



Blue Mountain Community College/Contributed Photo

Students by the thousands appear to be steering clear of Oregon's public and community colleges, including at Pendleton's Blue Mountain Community College, this fall. Financial aid applications from prospective community college students are down 44% from the same time last year.

Decline:

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Why is 2021 worse?

Ben Cannon, executive director of the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Council, hopes this is a one-time event brought on by the pandemic. One theory blames the lag on the lack of face time between high school students and their academic counselors, who normally would be urging and cajoling them to file applications.

Whatever the cause, these numbers are "stark," he said. "This looks like a really sharp downturn. It's quite concerning."

Declining college enrollment is bad news on any number of fronts, including the financial toll on the colleges. Administrators estimate the total fiscal impact of the pandemic on their institutions at \$500 million to \$600 million. That includes added expenses and lost tuition, ticket sales for athletic events and other revenue during fiscal years 2020 and 2021.

With 50% of the population now having received vaccines and Oregon colleges announcing they are returning to in-person learning on campus, some figured 2021 had to be an improvement over the year before.

But as of this month, financial aid applications seem to indicate the opposite. For some, the decline is steepening.

Oregon high school seniors filing a Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, this year stood at 21,843 as of May 4. Last year by the same date, the number was 24,699. The gap represents an 11.5% decline.

The number of prospective students filing for the New Oregon Promise Grant, which can be used only for community college, totaled 8,489 in the first week of May, a 44% decline from last year.

Cam Preus, executive director of the Oregon Community College Association, said community colleges were particularly vulnerable to enrollment swings because the career and technical classes typically offered by two-year institutions could not be replicated virtually. So they shut down, and the students went elsewhere.

The closure of K-12 schools also had an impact. Parents who otherwise might have enrolled at a community college were taking care of their kids at home.

"I think people are still a little tentative about the resumption of college," she said. "Some of it is about safety, some of it is concern about the cost, some of it is COVID financial support."

Financial aid applications are not a perfect proxy for actual enrollment figures. They are more volatile. But actual enrollment has also shown steady, if less dramatic, declines over the last decade.

The head count of full-time students at Oregon's public universities and community colleges has dropped in the last 10 years, from 116,593 in 2011 to 99,054 in 2020, the lowest number in more

than a decade.

Big, prestigious schools are weathering the storm just fine.

Standardized testing

The numbers have been skewed by the suspension of standardized college testing, like the SAT. The vast majority of colleges made the tests optional this year because the logistics of administering the tests were impossible given the pandemic.

That has resulted in a bit of a free-for-all. Students are applying in unprecedented numbers to the most prestigious schools in the country, figuring there is no longer any minimum SAT score to disqualify them.

In Oregon, that has benefited both OSU and UO.

"We are not experiencing any application decline. In fact, we're up big year over year, both in first-year and continuing students," said Noah Buckley, director of admissions at OSU.

But the pandemic has made for what Buckley termed "freaky" times in the college admissions game. It's hard to make any predictions. OSU has 4,000 freshman students who have "committed" to attending class in Corvallis, which ranks with some of OSU's best years.

"But I'd call them 'soft' commits," Buckley said. "Many haven't visited campus. We just don't know for sure. We're flying without all of our instruments right now."

The University of Oregon said it is seeing "a positive trend in students interested" in attending the university. It did not offer any numbers to back that up. "The pandemic adds a number of variables on where our enrollment may be this fall," the university said in a written statement.

Portland State is holding its own. Three months ago, its FAFSA applications were shockingly low, Knepfle said. But the numbers have improved steadily since then. Still, the school is preparing for a 5% decline in enrollment this fall.

Eastern Oregon University in La Grande projects a slight increase in the coming year. Tom Insko, the school's president, said enrollment should increase by 2.5% this fall to 2,190. Last year, enrollment fell 0.4%.

Many of Eastern's students are low-income, nearly 30% are people of color, and some come from families hard hit by COVID-19. In recognition of that, Insko has managed to keep 2021 tuition flat.

Many students also consider virtual learning an unacceptable substitute for real campus life. Eastern lost students who wanted to compete on athletic teams and participate in the performing arts or just wanted a traditional campus experience.

"They're now looking at the fall and they're asking themselves, 'Am I going to get that experience?'" Insko said.

The federal government has thrown billions of dollars at higher education in hopes of easing the pain. The U.S. Department of Education announced in the past week that it will release another \$36 billion in assistance. More than \$300 million will go to Oregon colleges.

Kids: More resource families needed

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with them at home.

"I was like a chicken with my head cut off and I loved it," she said.

There is plenty of support for resource parents, too, she said. Kids have case workers and court appointed special advocates and counselors, and parents have trainings and support groups. A new nonprofit called Sweet Potato's Closet, which opened last year, provides a large selection of clothing, hygiene items and more for resource parents to stop by and pick things out for free.

If Osuna was asked to advise people who are thinking about doing foster care but are feeling intimidated, she said it would be that "the kids are worth it."

"The journey isn't a walk in the park by any means, but these kids deserve love and a safe place," she said.

'We need more kiddos'

Michelle Davis and her husband did foster care for the past two and a half years in Oregon, and for about three years before that while they were living in Kansas.

She and her husband have two biological children and live in Hermiston, but decided they had room in their home for more.

"We thought, you know what? We need more kiddos in the house," she said.

The Davises have spent on average about a year with each child or sibling set they've taken into their home. They also frequently provide respite care, which provides temporary care for a child in the foster system while the person or family they are living with does something else, such as traveling out of town for a business trip.

Davis said if someone wants to dip their toe into the world of foster care to see how they like it, doing respite care for a day or two can be a good way to start.

There's always a risk that biological children and foster children in the same home might not get along well, similar to biological siblings, but Davis said her children always have been great about accepting everyone.

"My oldest just turned 9 yesterday and he has the biggest heart of gold," she said. "He just accepts anyone who comes in."

She said the other day when she asked her 4-year-old where babies come from, he answered that someone comes and drops them off, of course.



Michelle Davis/Contributed Photo

Michelle Davis and her husband, Al, live in Hermiston and have been doing foster care for about five years total.



Tonya Wilson/Contributed Photo

Tonya Wilson and her husband, Gene, live in Hermiston and have been resource parents for about a year.



Bianca Osuna/Contributed Photo

Umatilla resident Bianca Osuna has been providing foster care for three years.

No more empty nesters

Tonya Wilson and her husband are just coming up on one year of doing foster care. So far they have welcomed three teenagers, all related, into their Hermiston home.

"We're empty nesters, and we suck at it," she said when asked why they decided to get certified as foster parents. "It's so quiet and empty."

Wilson said it can take up to a year to get approved to be a foster parent, but in this case she and her husband were first approved as an emergency placement for a teen who had been living with some friends of hers who were moving out of state.

It hasn't always been easy — there have been a few brushes with law enforcement — but Wilson said she and her husband love their kids and are glad to have them.

"Our daughter did the same kind of stuff to us, so sometimes I have to remember, 'You're talking back to us because you're a teenager, not

because you're in foster care,'" she said.

She, Osuna and Davis all said they really enjoy the friendships they've made with other parents who are also doing foster care. There is a huge need for resource parents in the area, Wilson said, so she said if anyone is interested in giving it a try, it's worth pursuing, even though it is an arduous process to get certified.

How to become a resource parent

May is National Foster Care Month, and Marvin Hamilton, who does recruitment for resource parents for DHS in Umatilla and Morrow counties, said he is grateful for all of the people who are willing to take a child or teenager into their home when living with their biological parents isn't an option for the time being.

"They work hard to partner with families to offset the tremendous grief and loss children and young adults experiencing foster care may have,"

he said. "They are partners in achieving the best possible outcomes for families while providing for the safety, health and well-being of the children and young people they're committed to caring for in their home."

He said there is a great need for more resource families in the area, and they are especially short on Spanish-speaking homes. He said Umatilla and Morrow counties have a total of 183 children in care and 131 resource families.

Resource parents can be single, married or living together, with biological children or without. They must be at least 21 years old, be able to adequately support their family financially, have adequate room for children in their home or apartment, be able to physically care for a child's needs and pass a background check.

For more information, contact Hamilton at 541-564-4484 or Marvin.HAMILTON@dhsosha.state.or.us.

Parade:

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She had an inkling it was for some sort of honor, but no idea it was a part of an application for the grand marshal spot. In a short introduction to her resume, Burger shared her feelings about the impending honor.

"There are so many men and women much more deserving of this recognition," she wrote. "However, if I am indeed selected, I will take the example of my grandfather, Thomas Roosevelt Myers, WWII POW survivor, when he was awarded any honor or recognition ... accept it with humility and in honor of those who have sacrificed everything in their service to our nation, and those who

struggle to live in the world after serving."

Burger herself served in the U.S. Army during the 1990s, including a stint driving trucks at a military base in South Korea.

After she was discharged, Burger struggled with the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder but found a new sense of purpose after joining a VFW post in Redmond. She joined Post 922 after moving to Pendleton in 2017 and quickly rose through the ranks to the commander position.

Since her term as commander will be over by the time of the parade, Burger thought organizers might choose someone else to fill the grand marshal role for 2021, but they were insistent that she keep it.

Burger said she felt like the 2021 Fourth of July Parade is

important because it is a celebration of freedom following the COVID-19 lockdowns.

The parade will function similarly to previous events, starting at 10 a.m. at Pendleton City Hall on Southwest Dorion Avenue before moving toward South Main Street, heading west on Southwest Court Avenue and then ending at the Pendleton Convention Center.

Parade organizers are continuing to accept free applications for parade participants. The most highly regarded participants could win an award across several categories, with the top-rated participant winning the VFW Patriot Trophy.

While Oregon's restrictions have loosened as more people have received the vaccine, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention still recommends unvac-

inated people who attend large outdoor events wear masks and socially distance themselves.

Heading into the summer, local organizers were unsure whether the state would allow them to resume their annual events given the state's COVID-19 regulations. Some events, like Pendleton Bike Week, chose to cancel their event for the second consecutive year and look ahead to 2022.

But others chose to come back. The Pendleton Cattle Barons resumed its event on April 30, and concerts, namely the Jackalope Jamboree and Whisky Fest, have committed to reopening later this summer.

Whisky Fest is contending with an audience cap for its July 10 show and will announce a new headliner later this week.

Blessed:

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no energy," Drexlyn Bailey said. "But she's been bouncing around."

But now begins a months-long process of chemotherapy and the costs that come with it. As a plumber in Hermiston, Drexlyn can't make any money when he misses work, and paying for the treatment became a major concern for the family.

That's why the Baileys

were "blown away by how generous and loving and caring all these people are," Audrey Bailey said at the event.

"We stand behind the children of our community," said Jackie Lucas, a lifelong Stanfield resident, whose niece was in the taekwondo school. "There's a lot of caring people here."

'It's overwhelming'

The day began with demonstrations in the studio, where families packed in to watch their children thrust,

jab and kick while Watson shouted commands. Many children stood nervously in front of the large crowd, making mistakes that prompted frequent corrections from Watson, who cracked jokes to ease the tension.

The studio consist of roughly 100 students from across Eastern Oregon, some from as far as Heppner. Parents at the event said they bring their children long distances to have them learn self-control, discipline and determination.

Some children went above and beyond in the fundraiser, Watson said, raising extra money for Maysie Bailey through things such as lemonade stands.

"It's overwhelming," Watson said as the event neared its end. "I couldn't talk. It was just so emotional. When it comes to little kids having cancer and raising money, and all the kids pull in together and they all broke open their piggy banks — it's just amazing that, even as young as they are, they understand."

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