Playing the Numbers

High school graduation rates are tossed around with confidence and consequence in policy circles. But how a given state performs on this measure depends on whom you ask. The Washington, D.C.-based Alliance for Excellent Education compared the high school graduation rates reported by four major sources and found wild variations. *(See figure at right.)*

One reason is that some sources define graduation rates as the number of 12th-graders who graduate, while others measure the number of ninth-graders who graduate four years later. Also, some count students who earn GEDs as grads, some don’t.

Two years ago, the National Governors Association began looking for a common method for calculating state graduation rates. Now, a bill before Congress would standardize the rate as the number of students receiving a regular diploma in a school or school district divided by the number of first-time ninth-graders enrolled in the school or district four years earlier. The calculation would also take into account movement of students in and out of the school or district, allow for one-time identification of recently arrived Limited English Proficient students and “early college high school” students, factor in additional time for special education students to earn diplomas, and allow for reporting of completion measures for students in alternative settings.

* * * *

High school dropout rates—and therefore graduation rates—also vary dramatically *within* states. In Connecticut, for example, cumulative four-year dropout rates for the 2006 graduating class ranged from zero in toney districts such as Avon to 38 percent in New London. University of Connecticut economist Steven P. Lanza recently analyzed the differences and found that half the variation could be explained by four factors: parents’ educational backgrounds, parental involvement, preschool experience and teacher enrichment training.

According to Lanza’s analysis, every 10-point increase in the share of adults in a community who do not have high school diplomas raises dropout rates by 2.2 points. Every 10-point increase in open house attendance by parents reduces dropout rates by 1.9 points. A 10-point increase in pre-K attendance by the students is associated with a 0.5-point decrease in dropout rates 12 years later. Finally, every 10-point increase in the share of certified teachers in a district who have completed Connecticut’s program that pairs beginning teachers with mentors reduces dropout rates by 1.8 points.

Lanza also found to his surprise that certain factors do not contribute to the variation. Among them: class size, student-teacher ratios, course offerings, hours of instruction, teacher education and number and quality of computers.

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High School Graduation Rates: In the Eye of the Beholder?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>State Reported for No Child Left Behind</th>
<th>U.S. Dept of Education</th>
<th>Education Week</th>
<th>The Manhattan Institute</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>72%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
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<td>76%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>75%</td>
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<td>85%</td>
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<td>81%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Alliance for Excellent Education; [www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org), May 2007

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Snippets

Why Pop Culture Disses Profs

*“With the U.S. News rankings and the annual admissions frenzy, universities are playing an ever-more conspicuous role in creating the larger social hierarchy that no one acknowledges but everyone wants to climb. It’s no wonder that people resent the gatekeepers and enjoy seeing them symbolically humiliated.”*

—Yale University associate professor of English William Deresiewicz writing in *The American Scholar* on why popular novels and movies stereotype academics as embittered, lecherous and neglectful of their families.

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