



Another reason retention rates need to play a bigger role in higher ed discourse:

Virginia taxpayers paid \$177.7 million despite claiming an 86.1 percent retention rate of first-year students, the highest in the country. Maryland taxpayers lost \$102.5 million to the 17.7 percent of freshmen who did not return, while District residents parted with \$6.4 million.

Virginia public colleges gave \$60.2 million in grants, and Maryland gave \$46.8 million to first-year dropouts.

Nationally, more than \$9 billion was funneled into the 30 percent of students who did not return for a sophomore year through federal grants and state grants and subsidies; about \$7.6 billion of that came from state taxpayers. Most students attend public schools, which the states subsidize at a cost of about \$10,000 per student each year.

Mark Schneider, the pioneering report's author and the former commissioner of the Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics, said he hopes state legislatures will pressure colleges to retain students.

"We all know kids who have tried college and failed. Without dismissing the heartbreak for the family, there are huge fiscal costs, and we need to get smarter about using scarce dollars to encourage student success," Schneider said.

But Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, warned that funding based on completion has caveats.

"How do we know colleges won't just pass kids along to get them to graduate?" he said. "Then you would have spent taxpayer money on four years of education that didn't actually confer new knowledge."

Clifford Adelman, senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy — and a former colleague of Schneider's at the Education Department — pointed out that the report's use of "dropout" includes intermittent and transfer students who finish their degrees.

Caveats aside, the numbers are still pretty staggering. The report, which can be found in full [here](#), places

Arizona at 21st and 9th for amount of state and federal money spent on college dropouts, respectively.

While it's bad enough that retention rates don't get the attention they deserve from administrators, it's also worth noting that the cost of college dropouts is all but absent from the appropriation dialogue, and it's not hard to see why. With the exception of ASU's recent retention climb, there's really not much to brag about. However, given the state's budgetary pressures and recent cuts at all three universities, this issue is as important as ever.

Ever since the beginning of the 2010-11 FY, President Shelton has been doing the rounds, making sure that everyone knew that the university was dealing with a one hundred million dollar permanent appropriation cut. According to the data provided by the American Institute for Research, the state of Arizona wastes approximately \$144 million on college dropouts at all three public universities.

To be fair, and the researchers point this out, a fair number of students drop out for reasons totally beyond their control— financial pressure, family issues, health reasons, etc. But, with an acceptance rate around 80%, one would be hard pressed to deny that a substantial number of students call it quits simply because they are not ready for college level work.

Then, of course, there's the opportunity cost involved. What if those students who are not ready for course work at the UA had instead decided to work and, by extension, pay state taxes? I'm not claiming that we should be sympathetic to the legislature— it's certainly done it's part to get us into the budget mess we're in now— but President Shelton would be wise to introspect a bit more before laying all of the blame on Phoenix.

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