

## Latinos outpace whites in graduation rates at Western Oregon University

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Cristal Sandoval of Woodburn will be the first in her family to get a college degree when she graduates in June 2011 from Western Oregon University.

Cristal Sandoval says she's on course to become the first person in her family to earn a college degree, in part because of the financial support, tutoring and guidance she's received during her years at Western Oregon University.

"They taught me how to prepare with study skills and how to organize my time," said the 21-year-old senior. Western's support programs for Latino students, she said, "are definitely key to my success."

They also help explain why the college completion rate at Western, unlike at most colleges and universities in Oregon and the nation, is higher for Latino students than for their white peers. Nearly 49 percent of the Latino students at Western graduate within six years, compared with 45 percent of white classmates, according to a study last month by the American Enterprise Institute.

The study, which averaged graduation rates from 2005, 2006 and 2007, found that at most colleges and universities, no matter how selective, Latino completion rates lagged those of their non-Latino white peers.

The lag in Oregon ranges from 4 percentage points at the University of Oregon to 15 points at Willamette University, the report found. Those percentages, however, do not account for students who graduate after transferring from one institution within the Oregon University System to another, officials said.

Nationwide, 51 percent of Latino college students earn four-year degrees within six years compared with 59 percent of white students.

Universities are focusing more on Latino students because they are the fastest growing population group in the nation. In Oregon, one in five public school students is Latino, and the number is growing.

As a result, Oregon colleges and universities are under pressure from state business and political leaders to ensure more students succeed and graduate.

Improving Latino graduation rates was a major theme at a statewide symposium at Portland State last fall and at a daylong summit last week at California State University at San Bernardino that was broadcast to other universities, including Washington State University's Vancouver campus.

"By 2020, Hispanics will make up 22 percent of the nation's college-age population," the report said.

The state Board of Higher Education is aware of the coming Latino wave and has launched a "Latino Access and Success" initiative to recruit and retain more Latino students, said Joe Holliday, assistant vice chancellor for student success initiatives.

The system is looking at ways it can help more Latino students complete high school and then support them "once they are in college all the way through to graduation," he said. "It is really the first coordinated effort we've had in Oregon on Latino success in higher education."

Western is a model for other universities. It has recruited Latino students such as Sandoval, a graduate from Woodburn High School, and has hired Spanish-speaking staff and faculty to communicate better with its growing enrollment of Latino students and their families.

Sandoval said she got strong support from a summer bridge program that helped introduce her to the university before her freshman year and by the university's Student Enrichment Program, a federally funded program aimed at helping students from low-income homes or who are first in their families to attend college.

Sandra Dominguez Carrillo, 19, a freshman from Hood River and the first in her family to go to college, said she's also relied on the enrichment program as well as the Western chapter of the Latino organization M.E.Ch.A.

"It is difficult when you are the first one" in the family to go to college, she said. "You have to work harder than other people."

The enrichment program, which is supplemented by the university, provides tutoring, mentoring, study skill

classes, laptops and other support for 300 students "from registration all the way through graduation," said David McDonald, associate provost. "It is phenomenally successful. We have a 90 percent graduation rate for kids in that program."

Western has made dramatic headway with its Latino and other minority students, increasing their graduation rate by 16 percentage points between 2002 and 2007, putting it among the top 10 gains in the nation, according to a report by the Education Trust.

Latino students also fare better than their majority classmates at Portland State University, though the graduation rate for all groups is low, with 38 percent of Latino students and 35 percent of non-Latino white students graduating within six years.

Even with financial aid, tuition and other costs continue to be a major barrier to college for Latino students, said Martha Balshem, a PSU sociology professor and a special assistant to the president for diversity.

The university, which draws older, more mobile students who often must juggle jobs with school, has created a task force on how to help more Latino students succeed, she said.

"It is not only the right thing to do," she said, "but the business community and everyone else is concerned about it because the college-going rates among the Latino community will have a strong impact on the economy of our region."

-- Bill Graves

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