U.S. and state officials are intensifying efforts to hold colleges accountable for what happens after graduation, a sign of frustration with sky-high tuition costs and student-loan debt.

Sens. Ron Wyden (D., Ore.) and Marco Rubio (R., Fla.) are expected to reintroduce this week legislation that would require states to make more accessible the average salaries of colleges’ graduates. The figures could help prospective students compare salaries by college and major to assess the best return on their investment.

A similar bipartisan bill died last year, but a renewed push has gained political momentum in recent weeks. “This begins to introduce some market forces into the academic arena that have not been there,” said Mr. Wyden, adding that support for the move is unusually broad given the political divide in Washington.

Rep. Eric Cantor (R., Va.), the House majority leader, said he intends to support a similar measure in the House.

High-school seniors now trying to decide which college to attend next fall are awash with information about costs, from dorm rooms to meal plans. But there is almost no easy way to tell what graduates at specific schools earn—or how many found jobs in their chosen field. Supporters say more transparency is needed as students graduate deeper in debt and enter the rocky job market.

The Wyden-Rubio bill doesn’t spell out exactly how this information has to be assembled. The goal is that students and parents could use the U.S. Department of Education website to query data from all 50 states. But the bill relies on states to knit together wage data submitted by employers with information on graduates submitted by colleges.

A series looking at the rising costs of higher education in the U.S.:

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wages by colleges and program on its own, linked these two data sets using Social Security numbers. It didn’t publish the Social Security numbers.

Some colleges are resisting the broader push, saying it would be a burden for states to compile the information, and that it would tell students little they don’t already know.

“You don’t need a database to tell you that people who major in fine arts won’t earn a lot of money when they graduate,” said Terry Hartle, senior vice president for government and public affairs at the American Council on Education, a trade group that hasn’t taken a position on the bill by Messrs. Wyden and Rubio. Some officials worry that salary is too narrow a measure of the value of a liberal-arts education.

Privacy advocates have concerns with compiling so much data. One potential issue, they say, is that the data could be sliced so thinly that it would reveal information about individuals. "It's the risk of re-identification in small samples," says Marc Rotenberg, executive director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center in Washington, D.C.

Still, Bryce Harrison, who graduated last May from Goucher College, a private school in Baltimore, said wage data could have helped him pick his major. Mr. Harrison, 23 years old, hoped his political-science degree would land him a job with the government.

He has had no luck. With about $100,000 in student loans to repay, Mr. Harrison spent the summer working for his father, power-washing houses. But business slows in the winter, so he is now unemployed and is considering joining the National Guard.

"Was college worth getting in the amount of debt I’m in?” he asks. "At this point, I can’t answer that.”

Providing more information about outcomes will be a priority during President Barack Obama's second term, a Department of Education spokeswoman said. Last spring, the Obama administration began developing a "College Scorecard” that would add salary information for graduates and average debt load to existing data on costs, graduation rates and loan repayment rates. The Department of Education declined to detail how it might do this.

About 10 U.S. states already publish or are expected to start releasing this year data showing how salaries of recent graduates vary by school and program. The states include California, Florida, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

States typically match salary information from employers with separate data provided to states by colleges. The college lists typically include the course of study for recent graduates, the year of graduation and degree earned. The information is linked using Social Security numbers, though personal data isn’t included in the final reports.

The state data have shortcomings. Paychecks for the same job can vary widely by location. Salary data don’t reflect self-employed graduates or those who work for the

The U.S. Government is supplying new data to help prospective students figure out which colleges offer the best bang for the buck. WSJ's Jason Bellini has The Short Answer. Image: Getty

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