



## The Oregonian

### More Oregon grads find work

**97 percent of the Class of 2005 are satisfied with their skills, jobs and pay, but the costs come in higher tuition that leaves a heavier debt load**

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Graduates of Oregon public universities are happier than they've been in years with their degrees, which they say are delivering good jobs, high pay, useful skills and paths to advanced studies.

Though tuition keeps climbing as state spending on the seven universities declines, graduates of the Class of 2005, surveyed last spring, express greater satisfaction with their education than any class in the last decade, according to a report released Tuesday by the Oregon University System.

"I had a very good experience here," said Misti Southard, 23, of La Grande, who enjoyed studying sociology and history at Eastern Oregon University so much that she stayed after graduating in 2005. She works as an office assistant in the president's office.

"It was a great education," she said. "I just think I grew a lot in the four years from high school to graduation."

The survey showed that 93 percent of graduates from the Class of 2005 are working, continuing their education or doing both. Seven in 10 say they are working in jobs related to their college studies, 41 percent in professional fields.

They are earning more than the class surveyed two years earlier, partly because the state economy has improved, state officials say. And they need to earn more because two-thirds of them are carrying more debt than previous classes -- an average \$23,053.

Most members of the class had an internship or some kind of applied learning experience in college, and about a fourth of them turned those experiences into jobs. One of them is Christopher Allen, 29, who studied mechanical engineering at Oregon Institute of Technology's branch program in Portland. After interning six months with Boeing Co.'s plant in east Portland, he was hired as a manufacturing engineer. As 18 percent of his classmates who are working, he earns more than \$50,000.

Allen attended two years of community college in New York before moving to Portland and enrolling at OIT, based in Klamath Falls. He completed his program in night classes while working days, so he has no student loan debt. "I'm doing well," Allen said. "OIT served me great."

Less than half of the Class of 2005 entered the university system as freshmen directly out of high school. The biggest share, 45 percent, transferred from community colleges or another university, and 9 percent returned after taking breaks, usually to work. Many who took longer routes to their degrees were the first in their immediate family to earn a college degree.

#### Class profile

The survey found that 35 percent of graduates were first generation. They were more likely than others to

come from low-income families, enter the system through community college, work full time while in school, take advantage of internships and graduate with heavy debt, the report said. Among students with debt, two-thirds owe more than \$15,000, and one in five owes more than \$40,000.

The university system needs to do more to help those students, said Ruth Keele, the system's director of performance measurement and outcomes. "This is a group who are obviously willing to work very hard for their college education," she said, "which makes it incumbent on us to focus on issues like affordability, and aligning the curriculum and strengthening the support services."

Less than half of students were satisfied with university support services, which universities have cut in response to declining state support. However, 90 percent said the universities gave them skills to think critically, write clearly and work effectively with others.

### **Communication skills**

"The most important thing I got from the university is writing skills and communication skills," said Benjamin Berman, 29, a 2005 graduate of Eastern Oregon who now is an aviation electrical technician for the U.S. Coast Guard in Mobile, Ala.

After attending Eastern for a year, Berman joined the Coast Guard and then finished his degree, mostly through Eastern's distance-learning courses, while stationed at North Bend. Now, the married father of three boys is working on his master's degree in exercise physiology with hopes of going to officer candidate school.

Berman was one of 1,762 members of his class surveyed by telephone in spring 2006 by ORC Macro in Burlington, Vt., for the university system's report, called "One Year Later."

The survey put graduate success -- the percentage working, attending school or doing other activities of their choice -- at 97 percent, the highest level since the system started doing the survey more than a decade ago. The lowest level was 94 percent, posted by the Class of 2003.

### **The jobs factor**

That's not surprising because Oregon's jobless rate peaked in the last recession at 8.5 percent in the summer of 2003. By the time the class of 2005 entered the market, the unemployment rate had fallen to 6.3 percent.

Now unemployment stands at 5.4 percent, and job prospects are even better for college graduates and will continue to be, said Art Ayre, state employment economist for the Oregon Employment Department.

April Pregizer, 24, is looking for a job teaching high school science after earning her master's in education in December at Western Oregon University in Monmouth, where she also earned her bachelor's degree in 2005. She works as a substitute teacher in Monmouth and hopes to find a permanent job this summer in Portland. But she's in no hurry to leave Western.

"I will be," she says, "the person driving around the streets with the Western Oregon University sticker on my car."

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