

GUEST VIEWPOINT: Meeting higher ed's challenge | Despite rising enrollments and shrinking budgets, OSU finds ways to maintain access, quality

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For The Register-Guard*

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Interest in higher education has never been greater in the United States. Across the country, students are seeking access to universities and colleges in record numbers, mindful that a diploma from our campuses is now the ticket for admission to a competitive work force that is challenged to meet the increasingly complex, knowledge-based demands of the 21st century economy.

As we prepare to begin a new school year Monday, Oregon's public universities are feeling the heightened interest as keenly as anyone. At Oregon State University, we'll enroll an estimated 24,000 students — about 2,000 more than last fall, and 2,500 more than the Oregon University System projected for us just last year.

Other OUS institutions are also experiencing record student enrollments. Ten-year enrollment increases for OUS have trended higher than the national average for 4-year public universities by nearly 160 percent. Collectively, our campuses enrolled nearly 92,000 students in 2009-10, a figure that will certainly climb substantially this fall.

The current enrollment trend in the OUS institutions will help us make progress towards the goal of the state's legislatively approved "40-40-20" plan: By 2025, the plan calls for 40 percent of Oregonians to have a bachelor's degree or higher, 40 percent an associate's degree or postsecondary credential and 20 percent a high school degree.

However, sustaining continued access to affordable public higher education and, more importantly, ensuring a high-quality educational experience for students, is becoming increasingly challenging as support for higher education is squeezed in the current fiscal environment.

The stakes for Oregon's economy and the quality of life are large and growing. A report released last week by the College Board, "Education Pays 2010," shows that in 2009, median earnings for an individual with a bachelor's degree were nearly \$22,000 higher than for an individual with only a high school diploma; that earnings gap both grows nationally with each passing year and expands over the course of an individual's lifetime.

From the same report: In the fourth quarter of 2009, the unemployment rate for high school graduates was 2.6 times higher than that for college grads. There are many other reasons why a college education is important, but few speak to the imperative of access as clearly as these financial considerations.

The answers to questions of access, affordability and quality, however, vary for each institution. At OSU, we're addressing them in creative new ways that are paying dividends for Oregon and the students we serve.

OSU's Bridge to Success Program, now in its third year, will allow some 3,000 undergraduates to attend this year without paying for tuition or fees. Open only to Oregon residents, the program combines federal Pell Grant funds, Oregon Opportunity Grants and private scholarship funds raised through the ongoing Campaign for OSU, which has generated more than \$100 million in financial aid donations over the past five years.

Last year, participants in this program made up nearly 20 percent of our Oregon undergraduate population. As the state's land grant university, we consider it an important part of our mission to provide access to affordable, high-quality higher education for the people of this state.

We have launched an initiative that will ensure each entering student is guaranteed access to core foundational courses in areas such as mathematics, writing and communications, and to a meaningful first-year schedule that ensures students stay on track to graduate in a timely manner. During the 2010-11 academic year, OSU will direct more than \$2.5 million toward realizing this goal. Complementary to this effort, the university is also investing more than \$1 million in increasing and enhancing student advising.

To assist students in their transition to the university, we have expanded the successful summer bridge program initially designed for student athletes to the general student population through the September Scholars Bridge Program. The expanded program is specifically directed towards students from academically challenged environments or backgrounds. Additional focus is being placed on activities proven to foster student engagement and social integration, and greater participation in curricular and co-curricular activities that are critical factors in student success.

Such efforts to provide meaningful access to OSU would be in vain without strong commitment on the part of our faculty to student success. Faculty have led curriculum reform and student engagement efforts in recent years, and their importance cannot be overstated.

On the affordability front, two additional initiatives being launched this fall tackle another aspect of rising costs: textbook prices. The OSU Bookstore, the primary outlet for required textbooks, has increased its student discount from 8 percent to

10 percent, which will result in savings of more than \$1 million for students during the 2010-11 year. At the same time, OSU has committed \$110,000 in vouchers that will effectively provide an additional 15 percent discount for textbooks in communications, mathematics and writing — required first-year core courses. This will have an immediate effect on approximately 7,000 students.

Another key challenge facing OSU and other OUS institutions is availability of classroom and laboratory space. Our campuses, like many others around Oregon and the nation, are struggling to build, renovate and maintain sufficient classroom and laboratory space. At Oregon State, we're renovating more than 50 classrooms, including many of our largest classrooms, over this academic year to expand capacity and modernize facilities.

At the same time, as The Register-Guard noted last week, work is under way on our \$62.5-million Linus Pauling Science Center, a building that will provide new classrooms and laboratories for the thousands of students who take chemistry classes at OSU each year. Additional auditorium and classroom capacity is also part of the International Learning and Living Center, a \$52-million project that, like the Pauling Science Center, is expected to be completed by fall 2011.

Even with those activities, it's doubtful we'll be able to keep up with demand. As we enter the fall term, estimates show we're clearly approaching our enrollment capacity on the Corvallis campus. With projections indicating we're likely to reach 30,000 to 35,000 students by 2025, we're mindful that such growth cannot be achieved without a significant increase in teaching capacity, and the clock is ticking on facilities challenges that need to be addressed urgently.

All of these dynamics are unfolding within a state budget picture that grows more challenging by the day. More and more of our expenses are being addressed through private fundraising, student tuition, and, as the Legislative Fiscal Office recognized in a memo to the state Emergency Board in June, OSU's "diligence in containing costs and finding efficiencies."

As the economy continues to recover, Oregon's fiscal outlook will almost certainly improve. But even in better times, the state's investment in its public higher education campuses has been on a steady decline now for more than a generation. The state leaders we elect this fall will face immediate choices in how to create a more sustainable future for our colleges and universities and the students we serve.

Part of the answer undoubtedly lies in governance and management measures advanced by the State Board of Higher Education and supported by OUS and its seven campuses — measures that would provide great administrative flexibility and allow us more control over our own resources. But overall funding levels must also be addressed if we are to maintain and further develop a high-quality system that employs top faculty, keeps Oregon's best and brightest students in state and continues to serve as the state's single most important economic engine.

Meeting this challenge will require no small amount of political will. But as I survey a campus that will fill in just a few hours with 24,000 students, full of promise and potential, I can say without reservation that doing so is most certainly worth the effort.