

Study: WSU, UI students taking their sweet time

Fewer than two-thirds of undergraduate students at universities on Palouse, nationwide graduate within six years

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Posted on: Thursday, June 04, 2009

About 3,000 undergraduate students received their degrees from the University of Idaho and Washington State University this spring.

According to a new study, that number may have accounted for less than two-thirds of the students who began their academic careers on the Palouse.

The UI has a six-year graduation rate of 53 percent, while WSU's is 63 percent, according to the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research study.

Although the study refers to "America's college graduation rate crisis," local university officials say graduation rates are highly subjective and account for just one measure of student success.

"When you look at our traditional freshmen who come and reside at the Moscow campus, graduation rate is something we do want to pay attention to," UI Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management Steve Neiheisel said.

But there are many other types of students on campus.

The UI and WSU hover around the U.S. average for the percentage of students who graduate within six years, and both have higher rates than their respective state averages.

The UI's percentage stands out in comparison to Boise State University at 28 percent, Idaho State University at 31 percent and Lewis-Clark State College at 27 percent, but it is below the national curve.

"Each institution has its own purpose and mission, and ... the University of Idaho prides itself on providing great access to the citizens of Idaho," UI Dean of Students Bruce Pitman said.

He said institutions such as Stanford University, with a 95-percent six-year graduation rate, have different priorities in admitting students than do the UI or WSU.

"But again we're a different kind of university than a Stanford. They have a particular kind of mission, and we have a very important mission in the state of Idaho," he said.

Neiheisel said selective private institutions work with populations that are highly motivated and often have the financial means to go through school uninterrupted.

"With institutions that have less affluent student populations, those students have to take a semester off to pay for their education or work. Another factor is the number of, or the percentage of students who come to an institution who are first-generation," he said. "Sometimes it takes those students a bit longer to navigate the academic environment to graduation."

Neiheisel said although the study is new, the information is not.

"This is not new data in any way, shape or form," he said. "This is something that's been tracked and known information for years."

But Neiheisel said a new focus on graduation by the federal government may be pushing the issue to the forefront.

"The Obama administration is making graduation a high priority and the number of graduates (the United States) is turning out is lagging at this point," he said.

The study's authors also cited a new push toward higher education by the Obama administration, but described fears that institutions may begin to lower their standards to increase graduation rates.

"With these problems in mind, the fact still remains that a crucial piece of information for students and families deciding whether and where to enroll is the likelihood of receiving a degree," the authors concluded.

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