

Editorial: Some surprising educational statistics from Southside and Southwest Va.

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What part of the state is doing the best job of educating its people — as measured by how many are getting some kind of education beyond high school?

The obvious answer, of course, would be Northern Virginia. After all, Northern Virginia has one of the most educated workforces in the country. In Arlington, 74% of working-age adults have a college degree. In Falls Church, 78% of working-age adults do. No wonder Amazon saw such a deep talent pool there. By contrast, most communities in rural Virginia run in the teens — or lower. In this case, though, the obvious answer is wrong. The correct answer is —are you ready for this? — Southside Virginia. How can this be? How a rural, often impoverished region, be educating its people at a higher rate than Northern Virginia?

There go some stereotypes, bursting like water balloons on a hot summer day. All the data we're about to cite comes from the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia, which, in turn, is working with data from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. You can read it all yourself at statchatva.org. There you'll find a bunch of charts. The most pertinent ones are the ones that track where students come from and what kind of post-secondary education they're getting.

It is true that students from Northern Virginia go to four-year universities at a higher rate than any other part of the state. Students from Southwest Virginia (defined here as Wythe County and west) are the least likely to go to a four-year school. For every 100,000 residents, Northern Virginia produced 514 college graduates in 2016-17. By contrast, for every 100,000 residents, Southwest Virginia's rate was 183 graduates. Southside's was a bit higher, at 279. The New River-to-Lynchburg region weighed in at 398, putting us slightly higher than Hampton Roads but distinctly lower than Richmond and Northern Virginia.

So why are we saying that Southside is educating its people at a higher rate than

Northern Virginia? Because a four-year college isn't the only type of post-secondary education. There are community colleges, which sometimes award associate's degrees for two-year degrees or credentials for shorter-term training programs. And it's in that credentials category that Southside is surpassing not just Northern Virginia, but everybody else, with Southwest Virginia not far behind.

For the 2016-17 school year, students in Southside were awarded credentials at a rate of 530 per 100,000 residents. Southwest was 501 per 100,000. Northern Virginia was just 143. The New River-to-Lynchburg region was 264.

Now, some of you sharp-eyed readers have already spotted one potential fallacy in this comparison. Because Northern Virginia students are going to four-year schools at a higher rate, there's less need for them to seek credentials.

Nonetheless, when you add up every form of post-secondary education possible — credentials, associates degrees, bachelor degrees, graduate degrees — Southside still is educating its people at a higher rate than anywhere else. Southside totals up at 1,082 per 100,000. Northern Virginia is second at 995, just slightly higher than the New River-to-Lynchburg region at 948. Southwest Virginia is 877, but still higher than Hampton Roads or the rural areas around the Chesapeake Bay, which weigh in at 790.

So what's all this mean? The obvious takeaway is that people in Southside (and Southwest) Virginia are taking advantage of their local community colleges at an impressive rate. Are these numbers skewed by demographics? Do Southside and Southwest have higher rates of credential-seeking students because a disproportionate number of working-age adults are going back to school for training? No. At Northern Virginia Community College, 58% of the students are traditional-age college students.

At Dabney S. Lancaster Community College in Clifton Forge, that figure is 77%. At Southside Community College in Keysville and Patrick Henry Community College in Martinsville and Virginia Highlands Community College in Abingdon, it's 70%. At Wytheville Community College, it's 69%. You could argue that it would be better if those percentages were lower — because we need more working-age adults in rural Virginia to go back to school to get additional training. If they did, though, that would only make the per capita education numbers in Southside and Southwest even better.

The overarching takeaway seems to be this: *Southside and Southwest Virginia are doing a darned good job at getting their students educated beyond high school.* Whether more should be going onto a four-year school versus a credentials program is an interesting question that isn't really on our agenda today. Instead, it seems clear that students in Southside and Southwest are not sitting around, hoping for the mills and mines to re-open (which they won't). That runs completely counter to a lot of public perceptions that rural America is waiting helplessly for some kind of eternal salvation. Instead, it sure looks like students in our part of rural Virginia are taking matters into their own hands, as they should. Indeed, this seems an opportune time to point out that most of the community colleges in Virginia that have scholarship programs are in rural areas – such as the Community College Access Program at Virginia Western or the Access to Community College Education at New River or the Dabney's Promise program at Dabney S. Lancaster. The local governments and private donors funding those aren't waiting around on Washington or Richmond to help them; they're taking action to try to raise the skill level of their workforce.

Here's the real question: What's happening to all these students? The Weldon Cooper website gets to the heart of the matter: “The large number of graduating students from areas such as Southwest Virginia and Southside is promising; however, the degree to which these students return to these regions is small. Much of south and southwest Virginia are seeing population decline through aging and outmigration. An important factor in developing talent in parts of rural Virginia is to motivate and enable residents to return to their hometowns after graduation.”

Here's where things get more discouraging. Still, we chose the more optimistic interpretation. Rural Virginia is woefully undereducated compared to the needs of the modern economy. Southside and Southwest will have to do a lot more than they're presently doing to fix that – but these figures show the process has begun. Let's celebrate that.