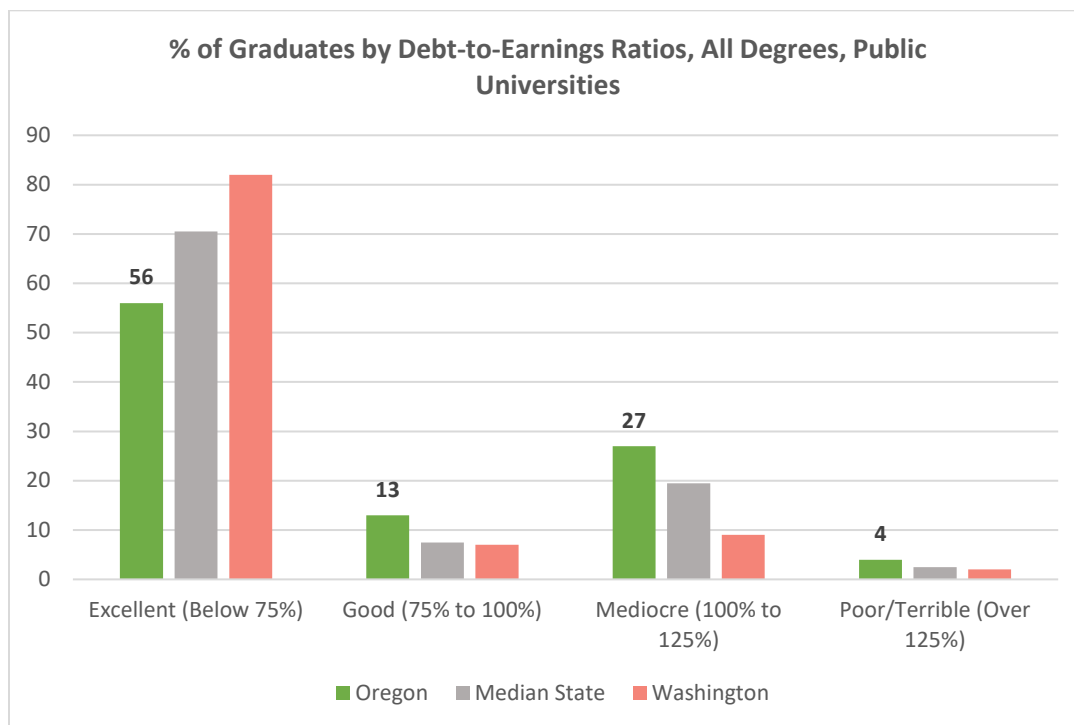


*Issue Brief #7 (10 April 2022)*

## OREGON'S FAILING PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

In a [report](#) of 2017, the Oregon Association of Scholars found that the state's major public and private universities were delivering mediocre results to students based on the value-added of a degree from each institution. A new [report](#) issued by the Texas Public Policy Foundation updates and confirms the earlier results. The report finds that Oregon is failing in higher education, even more than was apparent in the previous OAS report.



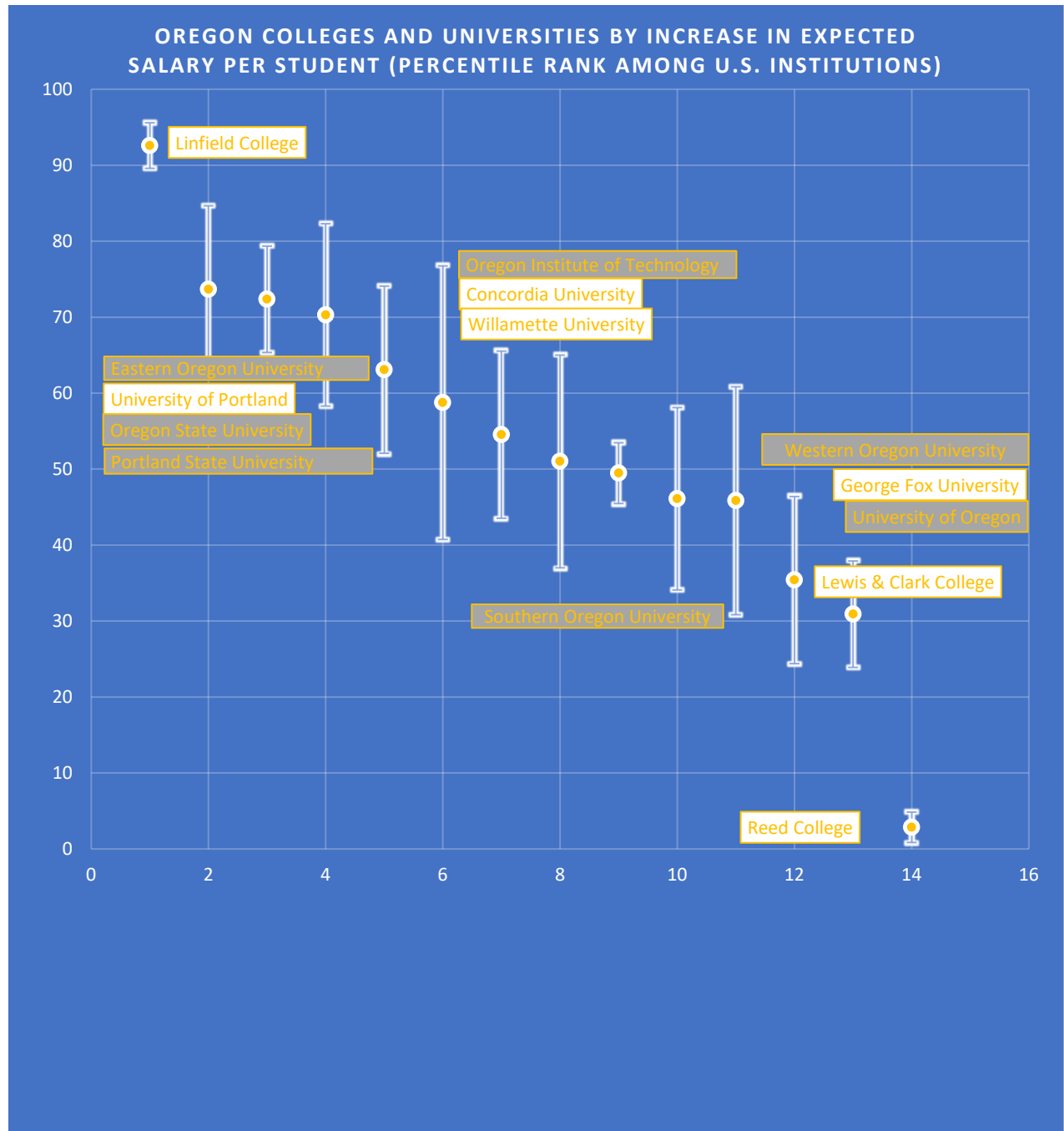
The Texas Public Policy Foundation report measures effectiveness in higher education by comparing the annual earnings of graduates two years after graduation with the debt burden they held at graduation. Presumably, colleges and universities that leave students with lower debt-to-earnings ratios do a better job of delivering value for money. The report describes debt-to-earnings ratios below 75% as Excellent while, at the other extreme, ratios over 100% are Mediocre, Poor, or Terrible. The report then aggregates students based on the home states of their institutions to compare the performance of states. The report uses data from cohorts of college students who graduated from public institutions in 2014-15 and 2015-16.

The results show that just 57% of graduates from Oregon public universities in the 2015 and 2016 classes had debt levels below 75% of their annual earnings two years later. That compares to a median level across all states of 71% in the Excellent category and 82% in comparable Washington state. At the other end of the spectrum, 31% of Oregon graduates fell into the Mediocre, Poor, or Terrible categories, compared to a median state value of 22% and a value in Washington state of just 11%.

Overall, the results put Oregon in the dismal place of 45<sup>th</sup> out of 50 states.



The new report uses earnings compared to debt as the measure of higher education's success. The earlier report by the Oregon Association of Scholars cited an alternative approach: it cited three different studies that used the incoming SAT scores of undergraduates, as well as the degrees they pursued, to measure whether a given college or university added value to the student's earnings after graduation compared to what similar students earned across the country.



The results of that report showed that in Oregon, private comprehensive institutions like Linfield University were the best value while private liberal arts colleges like Reed College were the worst. The state's flagship research university, the University of Oregon, was delivering sub-par results putting it in the 46th percentile of all U.S. colleges and universities based on the average of three different models. Because the ratings depended on a time lag between enrollment and later salary, those results mostly reflected institutional performance in the early to mid-2000s.

## Implications and Action

Taken together, the two reports paint a dismal picture of the state of higher education in Oregon. While university leaders in Oregon have spent the better part of the last two decades "reimagining" their institutions to serve all manner of social and political goals, the one overarching goal that taxpayers expect from their public universities is excellence as measured in the contributions to society of their graduates. While earnings are not the only measure of success, they provide a reliable and representative proxy for the sorts of social contributions that graduates make. They also provide a powerful incentive for institutional excellence across the board.



While other states have adopted a laser focus on excellence, Oregon's Higher Education Coordinating Commission has obsessed about its "[Equity Lens](#)" in recent years, complete with a long catechism of "We Believe..." statements. It is time for Oregon higher education to adopt an "Excellence Lens" that actually serves the students of Oregon, especially students from disadvantaged circumstances who suffer most from demeaning "equity" approaches and are most in need of the ladder of opportunity that excellence provides.

## About

*The Oregon Association of Scholars is the Oregon affiliate of the National Association of Scholars, a network of scholars and citizens united by a commitment to academic freedom, disinterested scholarship, and excellence in American higher education. Membership in NAS is open to all who share a commitment to these broad principles. NAS publishes a journal and has state and regional affiliates. Visit NAS at [www.nas.org](http://www.nas.org), and OAS at [www.oregonscholars.org](http://www.oregonscholars.org). Contact: Dr. Bruce Gilley, OAS President, [info@oregonscholars.org](mailto:info@oregonscholars.org)*