

# Pathways to Opportunity

Closing Opportunity Gaps and Increasing Economic Mobility



**R**ecord economic growth, historically low unemployment rates, and increasing rates of educational attainment have occurred across Oregon since the last recession (Leher, 2019). However, these headlines and statistical averages erase and obscure the realities of many individuals and families across the state. Disparities in educational attainment and income are growing for communities of color and rural residents, stagnating economic mobility for generations. At the same time, employers are clamoring for a more robust and skilled talent pipeline to meet their workforce needs. **To close these opportunity and skills gaps in Oregon, collective action from policy makers, business leaders, state agencies, and institutions of higher education is vital.**<sup>1</sup> Community colleges are at the nexus of this work, providing open access to high-quality education that builds 21st century and technical skills, responds to industry needs, and offers college credentials and degrees that increase career opportunities. Recognizing the important role that community colleges play in the state and the implications for Oregon's future vitality, the Pathways to Opportunity initiative was launched and codified in HB 4043 (2018).

**Oregon is out front nationally** and forging the way with Pathways to Opportunity. Under the vision of Portland Community College President Mark Mitsui, the college is leading the statewide Pathways to Opportunity initiative. **Pathways to Opportunity closes opportunity gaps and increases economic mobility by expanding the federal, state, and local resources available to low-income students so more individuals can attend and complete college.** Inherent in this work is increased collaboration, partnership, and alignment with state

agencies, community-based organizations, anti-poverty advocates, and amongst the seventeen community colleges. HB 4043 called for community colleges to come together with state agencies, the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC), the Office of the Governor, and other stakeholders to study and determine the best methods for community college students to learn about and apply for state or federal programs that offer financial or other benefits.

Unmet financial needs are a key barrier preventing too many individuals from attending and completing college, disproportionately impacting students of color, rural Oregonians, and other underserved populations. Finding solutions to close these opportunity gaps is a social justice and equity imperative, and an economic development necessity to meet the needs of communities and industries across the state. This report aims to share findings of the community colleges and offer policy and programmatic recommendations that can close opportunity gaps and increase economic mobility for all individuals in Oregon.

The Pathways to Opportunity leaders wish to acknowledge and thank the Oregon Presidents Council (OPC) and the HECC's Office of Community Colleges and Workforce Development (CCWD) for the funding to do this important work. State partners, such as the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Oregon Housing and Community Services (OHCS) Department have been critical. In addition, Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield and Melissa Johnson from National Skills Coalition (NSC) and Lauren Walizer from the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) offered essential insights and research.



## College Education Crucial to Addressing Wage Inequities

Economic inequality has increased exponentially since 1980, with 60 to 70% of this change stemming from the growing difference between the earnings of high school completers and college graduates (Carnevale & Smith, 2018). In the 1970's, three out of four jobs required a high school education or less, whereas today, two out of three jobs require at least some postsecondary education or training (Carnevale & Smith, 2018). Post-recession, 99% of all jobs created went to individuals with some college (Carnevale et al., 2016). In 2015, Georgetown's Center on Education and the Workforce found that 80% of all good jobs, jobs paying an average of \$55,000 annually, went to individuals with postsecondary education (Carnevale et al., 2015).

NSC identified that middle skill jobs, those that require more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree, will make up the largest share of job openings in Oregon through 2024. These middle skill jobs also represent the largest skills gap, with more job openings than skilled workers to fill the positions (National Skills Coalition [NSC], 2017). As NSC's Melissa Johnson and Katie Spiker (2018) detailed, "this unmet demand for skills is a lost opportunity for businesses who can't take advantage of economic growth, and means workers don't have the right skills to access good jobs" (p. 1). For Oregon, it creates a drag on economic growth and buoyancy.

Lower educational attainment also caps income and exacerbates wage inequities. In Oregon, education accounts for 23 to 26% of the variation in income, with one additional year of education increasing hourly earnings by 10% (Kaylor, 2018). When earnings are examined by race, the glaring wage gaps are evident. Workers of color earned a median hourly wage that was five dollars less an hour than white workers in 2015, growing from four dollars less an hour in 1980 (National Equity Atlas, 2018). In the Portland Metropolitan Area, the median wage for Black/African Americans is \$39,557, \$54,392 for Latinx, and \$75,116 for white individuals (Portland Business Alliance, 2018). Even more discouraging is that these gross inequities have remained or worsened in the last ten years. This not only has profound impacts on families and perpetuates cycles of poverty, but also negatively effects all of Oregon and all Oregonians.

Policy Link analyzed Oregon's gross domestic product and found that "eliminating discrimination in pay and hiring, boosting education attainment, and ensuring strong and rising wages for low-wage workers is good for families, good for communities, and good the economy" (Policy Link, 2018). Oregon's economy would have been \$14.67 billion larger in 2015, had there been no racial income gaps (National Equity Atlas, 2018). Investing in postsecondary education to close these wage gaps also offers additional benefits to Oregon. For every \$1 invested in Oregon's community colleges, the state yields an \$8.40 return on investment (No author, 2018). Focusing on opportunity and equity is not only a social justice and moral responsibility, but is fundamentally good for Oregon's communities and its economy.

**442,000 adults** 25 and older in Oregon are **unemployed or working making less than \$15/hr**

without postsecondary credentials. It would take 9 years of HS grads to equate to this number to address the skills gap.

## Opportunity Gaps are Leaving Too Many Oregonians Behind

Oregon's economy and the economic mobility of individuals are inextricably linked with educational attainment. If Oregon wants to grow and maintain a resilient economy constructed for the 21st century, increased educational attainment is required—especially postsecondary credentials. Oregon's 40-40-20 and Adult Attainment goals recognize the importance of college credentials and the clear overlay between education and opportunity. These educational attainment goals also acknowledge there is significant room for improvement.

Currently, 46% of individuals ages 25 to 34 are without postsecondary credentials, and 8% lack a high school diploma or equivalency (Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission [HECC], 2018). When looking at all individuals over age 25, that number grows to 48% without postsecondary credentials and 10% without a high school diploma (Cox, 2018). When the data is disaggregated, there are stark disparities between populations and communities across the state.

49% of white individuals over age 25 are without postsecondary credentials, but that number increases to 72% for Latinx adults. For low-income individuals over age 25, 62% do not possess any postsecondary credentials. There are also differences depending upon where one lives in the state, with 60% of rural Oregonians lacking postsecondary credentials in comparison to 48% of urban residents. These statistics explain why Oregon has over 442,000 adults over age 25 unemployed or working and making less than \$15 an hour without postsecondary credentials; 442,000 adults who are being left behind (Oregon Employment Department, 2019). This number is equivalent to nine years of Oregon’s high school graduating classes.

## Today’s Community College Students are Adults with Significant Financial Needs

Unless Oregon consciously creates equitable pathways into college, with increased supports for completion, the state as a whole will be left behind. To build effective systems, strategies, and policy, leaders and policy makers need to understand our current and future students. In 2017-2018, 56% of Oregon’s community college students were over age 25. This is consistent with national trends, where “traditional students” now make up just a third of the college population. As summarized in a report by CLASP, Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield et al. (2018) writes:

*Today’s college students are increasingly low-income, working adults balancing work, family, and school. These students are also more likely to be first-generation attenders, immigrants, and students of color pursuing dreams of better jobs, higher incomes, and more stability for their families. (p. 2)*

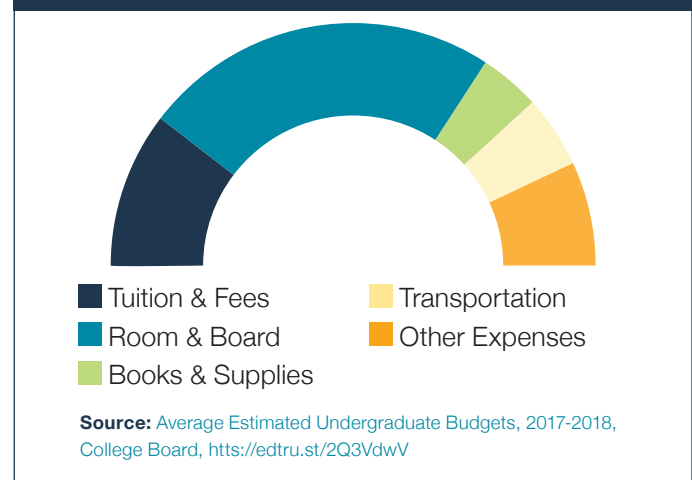
Oregon’s policies and practices have not kept up with these shifting college demographics. In order to close opportunity gaps, decisions and approaches need to be centered around the students of the present and not the past. Meaning, Oregon needs to critically examine what is needed to dismantle the systemic obstacles and inequities that are preventing too many individuals from enrolling, persisting, and completing college credentials that provide a pathway into careers offering economic mobility.

One of the primary obstacles preventing college access and completion is affordability, and the resultant unmet

financial needs. Unmet need is the gap between the cost of college and all student resources that do not need to be repaid, such as scholarships, grant aid, and a student’s Expected Family Contribution (EFC) as calculated in the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). CLASP analyzed U.S. Department of Education data from academic year 2015-16 and found that nearly three in four students nationally experience unmet need, and that unmet need among college students has risen by 23% since academic year 2011-12.

Across the country, 71% of students at public two-year institutions have unmet need that averages \$4,920 per year (Walizer, 2018). In Oregon, average unmet need for community college students in 2016 was \$4,300 for individuals and \$5,200 for independent students with dependents (Walizer, 2019). Nationally, all low-income, working students are left struggling with unmet financial need as they pursue their dreams of college (Duke-Benfield et al., 2018). Given that unmet need calculation figures are for one year and not an aggregate, and that two-year public institutions tend to underestimate the costs of attendance, it is difficult to accurately assess the true financial burdens facing community college students and the impact this has on college access and completion for those who need it most (Walizer, 2018).

**Figure 1: Average Costs at Community Colleges**



To understand the gravity of the situation, it’s important to recognize that it is more than the increasing costs of tuition. Today’s community college students are struggling with rising housing, food, childcare, healthcare, and living expenses (See Figure 1, The Education Trust, 2018). The HECC found that the average cost of attendance for a

community college student in Oregon in 2016-2017 was \$18,058, with 45% of students unable to meet expenses with expected resources, family contributions, student earnings, and grant aid (HECC, 18 April 2018). This unmet need leaves a growing share of students housing and food insecure.

**Southwestern Oregon Community College  
STEP Student:**

“As a high school drop-out, 19 years ago, I never pictured myself in college. I decided if my life was going to change I needed to get my GED. Now I’m in my third college term with a 3.4 GPA. I worked hard for this, but without the amazing GED program at SWOCC and the incredible staff, I would not have made it. The teachers not only helped me learn, but also made me feel important and worthy of becoming a great person. Because of the continuing support and the benefits from the STEP and GED programs, I have a bigger and brighter future. Programs like these empower people to build a better society.”

**–Darrell Donhoff**

In a national study of basic needs insecurity that included some of Oregon’s community colleges, Sara Goldrick-Rab et al. (2017) found that two in three community college students experience food insecurity, approximately half are housing insecure, and 13 to 14% experience homelessness. In comparison to other similarly sized regions across the country, the Portland Metropolitan Area has the largest share of cost-burdened households for both renters and owners (Portland Business Alliance, 2018). Add to this the costs of childcare and healthcare, and the situation is untenable. It is incredibly onerous to attend, persist, and complete college when fundamental basic needs are not met—for students, their children, and their families.

This confluence of opportunity and wage gaps, coupled with rapidly rising costs of living and college, creates even more urgency to find solutions before growing inequities are crystallized in Oregon’s communities and pathways out of poverty and into the middle class are fractured beyond repair. The work of Pathways to Opportunity has never been more necessary for Oregon.

## Pathways to Opportunity Meets the Needs of Today’s Students

There are no other public institutions better positioned to spearhead the Pathways to Opportunity initiative and address the needs outlined above than community colleges. They are woven into the fabric of Oregon’s communities, and rely on cross sector partnerships with employers, state agencies, K-12, community-based organizations, universities, and workforce and economic development providers to fulfill our missions. Goldrick-Rab & Cady (2018) write that:

*Community colleges are unique in their potential to generate social mobility by enrolling and graduating students from families with little economic security. They offer benefits that transcend generations, educate people with children and extended families, and provide access that rarely exists at four-year colleges and universities. (p. 2)*

In the federal letter, “Aligning Federal Supports and Program Delivery for College Access and Completion (2016)” six federal agencies offer guidance and state that a “postsecondary credential or degree is among the surest ways to access the middle class and become financially self-sufficient” (p. 1). Yet, as outlined above, too many students are unable to complete college due to financial constraints. Even where resources and benefits are available, students may be unaware of the programs that could support them to complete college (U.S. Department of Agriculture et al., 2016).

Pathways to Opportunity is an innovative approach that brings together a dynamic coalition of stakeholders to not only amplify how education and economic mobility are interconnected but also how federal, state, and local benefits are central to closing opportunity gaps in Oregon. A community of practice was created amongst all seventeen community colleges, DHS Self-Sufficiency, the HECC, Oregon Employment Department (OED), OHCS, Department of Corrections, philanthropists, and anti-poverty advocates. Through this community of practice, participants have learned from national policy experts and educational equity leaders. The community of practice also provides a forum to elevate promising practices across the state and share information about benefit programs and resources that can support college access, completion, and entry into family wage careers.

The Pathways to Opportunity coalition and local community college teams have been examining college access and affordability within a broader context considering the current social and economic realities of Oregon's students. These realities demand a holistic approach and "a new way of thinking about policy development, public investment, and institutional practices" to increase equitable opportunity (Duke-Benfield et al., 2018, p. 1). Policy and program solutions must use an equity lens and recognize the intersectionality of students' income, race, gender, parenting, immigration status, and involvement with state systems (justice, child welfare, unemployment, etc.) (Duke-Benfield et al., 2018).

All of Oregon's community colleges are engaged in Pathways to Opportunity work, recognizing that colleges can no longer operate within false dichotomies, functioning as if there is somehow a neat separation between the academic and non-academic supports that students need to be successful in their college and career pathway (Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018). Also, solutions cannot be created to mitigate the effects of poverty for current and future community college students without working in concert with state agencies and anti-poverty partners to align federal, state, and local resources available. Oregon's community colleges are evolving and embracing the reality that not only is it necessary to understand how federal financial aid works to support low-income students, but also how federal benefits like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Employment-Related Day Care (ERDC), and other assistance programs can help close the gaps of unmet financial need that prevent college access and completion.

## Pathways to Opportunity Delivers Outcomes

Close collaboration with DHS Self-Sufficiency has been essential to increasing awareness of these vital public benefits. Thanks to this partnership, there has also been expanded access and capacity in the Community College STEP (SNAP Training and Employment Program) Consortia—a project that exemplifies Pathways to

Opportunity in practice. The Community College STEP Consortia uses Oregon's Community College Career Pathways framework and a skills-based approach to support SNAP recipients as they access education and training, build skills, earn credentials, and progress into careers that offer economic mobility. Oregon's Career Pathways model offers connected education, training, and student supports that enable individuals to secure credentials and advance over time to higher levels of education and employment in a given occupation or industry sector. This approach has been proven to increase college completion and economic mobility, as Career Pathways are designed around the needs of today's students who are frequently juggling work, family, childcare, and college.

Community college STEP students receive college success and career coaching, internship/job placement assistance, and student support resources that can assist with gap funding for things like tuition, fees, books, tools, and bus passes. Placing skills and postsecondary credentials at the center, and integrating holistic student supports, increases career pathway options for individuals to get out of poverty and into jobs offering family sustaining wages. It provides a pathway for permanent self-sufficiency. The STEP grant also brings much needed federal resources into Oregon, through the 50% reimbursement grant administered by DHS Self-Sufficiency. The STEP program model, the policies, and the funding all help to close opportunity gaps, increase economic mobility, and expand self-sufficiency.

**Approximately 2 in 3** community college students  
experience food insecurity

**About 1/2** of community college students  
experience housing insecurity

**13% to 14%** of community college students  
experience homelessness

Hungry and Homeless in College: Results from a National Study of Basic Needs Insecurity in Higher Education (Goldrick-Rab 2017,1)

This collective work in the Community College STEP Consortia and partnership with DHS created a forum to discuss food insecurity and hunger amongst community college students and the frequent challenges with maintaining SNAP eligibility while students pursued postsecondary credentials. The Government Accountability Office estimated that more than 2 million college students nationwide who are experiencing food insecurity are not accessing the SNAP food benefits they are likely eligible for (Harris, 2019). Community colleges in Oregon were observing similar trends. In response to the needs of Oregon's college students, DHS proactively amended the state's SNAP student eligibility policy to increase benefit access for more income-eligible community college students. Now, community college students who are enrolled in Career and Technical Education (CTE) or Career Pathways programs, courses, or pre-requisites, or enrolled in a SNAP Employment and Training program, do not need to meet additional student eligibility criteria like working 20 hours per week. This change increases access to important food benefits for students, as well as qualifies many more students for STEP. Both SNAP benefits and STEP services help reduce unmet financial need, increasing college access and the likelihood of credential completion and transition into careers. This is good for families and good for Oregon.

Other federal and state benefits examined during Pathways to Opportunity include TANF, ERDC, Unemployment Benefits, WIOA, Housing, and EITC. Community college programs and resources that close opportunity and skills gaps were lifted up, including: Student Success Grants, Career Pathways, Oregon Promise, Single Stop, GED Wrap-around Support Grants, Guided Pathways, TRIO, emergency funds/grants, food pantries, TAACCCT/Trade Act grants, and student and faculty-led efforts on campuses across the state. The Pathways to Opportunity coalition has laid the groundwork to understand how federal, state, and local resources can intersect to support low-income students. Yet, there is much left to do to structurally engineer opportunity into Oregon to ensure that policy levers, benefits, and programs are maximized and leveraged to increase resources and support for low-income students to attend and complete college and move into careers offering economic mobility.



**100%:** All 17 community colleges created a local interdisciplinary Pathways to Opportunity team

**4** statewide Pathways to Opportunity Summits with representation from **all 17** community colleges, state agencies, and community-based organizations

Executive level leadership meetings between community colleges and **DHS, OED, OHCS, Office of Governor,** and the **HECC**

**STEP:** In collaboration with DHS, the Community College STEP Consortia expanded access across the state for SNAP recipients to build skills, earn college credentials, and move into careers offering pathways out of poverty

**9** colleges scaled up program increasing SNAP recipients served and support service funding

**5** colleges implemented new STEP programs

**3** colleges planned programs for federal fiscal year (FFY) 2020

All **17** community colleges are projected to be offering services through STEP Consortia in FFY 2020

**67%** increase in revenue for FFY 2019, resulting from college investments and new federal reimbursement

Exceeded grant outcomes by 214%, serving **3,344 STEP participants**; and 265%, offering **3,882 services/activities**

As a result of Pathways to Opportunities, community colleges:

**Created** resource maps and centralized resources and services for low-income students, with targeted marketing materials

**Developed** and deepened partnerships with local DHS partners, workforce providers, anti-poverty advocates, and community-based organizations

**Conducted** needs surveys of students and community members

**Offered** professional development to increase poverty-informed approaches and awareness of federal, state, and local resources to support students

**Piloted** approaches to increase systemic implementation and college-wide engagement

**Leveraged** and maximized state investments





## Input from the field:

*“This work is an important part of creating a better community for everyone.”*

*“The summits have been helpful to pull concepts together for a broader picture. We then use that information here on campus. It has been enlightening for the group to learn about various resources that we were unaware of. If we were unaware, how do we expect to communicate them effectively with our students.”*

*“The state-wide convenings with knowledgeable speakers have been quite motivating. It is also very powerful to be in a roomful of colleagues with a shared focus. These opportunities are especially beneficial for those of us at the small, rural colleges - those around the periphery of the state.”*

*“Convening the summits, facilitating meaningful discussions, informing the room (and thus colleges) on important and new policies, initiatives, funding opportunities, and student outcomes is invaluable. Pathways to Opportunity is a brilliant and timely assemblage of college faculty, management, partners, and staff to vision, strategize, and gain a set of tools and information to take action and improve our services for low-income students across the state.”*

*“The Pathways to Opportunity initiative has been a welcome addition to our efforts to reach under-served, non-traditional adult students, opportunity youth, and create an aligned streamlined path to workforce training and academic educational opportunities on our campus. Initiatives such as this are an important part of fully leveraging the many smaller funding resources and limited staff available, to promote success for underserved populations.”*

*“STEP has been a critical program in providing student support services and increasing college completions for low-income students, both in Oregon and at our college. STEP has helped initiate and implement policies and procedures instrumental in assisting low-income individuals access college, career training, and job search services. STEP has also given community resource partners a platform to collaborate and work together to serve our common customer. Pathways to Opportunity is a great chance to further this work and expand on what is working.”*

## Implications and Opportunity for Oregon's Future

Not only does Oregon need to consider the current opportunity and skills gaps, but those of the future. At the forefront of the minds of many policymakers and higher education leaders is how to prepare for our future economy, for the future of work. There has been much discussion about technology and automation eliminating jobs, but what's frequently not talked about is who is impacted—that there is more than one future of work and these changes won't impact all communities and all workers equally. There are projections that 40 to 50% of jobs could be eliminated in 20 years. However, further analysis shows that it is more likely that the skills used in these jobs will completely transform, resulting in the elimination of only 10 to 15% of jobs in the future (NSC, 2019). As National Skills Coalition (2019) described,

*Technology associated with the Future of Work will impact workers in every sector and at every level in the U.S. economy—but those impacts will not be borne equally. Research indicates the majority of job losses from automation will be borne by workers earning less than \$20/hour with a high school degree or less; many of these will be workers of color.*

Mid- and late-career workers with less developed digital skills than their younger counterparts are likewise vulnerable, as are a range of other experienced workers if there are not pathways and investments in their re-skilling (NSC, 2019).

These projections make it even more crucial that Oregon implements equity-informed frameworks that address college affordability, access, and completion—frameworks like Pathways to Opportunity that holistically address the needs of today's students and increase postsecondary credential attainment and career opportunities for low-income, rural, and students of color across the state. In order to do this, colleges require the resources to serve all of our community—especially low-income, working adults—so upskilling is possible and postsecondary education is a viable lifelong learning tool for economic mobility. Oregon's 40-40-20 and Adult Attainment goals provide solid, equity-informed educational attainment targets to aim for, but the state must also consider the student supports, federal and state benefits, policy levers,

funding, and programs that need to be in place to achieve these goals.

**Community colleges also cannot do it alone, and need to take a collective action approach with key state agencies and local partners to braid and align resources, expertise, and student-centered services. The ground-breaking work that has begun with Pathways to Opportunity must continue.**

Community colleges, state agencies, and anti-poverty activists have constructed a solid foundation from which to build a systemic framework that closes opportunity gaps and increases economic mobility for all. Pathways to Opportunity has a committed and dedicated group of leaders and practitioners who are mapping out solutions, and identifying how to maximize the impact of the federal, state, and local resources available to increase equitable opportunity in Oregon. There is also potential to fold in additional concerned stakeholders from the business community, community-based organizations, and economic development entities who are equally vested and concerned about Oregon's communities and economy.

Maintaining the status quo in Oregon is a policy, program, and moral decision that determines the state's future. Doing nothing to address the opportunity, skills, and income disparities in the state designates Oregon as a state with pathways to opportunity for some, and not for all. Inaction will not propel us through the 21st century, and the inevitable economic booms and down-turns.

**Continued support for Pathways to Opportunity allows Oregon to stay out front and lead the way to pioneer solutions that increase equity, close opportunity gaps, and expand economic mobility.**

**Community colleges are essential engines of this economic mobility, providing a bridge to opportunity and proven pathways out of poverty.** At the Pathways to Opportunity Summit last fall, former Secretary of Education, Dr. John B. King Jr., reminded us that education is the civil rights issue of our time. At a pivotal moment in history, Oregon has the chance to make policy, budget, and program decisions that place Oregon firmly on the right side of history.

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1. Opportunity gaps refer to the disparities in educational attainment and academic outcomes that result from structural and systemic inequities based on an individual's race, ethnicity, national origin, zip code into which they were born, socio economic status, and gender. This term is intentionally used instead of achievement gap, as it more squarely places the responsibility and need for solutions within systems and institutions and not on the individual.



**Blue Mountain Community College** (BMCC), Pendleton  
**Central Oregon Community College** (COCC), Bend  
**Chemeketa Community College** (Chemeketa CC), Salem  
**Clackamas Community College** (Clackamas CC), Oregon City  
**Clatsop Community College** (Clatsop CC), Astoria  
**Columbia Gorge Community College** (CGCC), The Dalles  
**Klamath Community College** (KCC), Klamath Falls  
**Lane Community College** (LCC), Eugene  
**Linn-Benton Community College** (LBCC), Albany

**Mt. Hood Community College** (MHCC), Gresham  
**Oregon Coast Community College** (OCCC), Newport  
**Portland Community College** (PCC), Portland  
**Rogue Community College** (RCC), Grants Pass  
**Southwestern Oregon Community College** (SOCC), Coos Bay  
**Tillamook Bay Community College** (TBCC), Tillamook  
**Treasure Valley Community College** (TVCC), Ontario  
**Umpqua Community College** (UCC), Roseburg