



Photo Courtesy of Smith College

Smith College: A Culture That Shouts ‘You Belong Here’

BY MANDY ZATYNSKI

Audrey Smith, vice president for enrollment at Smith College, greets every incoming class with the same message: “I want to tell you a secret about the admissions staff,” she pauses and says confidently, “They never make a mistake.”

And she’s right — they rarely do. Ninety percent of Smith’s Pell Grant recipients graduate in six years — some 40 percentage points higher than the national average (and overall, 86 percent of all students graduate, also far above the national average of 59 percent).¹ Smith credits the campus’ admissions staff, who employ a holistic review for selecting students who demonstrate resilience and perseverance.

Eight years ago, the small private college in Northampton, Massachusetts, made SAT and ACT tests optional for admission, in part so students who weren’t good test-takers — or those who didn’t have access to preparation courses — wouldn’t be deterred from applying. Instead, they pay close attention to teacher and counselor recommendations, and trained alumnae across the country interview prospective students in their hometowns. When admissions staff look at extracurricular activities, they note any work experience or care for siblings — things that may not sound as exciting as, say, the high school debate team, but are indicative of characteristics that will translate into success on campus. Smith College also partners with area high schools and community-based agencies, on which they rely for broader context about a prospective student when needed.

Each application includes a high school profile that summarizes any contextual information, including the college-going rate of that student’s high school. So if, for example, the student has no Advanced Placement courses on her transcript, the admissions officer can also note that the high school didn’t provide those courses. “We’re looking very closely at experiences and measuring resilience,” Smith said. In all, 21 percent of the college’s incoming freshmen are Pell recipients.²

Attending Smith, however, isn’t cheap. The college has a \$41,000 price tag, which can make low-income students shy away. That’s, in part, why the college pledges to meet the financial need of all its students. It estimates each student’s budget, including tuition and room and board — but also textbooks and traveling to and from campus — and then determines how much the family can contribute. The difference is made up through a combination of a Smith grant, federal work-study, and loans. (Loans are capped each year for a total of \$19,000 over four years.) The college also expects some financial contributions from a student’s summer job, but for low-income students, that expectation is waived.

Once students are on campus, they can meet with residence hall staff, faculty advisers, and peer mentors who were either first-generation students themselves or have been trained to understand the unique challenges of being the first in your family to go to college. Advisers sometimes have to remind students, particularly those from low-income families,

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also been there than from a professor or faculty adviser.) They also steer students to extra funding that's available when textbooks or art supplies (if she is an art major, for example) exceed the estimate provided by the financial aid office. Majoring in music? The lessons are free. These types of funds are maintained by the college and Smith Student Aid Society, which is an endowed program that also pays for emergency medical visits or travel to professional conferences. For internships or job interviews, students are invited to stop by Suit Yourself, a lending closet on campus stocked with donated professional wear from Banana Republic. Students only pay the cost of dry-cleaning. "Again, it's about making it possible for students to access these opportunities," Smith said.

Peer mentoring also plays a crucial role in the campus' AEMES — or Achieving Excellence in Mathematics, Engineering and Science — program, which was designed after faculty saw that many students (particularly underrepresented minorities) weren't continuing in the science field after taking one of the gateway, or introductory, courses. AEMES pairs an upperclassman with a first-year student, and they work in the lab together and participate in other activities, like brown bag lunches. It's paid off in big ways: Students of color who participate in the program are much more likely (the likelihood ranges from 18 to 23 percentage points, depending on the major) to finish with a degree in the sciences.

"This commitment to ensuring students full access to every aspect of the Smith education has seeped across the institution," Smith said, "And that's what it takes."

NOTES

1. Smith College data comes from *College Results Online*. National averages come from the National Center for Education Statistics: <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40>
2. *College Results Online*.

that their job is to be a student, no matter what's going on at home. "We try very hard to put forward successful role models ... who can authentically speak with students about the experience, about the challenges, and about the fact that they belong here," Smith said. "And I just can't overstate the importance of that."

Peer mentors have been particularly beneficial in connecting students to resources and support — financial or otherwise. "More entitled students know how to ask for these things," Smith said; low-income or first-generation students don't always. "It's making sure that they recognize that they are entitled ... and [helping them to overcome] certain social reluctance." (Additionally, a recommendation to go see a mental health counselor is better received from a peer who's



Photo Courtesy of Western Oregon University

Western Oregon University: Advising for Success

BY MANDY ZATYNSKI

At Western Oregon University, a small public campus south of Portland, the mission to increase access isn't only about getting more low-income students on campus; it's about seeing them through to graduation. "Everything is about the fact we really want to make sure that when we open the door to a student, we really open it all the way through a diploma," said David McDonald, associate provost, who oversees admissions, financial aid, and student success. And at Western Oregon, Pell recipients graduate at the same rate as (and in 2013, even higher than) non-Pell recipients. "It's not good enough to just start this journey," McDonald added. "It's important that they finish this."

And so, over the last decade, institutional leaders have created policies and structures, from mandatory advising to fixed tuition, with low-income student success in mind. More than half of the students who come to campus are low-income, first-generation, or disabled, and so, university officials say, they invest a lot of energy into understanding the challenges students are facing and providing the services that are needed to support them.¹

To start, all incoming students have the option to enroll in the Western Tuition Promise Program, which guarantees a fixed tuition rate for four years. That gives students, particularly those from low-income families, the ability to forecast expenses and plan accordingly. (Forty-seven percent of incoming freshmen are Pell Grant recipients.)² The university started the program in 2007 in the midst of dramatic tuition increases, upward of 12 percent in one year. The uncertainty of the increases — and exactly how high they'd go — created surprises for students that might have made them hesitant to apply or enroll, McDonald

said. In order to fund the program, the university increased the reserve side of its budget, and about one-third of each incoming class now takes part. "There is an element of risk" for the university, McDonald admitted. "But any pricing policy or decision the campus makes carries with it a certain amount of risk." And officials see it as a worthwhile investment: Retention rates have increased by 4 percentage points — to 72 percent — and they hope it only continues to climb as more students participate.³

Another financial support for low-income students is the university's textbook rental program. After learning that students were opting to forgo textbooks because of their steep prices, officials created a rental option at the university bookstore that offers books at a reduced price — (this varies, but it's cheaper than if purchased used) — if students return them at the end of the term, unmarked and in good condition. It started four years ago, and about 40 percent of all textbooks now have the rental option. Officials estimate that it saves students \$500,000 annually — and hopefully, far fewer students are forgoing textbooks because of price.

The "campuswide" gem, though, as McDonald calls it, is advising. Every student, regardless of major, must meet with an adviser each quarter; they can't register for classes until they do. But the purpose isn't solely for course-planning. "Sometimes these advising sessions are 10 percent 'What courses should I take?' and 90 percent all the other things that are happening in a student's life," McDonald said. And that can lead to early interventions and long-term relationships, which help when it

comes time to write letters of recommendation for internships and jobs. “These are important parts of keeping students connected to campus,” McDonald says, “because when a student knows that they have adults and professionals who are here to help them — not just get through the class, but to really have a successful education here — it makes a difference.”

For the past eight years, at least one adviser at Western Oregon has been recognized by the National Academic Advising Association as the best or an exemplar adviser in the nation.⁴ (McDonald received the organization’s premier Pacesetter award in 2011.) The university hires advising staff who bring bicultural and bilingual skills, and they are deliberate about their choices to hire faculty who also value student success, McDonald said.

Additional advising is provided through the federal TRIO program, specifically for low-income students. This is particularly helpful when students switch majors because they’ll also likely change advisers. But in the TRIO program, advisers are consistent throughout a student’s college career. TRIO also allows Western Oregon to provide free courses on study skills, financial literacy, and career planning. The classes don’t cost students anything, but they earn elective credits toward their degree. Most of this is standard at many campuses across the country that also receive federal TRIO grants and provide similar programming. What’s different at Western Oregon is that they reinvest back into the program TRIO funds that are allocated for indirect costs. (Usually 8 percent of the total grant, indirect costs are used for things like paper processing and payroll.) With additional institutional support, that exceeds \$200,000 and allows the university to serve a total of 400 students — about 150 more than the TRIO grant itself funds. It’s a small investment from the university that results in big gains for students — like many of the policies they’ve implemented over the last decade. “This type of success doesn’t happen in a vacuum,” McDonald said, “and it doesn’t happen by accident. It’s the result of intentional, sustained focus and efforts throughout the university.”

NOTES

1. Phone interview with David McDonald and Marshall Guthrie.
2. *College Results Online*.
3. Phone interview with David McDonald and Marshall Guthrie.
4. <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Events-Programs/Awards/Association-Awards.aspx>