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Oregon's community colleges working to support adult learners

SALEM, Ore. – Two reports released in June highlight the growing need to address bringing adult students back to community colleges to start or complete a credential, and thanks to the Student Success Center (SSC) at the Oregon Community College Association (OCCA), Oregon's colleges are already working to better support these populations.

New America Survey: *Bringing Adults Back to Oregon*

The Center on Education and Labor at New America on June 1 released the results of a survey conducted in February 2024 with current and former students ages 24 and older attending (or who in the recent past attended) classes at one of Oregon's 17 community colleges to help find ways that colleges can better serve this population. Students in this demographic group differ significantly from younger students in that they are more likely to work, be caregivers, and enroll part-time. The survey results provide colleges with insights into these students' experiences and needs to help improve how they support this population in the future.

The survey found that 40% of currently enrolled student respondents and 35% of non-currently enrolled respondents are caregivers for either a child/children or an adult member of their household. This is more than the national rate of one-fifth of community college students and one-third of women in community college who have dependent children. The survey also indicated that 76% of currently enrolled student respondents work, with 26% working at least 40 hours per week while attending college. Seventy-six percent of non-currently enrolled students also work, but 42% work more than 40 hours per week.

"Community colleges are best suited to serve this population because we serve every student where they are," said Elizabeth Cox Brand, Director of the SSC. "Our colleges recognize that better serving adult students is an issue we need to address, and this data helps highlight where we can improve."

Cox Brand and New America in April worked with the state's community colleges that participated in the study to develop plans for each institution to start working to bring adults back to college, whether they're starting for the first time or returning to complete a certificate or degree.

National Student Clearing House Report: *Some College, No Credential Outcomes 2024*

The National Student Clearinghouse also released a report last week highlighting stopped-out students – those who have some college credits but no credential. This report seeks to understand the educational trajectories of the tens of millions of U.S. adults who left postsecondary education without receiving a postsecondary credential and are no longer enrolled. Nationally, the Some College, No Credential (SCNC) population under 65 has increased 2.9%, and in Oregon, that rate increased 1.4% from 2023.

“We’re seeing a number of factors contributing to these Some College, No Credential rate increases,” Cox Brand said. “Though enrollments are beginning to increase at the colleges – and re-enrollment in Oregon increased a slight 0.1% over 2023 – institutions are still feeling the impacts of those students who left school during COVID and never returned.”

In addition, birth rates in Oregon are among the lowest in the country, so the number of traditional students coming into college straight from high school is shrinking. A study out of Georgetown University also recently noted that as of Fall 2023, seniors outnumber children in Oregon.

“Our demographics are changing, and our enrollment cliff isn’t going to bounce back like everyone hoped,” Cox Brand said. According to the recently released report from the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University, 70% of jobs in Oregon will require credentials more than a high school diploma by 2031. In reference to the report Cox Brand added, “it’s imperative to let Oregonians know our colleges are ready and able to support the skills and training needed for those jobs in our state.”

Oregon colleges are already making strides in creating more streamlined paths to a credential for adults returning to college later in life. Thanks to Cox Brand and the SSC, Oregon community colleges are seeing significant success in the use of corequisite models to support adult learners. Corequisite support models enroll degree-seeking students identified as needing additional support directly into college-level math and writing upon entering college, while also getting extra support to learn and understand the curriculum. Offering corequisite math and writing courses in the first year of college as an alternative to traditional developmental education has been shown to increase pass rates and improve equitable outcomes, saving students time and money.

In the 2024 Legislative Session, legislators approved Senate Bill 1552 to create a work group to provide recommendations to the Higher Education Coordinating Commission on how to best support the ongoing transition from a pre-requisite model to an evidence-based corequisite model of support for gateway math and writing courses at all of Oregon’s colleges.

“We’re certainly making strides in Oregon to re-engage adult learners, but we can and need to do more,” Cox Brand said. “The data from these recent studies reinforce that need to provide more support to these students the workforce desperately needs to be trained.”

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The Oregon Community College Association (OCCA) represents the 17 publicly chartered community colleges and their locally elected board members in Oregon. Founded in 1962, OCCA’s purpose is to support the colleges before policy-makers and partners whose actions affect the well-being of community colleges across the state.