

HIGHER EDUCATION'S SLIDE

Behind Oregon's F

A REGISTER-GUARD EDITORIAL

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By now Oregon has grown accustomed to receiving a grade of F for college affordability on the National Report Card on Higher Education, released every two years by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. It's easy to shrug off the low mark; 42 other states also receive failing grades, and the best grades in the country are the C-minuses given to California and Utah. A look at what goes into Oregon's F, however, should alarm and shame state policymakers.

The accompanying table lists two elements of the grade: the burden that community college costs impose on families, and the two-year retention rate at community colleges. States are scored on a scale of zero to 100 - the numbers are not percentages. Oregon ranks lowest among Western states on both counts. That means the financial burden of attending a community college weighs most heavily on families in Oregon. Partly as a consequence, fewer students begin their second year of community-college study in Oregon than in any Western state.

Other components of Oregon's F relate to the cost of four-year institutions of higher education and the availability of financial aid. The dire and declining condition of Oregon's universities has been discussed in earlier parts of this series of editorials. The condition of the state's community colleges is equally important. Community colleges offer training in vocations that pay enough to support a family and a mortgage. They also offer many students a low-cost means of completing the first two years of a four-year college education.

Oregon's 17 community colleges have installed turnstiles that make it increasingly hard to pass through their doorways to the middle class. Tuition has increased an average of 57 percent since 2001 in an effort to compensate for declining state support; at Lane Community College the increase has been 93 percent. Higher tuition has not been enough to balance budgets - community colleges have also cut course sections and entire programs. Attending a community college has become at once more costly and more difficult, so fewer students attend today than 10 years ago.

The connection between educational attainment and prosperity is direct. People who earn a two-year college degree earn 22 percent more than high school graduates, and their unemployment rate is 27 percent lower, according to a 2004 survey by the

College Board. Yet Oregon ranks 46th nationwide in attainment of college credentials, 46th in the amount of family income needed to pay community college costs and dead last in student retention into the second year of community college.

Such rankings are a result of protracted disinvestment. If the amount of state funds for community colleges in 2001 were adjusted for inflation, the appropriation for 2007-09 would be \$560 million. The state Board of Education requested \$529 million. Gov. Ted. Kulongoski recommended \$483 million. The co-chairs of the legislative joint Ways and Means Committee have proposed \$469 million. Oregon's political leaders are pursuing a low-education, low-wage strategy for the state.

The strategy may have been chosen deliberately rather than by default. In an April 8 article in *The (Portland) Oregonian* about budget proposals for community colleges, State Sen. Kurt Schrader, D-Canby, one of the Ways and Means co-chairs, complained of undisciplined administrators, small classes and "brain surgery 101 and basket weaving." Such remarks betray not only a lack of understanding of community colleges' operations and financial condition, but a contempt for their mission and purposes.

Schrader is not alone. The neglect of higher education in Oregon, including the community colleges, is bipartisan and of long standing. One well-known result is an F for college affordability. Less well known is the fact that among nearly all the states, Oregon has farther to go to earn even a passing grade.

Indicators of access

Oregon's high cost burden results in low retention of students.
Measures of community college affordability in selected states:

	Family ability to pay at community colleges (<i>graded 0 to 100</i>)	Students returning for 2nd year at 2-year colleges (<i>graded 0 to 10</i>)
Oregon	52	71
California	58	91
Washington	57	89
Idaho	85	84
Nevada	58	83
Colorado	68	73
Arizona	62	88
Utah	88	74
Montana	53	83
New Mexico	70	81

Source: "Measuring Up: The National Report Card on Higher Education." National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2006.