

# A Deep Dive into Reed's Freshman Retention Woes

By Skye Kychenthal

Reed College has a problem: we're dropping like flies. According to a 2022

S&P Financial Report, between 9% and 17% of each freshman class since 2018 has left Reed College prior to their sophomore year — compared to a median of only 5% among similar colleges and universities. This phenomenon is called Freshman Retention, and describes how many students in a freshman class remain at a school until at least their sophomore year. It's a statistic often used to indicate the presence of other problems in the college, and is therefore important for both students and administration. According to Reed College's 2022 Strategic Planning report, "The positive impacts of increased retention are many, including more consistent enrollments and revenues and improved demonstration of the college's value and impact."

The Strategic Planning report continues, "The range of systemic issues cited for lower retention is broad and under exploration, but we do know that the bulk of departures from the

college happen quickly after enrollment, during the first or second year, largely between semesters."

Clearly, Reed has a problem with freshmen leaving before their sophomore year, and it is not new. Recently, alarming rumors circulated among the student body, a rumor the Quest has been unable to confirm, which state that over 120 members of the class of 2025 dropped out of Reed prior to the start of the 2022-2023 school year. Out of the original population of 502 students, this would theoretically indicate a retention rate of 76%. These bad retention rates negatively impact college budgets; as more students leave, the college loses a portion of their income: a loss ranging in the millions. This has caused the college to develop a list of strategies for combating the loss of freshmen. According to the Strategic Planning Report, Reed's goals are changing. They hope to enroll more students and create a larger student body, since Reed's budget depends mostly on tuition, as shown by the S&P report, almost 60% of Reed's revenue for at least the past four years has

come from tuition.

Reed College's average freshman retention is roughly between 88% and 89%, as reported by College Factual Statistics and US News Rankings. This is higher than the national average of about 70%, and hovers around the average of 89% for US liberal arts colleges. But Reed's numbers have dipped as low as 83% in 2021, and have not been better than the average for liberal arts colleges within the last 5 years — not to mention that our overall retention rate is a measly 60%. Retention rates this low are scary for students, as they indicate disturbances and problematic conditions, but for administration, this means over a 10% loss in tuition revenue.

In the 2022 strategic planning report, Reed identifies possible plans to combat low retention rates by investing in current academic programs such as SEEDS or the HCC, and policies such as Title IX. The issue though, is that many of the solutions Reed proposes in their report come at a financial cost; the primary method identified for increasing funds is

increasing the number of students.

Increasing our student body in the middle of a pandemic as Reed did in 2021 is against the projections of enrollment trends and practices in the Pacific Northwest. In 2021, according to College Board, Reed College's projected enrollment (compared to the state of Oregon during COVID), should have been just over 300 students, as opposed to its 502. In that respect, Reed is an outlier.

Although Reed has identified retention as a problem, it's not entirely clear why Reedies are dropping out at such a high rate. For one, Reed is not only known as one of the most academically challenging colleges in the country, it is also one of the most expensive.

This brings up questions about our current financial aid office and their ability to handle either scenario. Reed's aid process comes after admission to Reed, which means that students have to make the decision whether or not to attend without complete information about how much they would be spending. And according to a

2019 Quest report titled "Financial Aid Fluctuations Frustrate Students," some Reedies have experienced unexpected decreases in their financial aid between academic years, which can interfere with their ability to pay for attendance at Reed. Transparency issues within the Financial Aid Office is anything but new, with a private letter from admission officers dating back to 2014 filled with criticisms relating to issues with financial aid.

Public reports such as the Reed College S&P reports and our internal Strategic Planning reports identifies freshmen retention as a problem that needs to be combatted. Reedies face countless difficulties that prove a barrier in continuing from their freshmen to sophomore year, barriers that Reed is aware of. The college's current plans to combat this are an increase in funding towards programs to support Reedies, and as the pandemic wanes, their methods of substantiating this funding is an increase to our student body, and our larger Sophomore class may well be the first of many to come.