

Portland State University

Portland State ReTHINKING an Urban University

Portland State University launched its ReTHINK PSU initiative three years ago to address the growing challenges facing public urban universities, including the growth in online education, the rising cost of tuition and increasingly diverse and cost-conscious students.

This campus-wide effort has sparked significant changes to the way PSU delivers education by putting students first and investing in innovation. The university has awarded \$3 million to faculty and staff to advance new ideas, launched a new PSU Online website, developed new flexible degrees and started overhauling its advising system to make it more student centered, streamlined and data driven.

PSU is already starting to see positive results, such as a more than 65 percent increase in online enrollment since 2012 and enhanced focus on retention and graduation rates. The ReTHINK projects include:

Four-Year Degree Guarantee

PSU is the first university in Oregon to offer a Four-Year Degree Guarantee to help students graduate on time and save thousands of dollars in tuition and college costs.

As the states have cut funding for higher education, costs at public universities have increased by nearly 40 percent over the past decade. Adding to the expense, most students take more than four years to earn a four-year degree because they cannot get the courses they need to graduate on time. Many students take out more loans to pay for the extra time. Across Oregon, students who take out loans graduate with an average debt of \$24,000.

Under the guarantee, PSU promises that full-time freshmen who sign an agreement will get the support and courses necessary to graduate in four years — or PSU will not charge them tuition for any remaining required course. Students pay for only four years.

In its first two years, the program has enrolled 185 students, including sophomore business major Jasmin Landa. She said the four-year degree guarantee was one of the main factors in her decision to move from Nevada to attend PSU. “It’s an added layer of oversight that keeps me on track,” she says.

Provost’s Challenge and Flexible Degrees

Provost Sona Andrews in 2013 awarded \$3 million in one-time grants to faculty and staff for 24 innovative projects. Among the projects:

- PSU plans to launch **10-15 new Flexible Degrees** that use technology to offer high quality and affordable education for undergraduate students who have attended college without receiving college credentials and graduate students who seek new avenues. Six new degrees are being developed in the first round, including a Bachelor's in Urban and Public Affairs, a Start-to-Finish Online Bachelor's in Business and a Graduate Certificate in Collaborative Governance. A second round of proposals is underway.
- A new **online Master of Social Work degree** offers statewide access to a graduate social work degree. It increased accessibility for non-traditional students, including students of color, parents, low-income students, students with disabilities, tribal members and students who live in rural areas.
- The **"Giving Credit Where Credit is Due"** project created a rigorous, reliable and flexible framework for recognizing, measuring and awarding credit for prior learning experiences, while upholding the quality and value of a PSU degree. In fall 2015, PSU offered a credit-for-prior-learning option for 18 courses in six different departments.

Super Awesome Degree Maps

With a \$105,000 from the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, PSU is developing an innovative app that will allow students to customize their degrees, track their progress and calculate their costs on the fly.

The new program, called Super Awesome Degree Maps, is a dynamic, mobile friendly tool that helps students make informed and proactive decisions around academic, career and financial planning. The tool is designed to support a wide range of decisions that students face on a regular basis, from enrolling in classes to calculating the cost. Information is made available to students where they are and connects them with other students and professional advisors with whom they can share their plans.

Andrews pitched the idea and won the University Pitch Challenge at the Annual Meeting in Indianapolis. The goal of the APLU's University Pitch Challenge is to expand the reach of innovative student advising efforts.

"Today's students take their own unique paths towards degree," says Sukhwant Jhaj, vice provost. "They're trying to figure out what they should major in, how long will it take to graduate, what the cost is, what classes should they take, or whether they can work while in school. Our app will help answer those questions easily."

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