

## HIGHER EDUCATION'S SLIDE

Too many dropouts

A Register-Guard Editorial

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A university begins making an investment in its students even before they enroll as freshmen. That investment is repaid many times over, but the return is highest for students who receive their degrees. In this sense a university with a low graduation rate is an underperforming asset. The Legislature should understand that by starving the Oregon University System it is not only curtailing many students' prospects by cutting their educations short, it is also forgoing a portion of the social and economic dividends those students would eventually pay to the state.

At the University of Oregon, the state's flagship institution of higher learning, 63 percent of students receive a degree within six years of entering as freshmen. All eight of the universities the OUS regards as the UO's peers have higher six-year graduation rates. The University of Virginia has the highest rate, 92.6 percent. The University of Iowa, at 66.1 percent, is closest to the UO.

Among the 34 public universities that are members of the elite American Association of Universities, six-year graduation rates range from 58.8 percent at Stony Brook University in New York to Virginia's 92.6 percent. The UO's graduation rate is sixth from the bottom. The University of Washington, the only other AAU member in the Northwest, has a six-year graduation rate of 74.3 percent.

UO students drop out or drift away for a variety of academic and financial reasons. The Legislature's budgetary decisions influence both categories. The UO and other institutions of higher learning have responded to two decades of budgetary neglect by raising tuition on one hand, and cutting student services on the other. Financial pressure on students has become acute, while assistance for students struggling to meet academic challenges has been scaled back.

As described in an editorial in this space last Sunday, the UO spends less per student than any of its peers, and less than all but one public AAU institution. It's no coincidence that it also has a low graduation rate. Other indices of distress will be detailed in the weeks to come.

The Oregon Student Association, which represents students on university and community colleges throughout the state, drew some of the connections in a report released last week. Based in part on a survey of 4,000 students, the OSA reported that 43 percent of university seniors, and 40 percent of juniors, had to prolong their studies because of an inability to enroll in classes needed for graduation. Such barriers to graduation can force cruel choices upon students: Borrow more to stay in school or quit.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski has proposed funding a state financial aid program at a level that would allow any Oregon student to afford a college education with a combination of

grants, family support, loans and job income. This "shared responsibility model" appears to have legislative backing. Its adoption is a necessary step toward improving graduation rates at the UO and other Oregon colleges and universities. But students also need services of advisers and other forms of academic assistance that have been lost over the years.

The effects on young people's lives - not just in lost income, but in unfulfilled aspirations and narrowed options - are the biggest consequence of a low graduation rate. The collective cost is also substantial. A university graduate can expect to make 40 percent more in salary than someone who attended college but did not receive a degree. Low graduation rates at the UO and on other Oregon campuses translate into lost tax revenue and increased demands for social services. Oregon isn't just leaving more than one in three students behind. It's leaving money on the table.

**Six-year graduation rates, UO and peer institutions**

