

Why Quality Matters

Quality in the Oregon University System may be viewed as the degree to which excellence is achieved in the three core missions of higher education: instruction, research, and service. It is best measured against standards set in the context of other public universities and systems.

Quality-related indicators for OUS serve as benchmarks of performance over time and are designed around stable, reliable measures of long-term performance—for example, student persistence and graduation, graduate and employer satisfaction surveys, research dollars brought to the institution by faculty, and philanthropic support. Other early warning signals—such as extremely high student-faculty ratios (exacerbated at some institutions by “overload” teaching to serve rapidly growing enrollment), comparatively low faculty compensation, and deferred maintenance of facilities—provide additional indicators of threats to quality.

These performance and threat measures reflect:

The quality of student experience—

- Ability to complete a course of study and obtain a degree within the standard time (four years for most bachelor’s degree programs);
- Ability of the institution to support majors in demand so that students are not forced to abandon degree choices simply because they are closed out of classes needed for their desired major;
- Opportunity to be part of a university community that is rich in ethnic, geographic, and cultural diversity;
- Ability of the institution to support the academic and course scheduling needs of adult learners;
- Capacity of the institution to attract and retain top quality faculty (e.g., through competitive compensation, labs, studios, and other facilities);
- Capacity of faculty to offer an appropriate array of instructional and assessment modes that are more time- and labor-intensive (e.g., seminars and discussions; essay exams; applied learning, such as internships and service learning; online/Web-based instruction);

- Capacity of the institution and faculty to provide necessary advising to students outside the classroom.

Research productivity—

- The capacity to support grant-funded research and innovation (e.g., with the necessary technology infrastructure and library resources);
- Institutional support of scholarly activity that brings national recognition (e.g., sponsorship of academic journals and editorships, exhibitions, and performances);
- The capacity to create start-up investments for faculty in a broad array of disciplines;
- Support of a critical mass of full-time departmental faculty (as opposed to adjunct or part-time faculty) to foster a strong community of scholars and opportunities for collaboration.

Contributions to the economic and civic vitality of the state—

- Production of graduates with strong liberal arts, sciences and professional preparation, especially those with degrees in fields of direct economic and civic benefit (e.g., engineering and technology, business and public administration, teacher education, law, health professions, architecture, natural resources, and the arts);
- Maintenance of an Oregon-educated population with the proportion of college graduates at least at the median of other states;
- The ability to support university-industry-agency collaborations in research and projects.

On each of these dimensions, OUS universities face critical threats to quality. The relationship between state funding and indicators of quality is already evident in comparisons against our peers: lower levels of funding in OUS are associated with comparatively lower graduation rates and higher student-faculty ratios. The dimensions listed here represent important aspects of the broader quality indicators. They describe the way in which threats to quality posed by severe and ongoing reductions in funding are felt at the level of the student, parent, faculty, employer, and business leader.

