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Rising S.C. college grad rates an encouraging sign

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Graduating from college is important. Graduating from college in four or even six years is more important still.

And newly released findings from The Chronicle of Higher Education and the national Student Clearinghouse show that South Carolina is excelling in the percentage of students in state colleges who do just that.

Only five states have graduation rates higher than South Carolina, and The Citadel leads the state.

That college graduation rate is more than a bragging point, however.

The longer students stay in college, the more they pay and the less time they are in their chosen careers, making money and racking up experience. They aren't contributing as much to the local economy.

And with public colleges and universities, taxpayers pay a price, too.

Most students plan to finish college in four years, but things happen: They change majors, fail courses, go abroad for a semester, do an internship, encounter personal difficulties, need specific courses that are overcrowded, or run out of money.

Delaying graduation can be costly, but failing to graduate is even more so. Studies show that college students who fail to get a degree do no better than those who never attended college at all. Plus, they might have college debt to pay off.

It is probably no surprise that students at private colleges are more likely to graduate on time than their counterparts in public schools. Private schools are often more selective, and their students usually pay more tuition — a good incentive.

The Citadel has been focused in its quest to increase its on-time graduation rate. It tracks every student's academic progress and offers a wide array of academic support for those they see are struggling.

The College of Charleston requires freshmen to participate in a first-year experience program or a designated learning community to help them get their bearings academically and socially.

South Carolina's state colleges' success in helping students graduate makes the state's dismal high school graduation rate (10th from the bottom) appear even more so.

In a wise move, some colleges in South Carolina are cooperating with high schools to smooth the transition and ensure that high school students are prepared for what is ahead. A successful college student is far more likely to stay in school.

When choosing a place to open a new plant or office, businesses take a hard look at the talent pool. If there are ample college graduates in an area, it becomes much more attractive to them.

South Carolina has a long way to go to solve its education problems. Academic achievement in K-12 is sadly lacking overall, and the quality of a college education is wide ranging.

But the state's colleges are to be congratulated for the good work they are doing to produce graduates in a timely way.

It's good for the graduates, and it's good for the state.