Fresh strategies to help frosh

Retention - Oregon's public universities want to prevent students from dropping out before their sophomore year

Sunday, September 23, 2007
SUZANNE PARDINGTON
The Oregonian

EUGENE -- As many as 2,200 of the 10,400 freshmen who start classes this week in Oregon's seven public universities will probably quit before their sophomore year.

For those students, the excitement of going to college will quickly turn into academic frustration, social isolation and financial stress -- some of the chief reasons freshmen drop out.

After getting $142 million in new money from the Legislature, campus leaders are responding with initiatives to try to stem the steady drain of new students from state universities.

"We want to not only get them in, we want to get them through," said Susan Weeks, vice chancellor for strategic programs and planning in the university system. "It doesn't do our goal of having a highly educated population any good if you can't get them through."

The universities are boosting student support services such as tutoring and advising, giving students more opportunities to interact with faculty and intervening earlier when students are in trouble.

The percentage of freshmen who quit between fall 2005 and fall 2006 ranged from 31 percent at Eastern Oregon University to 15 percent at the University of Oregon.

Nationally, about 25 percent of first-time students at four-year public colleges quit before their sophomore year, according to federal and state educators.

At UO, the focus is on connecting students with the academic life of the college as quickly as possible, said Karen Sprague, vice provost for undergraduate studies. One way the university does that is through "freshman interest groups" of 25 students who take two classes together, meet in small groups with a professor and student adviser and sometimes live in the same dorm.

"People leave for all sorts of reasons, but a big factor is a sense of isolation," Sprague said. "Anything we can do to help people find their niche is going to help."

Betsy Selander, an 18-year-old freshman from San Francisco, signed up for a residential interest group so she wouldn't be lost in the crowds at UO.

"I like it when a school kind of holds your hands and guides you a little bit," she said Thursday, while trying to put away a mountain of clothes on her bed before her roommate arrived. "I thought if I could find a small school within the big school I'd like it more."

Her interest group, called Living Autobiography, is taking U.S. history and folklore classes, reading a UO freshman diary from 1914 and writing accounts of their freshman year that will be submitted to the campus archives.

"I thought that was really cool, the idea that even as a freshman you can impact the school," Selander said.

Nicole Wentz, who also is 18 and from the San Francisco area, was putting up photo collages, posters and a UO football banner on her walls Thursday. She said she wanted to live and study with a small group of students to help her stay motivated and on top of her work.

"Everyone's in the same boat," she said. "Everyone wants to do well."

Freshmen in interest groups are more likely than other freshmen to return for their sophomore year, Sprague said. Over the past five years, the retention rate for the interest groups has been 86 percent to 89 percent, compared with 81 percent to 83 percent for those students not in the programs.

Online support

Another program that seems to work is the Students First Mentoring Program at Portland State University, created by Peter Collier, an associate professor of sociology. The program, based on Collier's research, supports freshmen who are eligible for financial aid and whose parents do not have a college degree by providing online help, tips and videos, as well as discussion groups. Some students also meet with a mentor.

"I'm trying to show these students that they are legitimate college students by giving them ways to act like college students," Collier said. "These are things that aren't in the catalog," such as how to read a course syllabus and how to talk to a professor.
Students in the program earn higher grades and more credits their freshman year, and retention rates are slightly higher, Collier said.

Stephanie Haas, a 20-year-old sophomore at PSU, said she might have quit during her freshman year without help from the program. Her mentor and others helped her through financial aid, roommate and academic issues, she said.

College was "so new and scary," she said. "I remember calling my mom that first night and crying, 'I want to go home.'"

Small-school feeling

Western Oregon University is expecting its freshman retention rate to improve by about 10 percent this year as a result of a campuswide focus on the issue, said Dave McDonald, associate provost.

The university is trying to create the feeling of a school that's smaller than its 5,100 students. For instance, faculty have lunch with students regularly in their residence halls.

"It's one more chance to connect with a faculty member, one more chance to add a face and personality to the people they'll be taking classes from," McDonald said.

Other state universities are taking a similar approach by creating more communities within the larger campus based on academic or other interests.

"You're seeing that blurring between the classroom and the learning environment," said Jackie Balzer, dean of student life at Oregon State University.

"Our goal is to really get them webbed in and connected so their learning experience is powerful and they have the support they need throughout their journey."

Suzanne Pardington: 503-412-7054; spardington@news.oregonian.com

©2007 The Oregonian