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## 41 percent in state don't finish college within 6 years

By Nick Perry

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Only 59 percent of Washington university students manage to graduate from the college they start at within six years, a new report has found — but that's still better than in most other states.

The report "Diplomas and Dropouts," put out by the conservative think tank American Enterprise Institute with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is aimed at jump-starting debate on problems with college completion. It ranks Washington ninth-best in the nation.

"But in a state that size, if 41 percent are not graduating, those are lost opportunities," study co-author Kevin Carey said. "When we talk about higher education, we usually only talk about access. We don't talk nearly as much about success."

The report points to huge variations in graduation rates from college to college, even among those that attract similar students. Among "noncompetitive" schools — those that take almost any student who has a high-school diploma — graduation rates are as low as 8 percent at Southern University in New Orleans and as high as 100 percent at Arkansas Baptist College.

The variations in Washington are dramatic as well — 86 percent of students graduate from Whitman College in Walla Walla, compared with just 17 percent at Heritage University in Toppenish, Yakima County, according to the report. At the University of Washington's Seattle campus, 75 percent of students graduate.

Whitman President George Bridges said its graduation rate has improved dramatically and was as low as 55 percent in the 1970s.

"We have worked very, very hard to get those numbers higher," Bridges said. "The college has, in recent years, made a commitment to increasing graduation rates."

Bridges said that approach has been twofold.

"We look very carefully in the admissions process for students we think will fit with the culture and expectations of this campus," he said. "And we have put significant resources into student services and support. When students experience difficulties, they can receive the type of support that only a small college can offer."

While students at Whitman typically come in with grade-point averages of around 3.9 and pay up to \$35,000 in tuition and fees yearly, it's a far different student body at Heritage. There, more than 90 percent of students are low-income and many work full time while going to college.

Heritage University President Kathleen Ross said the federal statistics used in the report are unfair. She pointed out that the numbers do not account for students who transfer in from community colleges, who make up the majority of Heritage's student body. Nor do they account for those who take more than six years to graduate because of work and family obligations.

Factoring in those variables, Heritage has tracked its graduation rate at between 38 percent and 50 percent over the years, Ross said, which puts it in the midrange nationally.

Hilary Pennington, the director of postsecondary success and special initiatives at the Gates Foundation, said federal data sets in higher education are inadequate and need to start accounting for part-time and transfer students.

That said, the report does show you can have similar institutions with "really incredibly different outcomes," Pennington said.

"We are very interested in the obvious next question: What is it that the good ones are doing, and the poor-performing ones are not doing?" she said.

The report says that when students and parents are comparing colleges, it's important for them to have information about how well the schools do in graduating students. But the report also warns there is a danger that colleges could become overly selective, or water down academic rigor, to bump up graduation rates.

Carey says the most important thing colleges can do is pay attention to how well students are performing and intervene quickly when they appear to be struggling.

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