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## Study: Students who quit after a year waste millions in taxpayer funds

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Dropping out of college after a year can leave students mired in debt and confused about their next step in life.

But the one-in-five students dropping out of state four-year universities before their sophomore year are also a big burden on Illinois taxpayers, according to a report released Monday.

Between 2003 and 2008, freshman dropouts cost Illinois taxpayers \$321 million and federal taxpayers another \$75 million, the American Institutes for Research study estimates.

The high cost of dropouts -- \$9.1 billion in state and federal funding to colleges and students nationwide over a five-year period -- threatens President Obama's goal of the U.S. having the highest rate of college graduates in the world by 2020, according to Mark Schneider, vice president of the research organization.

And the findings also could give ammunition to critics who say too many students are attending four-year schools -- and that pushing them to finish wastes even more taxpayer money.

Among public universities, none in Illinois fare worse than Chicago State University, where two in five freshmen don't immediately return for their sophomore year.

CSU president Wayne Watson hired a freshman dean to tackle the problem and an early warning system that prompts aggressive intervention for failing students has seen retention rates rise for the last two years.

"Our students are not academically challenged, they're financially challenged," he said, adding that many CSU students who don't return in the fall do eventually re-enroll once finances allow, "and if it takes eight or nine years, they still finish their degrees, and it doesn't cost the taxpayer any more than if they did it in four years."

Even the student who stays dropped out adds to "a more literate society," he said, adding, "There's a value to having read Macbeth, to learning basic calculus, to learning how to write a job application letter, and you don't unlearn that just because you can't come back to school."

But state Sen. Edward Maloney (D-Chicago), who sponsored legislation earlier this year that helps high schoolers prepare for college-level classes, said "There's better things to spend money on" than students who don't graduate.

"We have to be truthful with some students and say that four-year college is not a proposition for you," he said.

The cost of educating students who drop out after one year accounts for 2 percent to 8 percent of states' total higher education appropriations, according to the report's authors.

The Illinois Board of Higher Education is due to report later this year how state funding of universities might be tied to graduation or course completion rates, the board's executive director Don Sevener said.

Ohio already has moved toward such a system.

The American Institutes for Research report doesn't include part-timers, transfers or students who come back later and graduate.

Robert Lerman, an American University economics professor who questions promoting college for all, said the report does flesh out the reality of high dropout rates. But he said it could just as easily be used to argue that less-prepared, less-motivated students are better off not going to college.

"Getting them to go a second year might waste even more money," Lerman said.

"Who knows?"

Contributing: *AP*

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