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Education experts give graduation rate calculations a failing grade

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— WASHINGTON — The University of Maryland in Prince George's County's College Park has an 82 percent graduation rate.

Just miles away in Largo, Prince George's County Community College has a graduation rate of 6 percent. And Bowie State University, one of the nation's oldest historically black colleges, graduates 39 percent of its students.

It's easy to assume on first glance which schools are succeeding and which are failing.

But some analysts and education leaders say the methods used to calculate graduation rates cast an unfair light on certain schools by only showing part of a much larger picture.

"We're not counting all the right people and we're not counting all the right things," said Amy Laitinen, a senior policy analyst at Education Sector, an education nonprofit in Washington.

The rates are calculated by counting the number of first-time, full-time students who earn a degree at a college or university after a specific amount of time — three years for public two-year colleges, and six years for public four-year colleges.

If a student attends part-time, they do not count toward a graduation rate total, even if they spend some semesters as full-time students.

In a given year, Laitinen said, only 15 percent of all students are full-time, first-time attendees. The National Center for Education Statistics said in 2011, 59 percent of students at two-year community colleges go part time and 22 percent of students at four-year public universities go part time.

"With community colleges, there are a high percentage of them are part time, and we don't know how many go on to graduate because we're not counting," Laitinen said.

Graduation rates also exclude transfer students who, according to recently released data by the National Student Clearinghouse, account for one-third of all degree-seeking students.

This often results in much lower graduation rates for community colleges and other schools with large populations of part-time students.

“The typical graduation rates underestimate our true level of success by ignoring students who transferred but are very happy with the experience they had at community college,” said Craig Claggett, vice president of planning, marketing, and assessment at Carroll Community College. “A proper rate would be a combined graduation and transfer rate.”

In 2011, Complete College America, a national education nonprofit, released graduation rate data from public colleges and universities in 33 participating states, including Maryland.

According to Wes Moore, a research analyst at Complete College, the rates were calculated from self-reported data submitted by schools for the federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. Since the rates track cohorts of students over extended periods of time, the most recent data available is already three years old.

Moore acknowledged that the number of transfer students, the limited time frame and the variation in academic policies among schools often means that some colleges see lower numbers than they’d like.

“You sort of had to draw the line somewhere,” Moore said.

But Moore said that despite its problems, the data is ultimately helpful to administrators and policymakers.

“Our mission is to work with state governments to change policy. Part of that work is really strengthened when they have data to look at,” he said.

But having all the numbers wouldn’t eliminate the underlying problems, Laitinen said.

“I do think the data aren’t perfect, but if we fix the data and had a complete set then the story would actually be worse.”

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., recently introduced the bipartisan “Student Right to Know Before You Go” Act.

Designed to give students access to key information about colleges before they enroll, the act would require colleges to submit various information to an easily accessible, public database, including retention, completion, job earnings and debt.

If the act were to pass, Laitinen said, the information provided would be a much better indicator of a school’s overall performance than the graduation rate data now being collected.

Regardless of the current flaws, some schools say that viewing graduation rates can be helpful.

Since 1994, the University of Maryland, College Park has seen its graduation rate rise from 63 percent to 82 percent — the second highest among Maryland public colleges, behind the United States Naval Academy.

UMCP officials say that initiatives taken over the years to increase the graduation rate, such as stronger

academic guidance programs, have hoisted the university among the top 10 public universities with the highest graduation rates.