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Oklahoma graduation and retention rates among lowest in the nation

By Randy Ellis, rellis@opubco.com
Published: October 11, 2009

Oklahoma colleges and universities have the worst freshman retention rate and ninth worst six-year graduation rate in the nation.

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More than a third of the first-year, full-time freshmen who attend Oklahoma's public and private colleges drop out or transfer before their second year.

Six years after beginning college, only 44.1 percent of Oklahoma college students attain bachelor's degrees at the institutions where they started.

"We are concerned about graduation rates, but I think we can make a strong and persuasive case that we're doing some things about it," said [Glen Johnson](#), chancellor of the [Oklahoma State System of Higher Education](#).

IT'S AN UPHILL CLIMB

Rigor of a student's high school curriculum is the biggest factor in determining whether a student will be successful in college, Johnson said. Remediation rates show that many Oklahoma students arrive at college academically unprepared.

More than 38,000 Oklahoma college students had to take non-credit remedial courses in 2007-2008, including more than a third of first-time freshmen.

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Twelve of Oklahoma's 27 colleges and community colleges reported that more than half of their in-coming, full-time freshmen had to take at least one remedial course to prepare for college-level work that year.

To combat the problem, [Oklahoma's Legislature](#) and higher education regents increasingly have intervened at the high school level in recent years to establish and assist with programs designed to get students more academically prepared.

About three years ago, the Oklahoma Legislature established the Achieving Classroom Excellence (ACE) project to better align high school curriculums with college entrance requirements, Johnson said.

Higher Education Regents provide financial support by funding the Explore, Plan and Act (EPAS) program, which provides funding to test students at the 8th and 10th grade levels to gauge progress and identify subjects in which help can be provided before students

reach college, Johnson said.

GEAR UP, the American Diploma Project, summer academies, the Student Information Portal and Upward Bound are among a multitude of other programs state regents participate in that involve intervening at the high school level so that students will be better prepared by the time they reach college.

"All of those are initiatives that we believe are important," Johnson said.

Helping families overcome financial limitations is another key to improving graduation rates, he said.

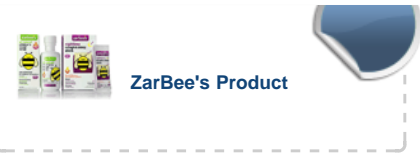
Oklahoma's boldest initiative in that area is Oklahoma's Promise program, formerly known as the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program (OHLAP). It's a program that calls for the state to pick up the tuition costs of students in families that earn \$50,000 or less, as long as students fulfill a promise to take college preparatory classes, stay out of trouble and maintain high school grade point averages of at least 2.5.

Participation has grown from less than 3,000 students to more than 19,000 students over the past decade, Johnson said.

"This has a chance to be a transformational program," he said. "All of the data shows that if you compare the ... Oklahoma's Promise students to the general student population, they had a higher grade point average in high school, their ACT scores were higher, their freshman grade point average was higher and as we're now starting to get the first graduation information, their graduation rates have been higher."

STANDARDS QUESTIONED

While higher education officials praise the program, a recent [University of Central Oklahoma](#) graduate told [The Oklahoman](#) she thinks it took her and several of her



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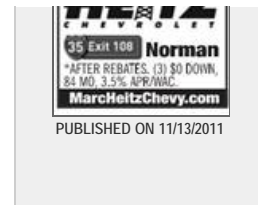
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friends longer to graduate because they were on OHLAP scholarships. "I felt because my school was paid for through this program, I wasn't as committed," said the student, who asked to remain anonymous. "I think every semester I dropped classes because it was paid for and there was no accountability."

She suggests raising the required grade point average of Oklahoma's Promise students above the state higher education system's minimum 2.0 academic progress requirement to provide an incentive for students to get serious about their studies.

Johnson said higher education officials considered that, but concluded it might have the unintended consequence of driving students who major in difficult subjects like engineering and math to switch to other majors where the course work is easier.

Colleges could also boost graduation rates by requiring higher ACT and SAT test scores to gain admittance, but that would limit access at a time when the state needs more college graduates, not fewer, he said.

"If you look at where we are in Oklahoma, access has got to be a priority," Johnson said. "We're below the national average in percentage of our citizens with college degrees." "We're making progress," he said. "Over the last decade we have increased the percentage of degrees awarded in this state by 26 percent."

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