesman said that it had concluded that College Abacus exercised due diligence when linking to its own calculator.

Sarah Ray, director of media relations at Middlebury, went further in a statement. "We spoke with some of our peers who also utilize the Student Aid Services net price calculator as well as folks at the College Board to get others' perspective on the situation," she wrote. "When it came down to making a decision, we thought it was in the best interest of students and families to be able to use the College Abacus tool and provide the transparency they are searching for."

This week I communicated with representatives at the following blocking schools who said they are in various stages of reconsidering or considering reconsidering: Skidmore, Davidson, Texas Christian and Hamilton, which called College Abacus to set up an appointment to talk. Lancaster Bible College said it would be unblocking College Abacus in a few days.

At the University of Arkansas, the staff wasn't aware that they were blocking College Abacus until I called, and the university is now examining its options.

If you're a parent or an applicant, you're entitled to throw up your hands at this point. Every party in this drama has an interest in making the process easier and more accurate for families about to spend up to a quarter of a million dollars per student at the universities.

They should stop blocking and start talking, and I look forward to coming back to this matter in 2015 to see how much progress they've made.

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