Dozens of public universities across the country, including three in Maryland, report that fewer than half of their full-time freshmen in 2007 earned bachelor’s degrees after six years at those schools or after switching to other schools.

That finding emerges from an unusual cache of data posted on a nongovernmental Web site to provide what sponsors call “a more comprehensive and accurate picture” of college outcomes than can be found in federal records. The new data put a rare spotlight on a crucial group: transfer students.

The government tracks graduation rates for first-time, full-time students who finish where they began. But that omits the huge number who hop from school to school. Colleges are now stepping forward to fill in gaps in public knowledge through a site
called **Student Achievement Measure**.

So far, 250 public colleges and 16 private schools have disclosed details about outcomes for the class that entered in fall 2007, including the proportions that:

- Graduated from their original school within six years.
- Graduated from other schools.
- Were still enrolled in quest of degrees.
- Had dropped out or were for some other reason untrackable.

These questions matter because every college student who fails to finish has invested a significant amount of money and effort — possibly going into debt — without reaping any of the economic or social benefits of obtaining a degree. Students of modest means, whose parents never went to college, are often those who face the highest hurdles in the effort to graduate.

This chart shows data for 266 colleges and universities, tracking outcomes for first-time, full-time students who entered college in 2007. **See the chart.**

More schools are planning to participate in the initiative. Radford University in Virginia this month became the 500th to enlist.
tends to put schools in a better light than federal data alone, but the more precise reckoning of degree completion rates brings into sharper focus the challenges that many schools face.

Bowie State University in Prince George’s County is a case in point.

To the federal government, its six-year graduation rate is 35 percent. But an additional 7 percent of the 821 students who started there as full-time freshmen in fall 2007 had earned diplomas from other schools six years later, according to SAM. Nine percent were still enrolled at Bowie State in 2013, 13 percent elsewhere.

That left 36 percent whose status was unknown.

Mickey L. Burnim, president of Bowie State, called the expanded disclosure a “vast improvement” over federal graduation data. He said a significant number of students work part time or full time, which sometimes hinders their push toward degrees. About half of Bowie State’s students have enough financial need to qualify for federal Pell Grants. Many also are the first in their families to go to college. Burnim said the school is keeping a close eye on who finishes, who doesn’t and why.

“We’re concerned generally about improving student success rates,” he said.

A Washington Post analysis of the SAM data found Bowie State is one of 47 universities at which fewer than half of entering freshmen obtained diplomas at their original school or at transfer schools after six years. The cumulative graduation rate for Bowie State’s 2007
For those from the **University of Maryland Eastern Shore**, the rate was 45 percent. For those from **University of Maryland University College** it was 17 percent. UMUC, an online school, is a unique case because its students are highly mobile and typically enroll part time.

Without counting transfer students, the analysis found, the number of schools where fewer than half of 2007 freshmen graduated is far higher: 124.

SAM, launched last year, receives funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. It relies on enrollment and graduation data from the nonprofit National Student Clearinghouse, based in Herndon, Va.

The clearinghouse, founded in 1993, keeps records on more than 197 million students from more than 3,600 participating colleges and universities. That covers most of U.S. higher education. Unlike the federal government, the clearinghouse can follow students from one college to another. For years there has been debate about whether the government should have such power, too. Skeptics, citing privacy concerns, have blocked efforts to facilitate federal tracking of transfer students. Leaders in higher education want to fill the void.

“Everybody recognizes that the federal government’s way of measuring graduation rates is flawed,” said M. Peter McPherson, president of the APLU. He pointed out the federal methodology would not count President Obama as a graduate; Obama obtained a bachelor’s degree from Columbia University after transferring from
Occidental College.

“That makes the point, doesn’t it?” McPherson said.

The Obama administration is developing a system to rate colleges. How graduation data will factor into it remains to be determined. Jamienne S. Studley, deputy undersecretary of education and former president of Skidmore College, said a draft plan for the federal ratings will be unveiled in the fall. She called the SAM initiative “interesting and useful.”

Participants include prestigious private schools such as the University of Pennsylvania, Cornell and Brown universities, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Predictably, their graduation rates are sky-high. But many leading private schools, including Harvard and Stanford universities, are absent. No private universities in the District of Columbia are participants.

Emory & Henry College, a private liberal arts school in southwest Virginia, joined even though its six-year graduation rate (48 percent) is not stellar. An additional 15 percent of its 2007 freshmen graduated from other schools.

David P. Haney, vice president for academic affairs, said the college is working to improve its numbers. “My philosophy is, you put the actual data out there honestly and people can do their comparisons,” Haney said. “I can give people plenty of reasons to come to Emory & Henry.”

Mainly, the data spotlight the performance of public colleges and
At Indiana University at South Bend, for example, the data show that about 27 percent of 2007 freshmen graduated from the school within six years and that an additional 6 percent graduated elsewhere. Terry L. Allison, the school’s chancellor, said he learned of the data as he was preparing to take office last year. His reaction: “Wow, we need to do a lot to improve this picture.”

At Stony Brook University in New York, nearly 66 percent of 2007 freshmen graduated from the school in six years, and nearly 13 percent graduated elsewhere. Samuel L. Stanley Jr., the school’s president, said transfer outcomes are important. “What we really care about is student success,” he said. “If a student is coming to Stony Brook and electing to finish up at Columbia or Cornell, that’s not a bad thing for Stony Brook.”

Graduation rates are a function, in part, of selectivity in college admissions. Rates at the University of Virginia, the College of William and Mary and other elite schools exceed 90 percent no matter how they are analyzed.

At Virginia Commonwealth University, a less selective school, 64 percent of 2007 freshmen graduated from VCU or other schools in six years. The Richmond school has launched a campaign for students to take 15 credits a semester and to finish in four years. “We’d really, really like to see more students stay here and graduate from here,” said Luke Schultheis, vice provost for strategic enrollment management.

The SAM data also show what happens after students transfer into a school. At Towson University, 72.5 percent of incoming transfer
students in 2007 graduated within six years from the public school north of Baltimore. That exceeds the rate at the University of Maryland (65 percent).

“We’re doing pretty well,” said Timothy Chandler, Towson’s provost. “As we have continued to grow as an institution, we have taken on more and more transfer students who want to come here.”