



Klamath County is home to Oregon Institute of Technology and Klamath Community College, both in Klamath Falls. There are over 3,000 high school students served each year by two school districts. The county is also home to Klamath Promise, a collaborative effort to improve outcomes for youth with 65-70 partners throughout the county. Gateway to College National Network staff spent a day in Klamath Falls to learn about the existing efforts and challenges for young people. Over the course of the day we spoke with AVID students, school staff, and members of Klamath Promise. Below are some key points that were made throughout the day.

Relationships and Caring Adults are Key: It is well established that relationships with caring adults are critical to youth development. Students shared how having teachers who cared and they trusted was important to their success. Many students we talked to have had an experience where they feel consistently cared for. Others identified the teachers they trusted and mentioned others who they felt were less supportive. In addition, we heard from counselors and the Klamath Promise group about the many ways opportunities for relationships are being built into the structure of the school experience. This included counselors serving particular groups of students such as English Language Learners, initiatives like AVID and Upward Bound, and many others. There is also an initiative being piloted to focus on attendance in place which will contribute to stronger relationships as well.

Economic Challenges: Klamath County is unique in that there is housing available that is affordable for individuals with full-time minimum wage jobs. However, families still struggle and throughout the day we heard about families who have struggled for generations with poverty and how this affects young people in terms of food security, homelessness, and stress at home. We heard that this creates a dilemma because most of the jobs in the county that are currently open are minimum wage, which means families do not have an easy path to economic stability. However, these jobs are attractive to 18-year-olds who are eager to become independent. This negatively impacts efforts to support youth in high school completion and when young people enroll in post-secondary courses. Some employers contribute to this challenge because they make work schedules incompatible with scheduling classes. Skilled jobs are few and far between in the county, however there are also shortages in the trades for electricians, plumbers, and other skilled workers who are necessary to maintain the infrastructure of the county.

Rural Challenges: Rural places are known for innovation and Klamath is no exception. The abundance of initiatives and pilot programs to support youth as well as the willingness of so many partners to engage with Klamath Promise all demonstrate the innovation in the county. However, policy is often built for urban places and we heard about the challenges with requirements for staffing internships; funding for successful programs; and the small number of youth served by pilot programs which can be at odds with the reach of similar urban initiatives. Small businesses are plentiful in Klamath County and generally very supportive of young people, however they are small and the number of initiatives, clubs, and events that need support can create a burden on these businesses. Often small businesses have small staffs and limited capacity to support internships.

Mental Health: Like urban and suburban areas, in the state, mental health is a significant challenge for students. It also affects students who have family members who struggle with mental health and can contribute to other challenges around poverty and support. Like most rural areas finding the resources to provide adequate mental health treatment is a challenge and there are long wait times for appointments. However, schools and the Klamath Promise collaborative are working to connect young people to resources. One example is a partnership between Klamath Union High School and Klamath Basin Behavior Health.

Making Education Relevant: We heard from students that they want woodshop and welding and other trades classes where they can build things. The adults talked about needing to provide ways for youth to connect what they learn in English and math to the real world either through more project-based work or internships. There are unique initiatives including a program with peer to peer internships to make training interns easier and a project-based program alongside internships at the tribe. The challenge is to integrate the projects, career pathways, and apprenticeship programs into multiple institutions so youth can participate in them during high school and when they get to college. The new WIOAA rules around serving opportunity youth have resulted in far fewer youth being served in work programs. Work programs for youth have shrunk significantly over the last few decades, where some people remember a time when 300 youth were part of summer work programs, currently less than 20 students are being served which restricts that opportunity for work experience for most youth.

Preparation for Adulthood and College: Because of the ability for 18-year-olds to live on their own, there is a group of young people who don't enroll in college until later, though the tribe is seeing more students enroll in college following high school. As mentioned above, there are challenges in preparing students for work that is above minimum wage as apprenticeship programs require high staff ratios. There are multiple options for dual credit in Klamath Falls. High school students told us that as a result, they are not worried about the academics in college, but they do recognize the challenge of staying organized and self-directed and staying on track for their degrees.

Questions or comments?

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