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Front Page News

Last Update Sunday, November 24th, 2024

RCC enrollment on road to recovery after upheaval of COVID pandemic

By Chrissy Ewald of the Daily Courier

Enrollment at Rogue Community College has continued to bounce back since the pandemic, according to recently released enrollment numbers from the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission.

The college enrolled the equivalent of 1,268 full-time students in fall 2024, almost equal to 1,271 in 2019, the year before the pandemic. But total head count is still below where it was pre-pandemic: 5,193 students this fall vs. 6,148 in 2019.

During the same period statewide, full-time equivalent enrollment at community colleges and public universities is still down 14.2%, much lower than at RCC. Head count is down 17.6%, which is about on par with RCC.

What's the difference between full-time equivalent students and head count?

"If I'm a full-time student, I have a full-time equivalency of one," RCC President Randy Weber explained this week. "But if I'm a part-time student, it might take three of us to generate one FTE," meaning full-time equivalent.

Weber acknowledged that the college is serving fewer students than before the pandemic.

"But they're taking more load, which can be good in a lot of ways," he said. "It means they're getting to and through their degree faster, which gets you into the workforce faster, which decreases the amount of loans, hopefully, because they're taking it over less time."

During the pandemic, enrollment at colleges and universities across the country dropped sharply, especially at community colleges. At RCC, from 2019 to 2020, full-time equivalent enrollment dropped from 1,271 to 883. Headcount dropped from 6,148 to 3,619. As with other colleges across the country, many classes moved online.

Recovery from the pandemic at Oregon community colleges has been a mixed bag. Some have seen success: Umpqua Community College in Roseburg saw headcount and full-time equivalent enrollment exceed pre-pandemic levels for the first time this fall, and Klamath Community College in Klamath Falls saw its full-time equivalent enrollment exceed pre-pandemic levels for the second year in a row.

Others have continued to struggle to get students back in the classroom. And compared to four-year universities, enrollment and headcount were affected more sharply by the pandemic and have not recovered as well.

The first programs at RCC to recover, Weber said, were career and technical courses that transfer directly into employment, like welding, automotive, nursing and dental hygiene. The college's career and technical-focused Table Rock Campus in White City now has more students than it did before the pandemic, he said, while the Redwood Campus in Grants Pass and Riverside Campus in downtown Medford have not returned to their pre-pandemic levels.

This year, he said, the college is seeing an increase in transfer course work, the type of courses typically taken by students who want to transfer to Southern Oregon University or another four-year college or university.

Voters rejected a \$60.3 million bond earlier this month that would have further expanded the college's career and technical education programs. Weber said that means some of those programs will likely hit capacity, and the college will in some cases not be able to offer programs at multiple locations.

"What we're doing now is looking at what we can do to best try to serve that need," Weber said. He said it's likely some students are choosing the classes that will enable



JULIE ANDERSON / Daily Courier Bobby Raetz (right), the instructor in the steering and suspension class at Rogue Community College's Redwood Campus, watches as students Aryssa Montano (left) and Emily Becerra learn how to change a strut cartridge on Friday.

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transferring to a four-year college because there's not room in career and technical programs.

Weber said the college's goal is to get headcount back to pre-pandemic levels. While getting more students in the door is part of that goal, Weber said retaining students at higher levels is also part of the college's strategy. He said in fall 2022, his first year on the job after taking over from Cathy Kemper-Pelle, the college set a goal to stabilize enrollment by increasing new students and helping current students be more successful.

"We found that students who don't complete courses and withdraw from courses, too frequently withdraw from school," he said. Since fall 2022, he said, course completion rates have gone up, as has term-to-term student retention.

Last year, technical issues with the FAFSA, the form students use to apply for federal student aid, caused enrollment dips at colleges across the country. Delays to the FAFSA meant some students were making college decisions without knowing how much financial aid they would get.

RCC Financial Aid Director Frankie Everett said in an email that the school is keeping a close eye on this year's FAFSA, which opened to all students Thursday.

Overall, Weber said increased enrollment at RCC is good for the local economy.

"We're getting people into the workforce to fill these in-demand jobs, really, and at a faster pace," he said.

And, of course, recovery from the pandemic is good for RCC as well. The college was able to avoid mass layoffs.

"FTE is tied to our revenue, so it helps us have more resources that provide direct support for students," Weber said.

The data from the Higher Education Coordinating Commission also covers Oregon's public four-year universities, which collectively had stable headcount even during the pandemic. Full-time equivalent enrollment dipped during the pandemic but is now similar to pre-pandemic levels. Some institutions are faring better than others; Oregon State University and University of Oregon have higher headcount than before the pandemic, while headcount at Portland State University has fallen every year since 2019.

Oregon's nonprofit private colleges and universities have had persistently lowered enrollment since the pandemic. This fall, the Oregon Alliance of Independent Colleges and Universities reported a 1% decrease in headcount across its 11 member institutions since last year, which a press release attributed to last year's FAFSA issues. Fall 2024 undergraduate and graduate enrollment totaled 23,079 across the 11 schools, well below 32,964 in fall 2019.

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## RCC enrollment on road to recovery after upheaval of COVID pandemic

### Proposal for tribal casino in Medford receives a key approval

MEDFORD — The federal government has taken a big step toward approval of a casino in Medford, to be operated by a tribe on the South Coast and opposed by a tribe closer to the Rogue Valley. [Read More »](#)

### Drenching storms trigger small increase in Grants Pass Gospel Rescue Mission use

The half-full Gospel Rescue Mission homeless shelter in Grants Pass has seen a small uptick in use, but no major influx in the wake of recent stormy weather and a summer U.S. Supreme Court decision that allows cities to be more strict about homeless camping on public property. [Read More »](#)

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