Terror Suspects Sought Through Financial Aid Records

By Judith Earley

In the wake of the September 11th attacks, a federal program was created that was designed to examine the financial aid records of selected college students. Project Strike Back was a joint effort between the U.S. Department of Education and the FBI; it was first disclosed by the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill.

USA TODAY was granted access to official documents through Freedom of Information Act requests. According to authorities, "fewer than 1,000" students were targeted by the FBI in terrorism investigations and their financial aid records subsequently examined.

The purpose of the program was to determine whether or not targeted terrorism suspects had obtained college aid under false pretenses or through identify theft to help finance terrorist operations. The majority of the students under surveillance were investigated in 2001 and 2002; the program ended in June 2006.

FBI authorities conceived the project when intelligence reports alerted them that terrorists were exploiting student visas and federal loan programs. Official documents indicate that only the financial aid records of suspects already under investigation were examined. Approximately 14 million college students apply for federal financial aid annually. The U.S. Department of Education acknowledged that, at the request of the FBI, millions of those records were sifted, looking for a smoking gun connecting known terror suspects and illegal financial activity.

The FBI's efforts through Project Strike Back are not unlike other covert arrangements between the bureau and other federal agencies to collect information about potential terrorists. Under the program, the names of targeted students were given to the Education Department by the FBI; in turn, students files were assessed to ascertain if any of the targeted students applied for federal aid, been granted federal aid, or if there were indications of potential fraud.

These types of requests are legal because law enforcement agencies can seek an exemption to the Privacy Act, which governs student data held by the federal government. No information was released by Education Department officials as to how many names the department turned over to the FBI, or whether or not the program led to the arrest of any terrorists or terror suspects. The program was closed this past June because of the huge drop-off of FBI requests since 2002.

Advocates of the project are in agreement that this type of examination of student aid records can also aid officials in tracking the performance of colleges and students; opponents disagree, stressing that such programs are dangerously close to violating student privacy.

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Interestingly, Project Strike Back is almost unheard of within the higher education community. Many top financial aid and admissions officials indicated that they were not aware of it; however, mention was made of the program in a September 2002 Education Department report to Congress. Additionally, in May of 2004, the Government Accountability Office issued a report on data mining and documented that it compares data from Department of Education and the FBI "for anomalies."

The FBI would not specify how they used the information they received or whether it led to arrests or prosecutions of suspects.