



Retention and Student Success in OUS

There is probably nothing more critical to improving educational attainment in Oregon than ensuring that students enter postsecondary institutions college-ready and able to perform well. Adequate student preparation affects retention, completion, and learning, and ultimately graduates' success in jobs and advanced education.

Numerous studies have documented the positive relationship between solid academic preparation prior to college and successful college participation, retention and completion. Using the high school grade point average (GPA) as an indicator of high school academic preparation, OUS retention studies confirm this: 80% of entering freshmen with a high school GPA of 3.75 or greater complete their degree within six years, compared to just 40% of students with a high school GPA below 3.00.¹

Retention and Graduation in OUS

During the 1990s, first-year retention rates in OUS grew steadily as universities developed initiatives and academic support services aimed at helping students succeed through the first year. While recent rates have continued to improve at some campuses, budget cuts since 2001 – which triggered increases in student/faculty ratios and decreases in student support services – have eroded the progress made earlier, particularly at some of the smaller universities (see Table 2).

Persisting through that critical first year is the most important step a student can take to ensure successful completion of a degree. While the overall six-year graduation rate for OUS students entering as freshmen is 58.7%, students who persist through the first year complete at a rate of 71.7%. For students persisting through two years, the graduation rate is 81.5%.²

About half (51.5%) of OUS entering freshmen who complete their bachelor's degree finish in four years, slightly above the U.S. average. Ninety percent of OUS degree completers finish within five years. Ensuring that students can persist and make timely progress toward their degree means those students can pay less and borrow less for their education, start jobs and careers sooner, and make important contributions to Oregon's economic and community well-being, including paying higher taxes than their less educated same-age counterparts, on average.

Table 1
National Surveys of College Faculty
and High School Teachers

What they said	Who said it	
	College Faculty	High School Teachers
Students are well-prepared for college level writing	6%	36%
Students are not well-prepared for college level writing	44%	10%
Students are well-prepared in math	4%	37%
Students are not well-prepared in math	32%	9%

Source: "What Professors and Teachers Think: A Perception Gap Over Students' Preparation." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 10, 2006.

Recent national surveys of college faculty and high school teachers reveal a significant disparity between how well high school teachers believe their students are prepared for college and how well college faculty find students to be prepared (Table 1).

¹ Oregon University System, Office of Institutional Research, *Retention, Attrition, and Graduation of OUS Freshmen*, Fall 1998 and Fall 1999 Cohorts.

² Oregon University System, Office of Institutional Research, 2006 Fact Book.

Steps That Improve Retention

A menu of methods to improve retention is essential for campuses to address their varied populations, which include higher achieving as well as underprepared first-time freshmen, first-generation college students, and returning adults. These methods can include new student cohort programs, living and learning communities, enhanced academic and career advising, mentoring by upper-division students, and summer bridge programs, among many other targeted and proven strategies.

With the funding proposed in the Governor’s Recommended Budget, OUS now has the opportunity to focus even more on improving retention and graduation rates of students. Funding elements that could help include:

- **Reducing student/faculty ratios and funding enrollment growth**, which will provide for targeted smaller classes and the hiring of additional faculty and academic support staff for teaching, mentoring, and advising students.
- **Making college more affordable through adoption of the Shared Responsibility Model**, because affordability plays a critical role in a student’s ability to continue with his or her college education.
- **Restoring a full curriculum to Oregon’s high schools and supporting the new, more demanding high school graduation requirements**, which will ensure that more students are prepared for the rigors of college-level work.

Improving educational attainment in Oregon requires having the highest possible graduation rates. **A relatively small percentage improvement in the retention of continuing students has a much greater effect on enrollment and, ultimately, student success** than does a much larger percentage increase in new students.

Table 2
Freshman Retention to Second Year at Same OUS Institution

Institution	Percent who returned the following fall to the same campus, by year of entrance:			
	Fall 2000	Fall 2001	Fall 2004	Fall 2005
EOU	64.9	65.4	68.5	65.4
OIT	73.3	68.9	68.8	66.8
OSU	79.5	79.6	80.3	80.8
PSU	68.5	67.9	67.1	67.1
SOU	68.4	68.8	65.2	64.8
UO	81.5	83.0	83.5	82.9
WOU	69.6	74.9	66.5	65.3
OUS Average, Student Returns to Same Institution	76.3	77.2	76.5	76.2
OUS Average, Student Returns to Any OUS Institution*	79.7	80.3	80.2	79.4

*Retention rates are also tracked for students who begin at an OUS institution and return either to the same campus or to another OUS institution. These rates are higher than the “return to same campus” rates seen above.

Source: OUS Institutional Research

