



More seen going to college in state

Rate near that of U.S., but degree-earners still few, data show

EVIE BLAD ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

The percentage of Arkansas students attending in-state colleges immediately after high school continues to grow and appears poised to match national rates.

But higher attendance doesn't automatically improve the state's lagging degree count, higher-education officials said.

"If we want to improve degree production, we need to focus on both retention and completion," said Rick Jenkins, associate director for planning and accountability at the state Department of Higher Education.

In the fall of 2009, 68.7 percent of Arkansas students enrolled as full-time, on-campus students at an in-state college or university in the semester after completing high school or a General Educational Development (GED) diploma, according to a report from Arkansas' higher-education agency.

That's a 5.3 percentagepoint increase from the previous fall term, the report said.

National data are not yet available for 2009. In 2008, the national college-going rate was 68.6 percent, compared with 63.4 percent in Arkansas.

Preliminary fall enrollment figures project that the number will continue to climb this year, buoyed by the implementation of the Arkansas Scholarship Lottery, which will fund Arkansas Academic Challenge Scholarships of up to \$5,000 to attend the state's public colleges and universities.

At the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, for example, workers are rushing to ready dorms for an expected 500 additional freshmen students compared with fall 2009.

State leaders have long sought to increase the level of higher education in Arkansas.

In 2008, 18.8 percent of Arkansans had bachelor's degrees, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey.

The state bested only West Virginia in a national ranking of degrees per capita.

The highest ranking went to Washington, D.C., where nearly half of its residents hold degrees. In second-place Massachusetts, 38.1 percent of residents have degrees.

Arkansas is one of 23 states participating in Complete College America, a nonprofit organization committed to increasing degrees through remediation, ease in transferring credits and structuring degree programs simply enough for students to follow to completion, Higher Education Director Jim Purcell told the Higher Education Coordinating Board in July.

Arkansas could double its annual degree production by 2020 if the state committed to increasing the figure by 6 percent each year, he said.

"Before long, we'd solve the work-force crisis," Purcell said.

"Access to Success," the August 2008 final report of the Arkansas Task Force on Higher Education Remediation, Retention and Graduation Rates, linked college degrees to the state's ability to attract and retain employers, and fill work-force shortages.

More Arkansas students attend college than those in neighboring Southern states, but fewer finish, the report said.

The disconnect between attendance and degree production means "state funding and student tuition spent on higher education in Arkansas is used less efficiently," it said.

None of the task force's recommendations, outlined in 15 pages of spreadsheets, called for increasing initial college attendance.

But an increase in attendance is a good first step toward more degrees, said Betty Ruth Welch, who coordinates the guidance-counselor program for the state Department of Education.

"I think a lot of it has to do with focus — the focus of the governor, the focus of going to college," she said. "In our schools, more and more counselors and administrators are talking in that language also."

Public and privately funded programs pay for college admissions tests and Advanced Placement tests for high school students, putting them in a "college mindset."

Counseling requirements adopted in the state Legislature's 2005 session also require counselors to create career-based four-year plans for students and work with parents to set educational goals, Welch said.

These initiatives help Arkansas students — many of whom would be first-generation college students — see higher education as an attainable goal, she said.

"Going to college is scary if you haven't had parents or siblings who've gone," Welch said.

