

Oregon Council of Presidents



May 23, 2017

Dear Governor Brown and Legislative Leaders,

As you undertake difficult budget decisions, and public universities near the end of our academic year and prepare for the next one, we urge the State of Oregon to confront the painful and costly realities of inadequate revenue streams and debilitating cost drivers. These structural budget issues threaten the quality and scope of our educational, human services, and public safety systems and stymie our state's progress.

At the same time, Oregonians are deeply concerned about the rising cost of a college degree and many fear that the opportunity to obtain a college degree is not possible without taking on a lifetime of debt. Political, business, and labor leaders have spoken publicly about the urgent need to address the budget this session. We know this means tough votes on additional revenue and efforts to bend cost curves that will have real and lasting impact on Oregonians. The problems are complex and so are the solutions.

Nevertheless, the tough issues must be tackled now because Oregon students cannot afford to wait any longer. An outstanding question, however, is whether these tough votes will be taken by you or will be left to the Boards of Trustees of Oregon's public universities who are adopting painful cuts and increases in tuition. Each of us is trying to balance budget cuts, which threaten the quality and availability of our programs, and tuition increases that will reduce access to college degrees for Oregonians.

We have hobbled along through boom and bust cycles making investments and levying cuts as income tax revenues rise and fall. These dramatic swings have taken their toll on our institutions, shifting the responsibility of paying for a public university education away from the state and toward students and families.

The election last fall demonstrated that the state's diverse interest groups are capable of building sufficient coalitions to defeat and pass ballot measures. But we are in search of something more. Oregon has yet to build a coalition that casts a net wide enough to provide solutions for all Oregonians. If the Legislature is unable to accomplish that in the coming months, we will have failed future Oregonians and we will leave a legacy that will haunt our classrooms, workforce, and economy for generations to come.

Our funding challenges are not somebody else's problem. This is our collective problem. If we pass up the opportunity to tackle it as citizens of Oregon, we bear the responsibility of passing it on to our children and their children.

It is time for the Governor and members of the Oregon Legislative Assembly, regardless of political party affiliation, to come together as Oregonians to address these critical issues. We ask that you carefully consider and agree upon a path forward for the future, making the difficult, but necessary choices to raise revenue to invest in higher education while curbing unsustainable costs at the same time, and grow the economy. We need you to look for solutions that are politically viable and can withstand scrutiny from civic leaders, elected officials, courts, and voters. We will join you in supporting these actions.

We did not arrive at this moment suddenly. We find ourselves here as the result of decades of decisions by voters and elected officials. It will take deliberate, disciplined and intentional decisions and execution over several years to lead Oregon back to a stronger, more resilient economy, resulting in more resources for education and other vital services for the future.

In the coming weeks, we will all be tested. In spite of those trials, we firmly believe that if we do not confront the realities we face, we will do irreparable harm to our students, our universities and our state as a whole. Oregonians deserve something better than management by crisis. Hunkering down in bad times and hoping for good times is not a strategy. We urge the state to adopt a continuously sustainable strategy of investment to create the economy of the future that the people of Oregon deserve, and we believe that education must be at the center of any such strategy.

We stand ready to participate in any conversation that would be beneficial to finding solutions, or provide the intellectual resources of our respective universities should it be helpful toward finding a path forward.

Thank you for your efforts to ensure Oregon students have a future where a college degree is accessible and where first-generation and underrepresented students have the support to raise themselves out of poverty and find a path to prosperous careers and a better quality of life. Our Boards are making tough choices on our respective campuses. We ask that you do the same.

Sincerely,



Thomas Insko
President, Eastern Oregon University



Michael Schill
President, University of Oregon



Rex Fuller
President, Western Oregon University



Edward Ray
President, Oregon State University



Linda Schott
President, Southern Oregon University



Nagi Naganathan
President, Oregon Institute of Technology



Wim Wiewel
President, Portland State University