As development of a government ratings system continues, input from across all sectors of higher education is crucial. There is great value in such a system for students, colleges and the federal government alike, but only if it is designed and implemented in a way that serves the distinct needs of each of these groups.

Of course, the system’s primary consideration should be its usefulness for students, as is the case with any college-related tool worth developing. So, as arguments for and against the concept are considered, it’s essential that we view the rating tool not as a means to rank our institutions for their effectiveness over one another, but to provide prospective students with information that helps them identify their academic needs and comprehensively measure our ability to satisfy those needs at a price they can afford.

Transparency is key. All of the aggregate metrics ultimately utilized in the ratings system should be made readily available to the public in an easy-to-access and straightforward manner. There can be no unnecessary confusion or frustration as students and parents use this tool. When possible, the metrics should also be already available, in recognition of the substantial reporting requirements of colleges and universities to federal agencies, state departments and publications. Further, the new rankings present an opportunity to refresh current data systems like Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), which has some known flaws. These measures will ensure accuracy and ease participation by allowing institutions to build reporting into existing procedures.

Finally, an ability to translate assorted campus missions must be considered. At SUNY, we have 64 campuses representative of every sector. Such differentiation provides a comprehensive program of higher education across our system, precisely like that of the nation’s. This balance of institutional diversity will need to be struck as methods for weighting and scoring are established.

To put it much too broadly, the development of a ratings system is a complex and massive – but not impossible – undertaking, one that is underway whether we like it or not. I commend President Obama and his administration for tackling this difficult endeavor and encourage my colleagues across the country to seek out an active role in the process.