



Western Oregon University Federation of Teachers
Local 2278, AFT, AFL-CIO

Western Oregon University, Monmouth, OR 97361

Representing Faculty at WOU since 1974

Statement regarding HB 4076 Fixed-Cost Bachelor's Degrees

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I am Mark Perlman, a Philosophy Professor at Western Oregon University and President of the Faculty Union at WOU. As an educator, of course I agree with the goals of making higher education more affordable and lowering tuition costs, but only if we ensure that we retain high quality education. That is the main problem with HB 4076 – it will erode the quality of the bachelor's degrees its proponents claim to want to support.

There are many complex problems in the world, but determining the cause of high tuitions at Oregon's state universities is not one of them. The cause is simple – cuts in state appropriations to higher education. In the last seven years, state funds for my university have been cut by 30%. In K-12 public schools, when the legislature reduces funding, the only option is to reduce quality. So we have seen K-12 teacher layoffs, increased class sizes, eliminations of valuable programs, and shortening of the school year that made Portland schools the laughing stock of the nation. At Oregon's public universities, we had the two options: Reduce the quality of the education and the value of the degrees we grant (and risk losing our accreditation), or raise tuition. The former was utterly unacceptable, so tuition has gone up dramatically.

Everyone knows the cause of higher tuitions – it is the obvious fact that the State of Oregon has, for the last thirty years, been steadily reducing its investment in education. Governor Kulongoski wisely declared that we would reverse this disinvestment in education, but then the Great Recession hit, and we lost more and more ground. Yet the cuts are also because of poor choices made, and a lack of leadership and political will to do what is necessary to fund education. Instead of finding the money necessary to pay for education, Oregon has dumped the cost of college onto the backs of its students, causing them to graduate with ever larger debt, and causing many to be unable to afford a college education at all. This is indeed a serious problem that is harming our citizens. The obvious solution to this problem is for the legislature and the governor to restore the funding education in Oregon to the levels needed to bring our next generations successfully into the future. We do not need to spend 5 years, or even 5 minutes, with some pilot program to determine how to lower tuition. We already know the solution – increase state funding of higher education. The problem is that it is very difficult to find the money and summon the political will to solve the problem. So, rather than work on the obvious solution, HB 4076 is an entirely unnecessary and harmful effort to pretend to do something while ignoring the obvious cause of the problem.

I fear that "Fixed-Cost degrees" is a euphemism for a dangerous path – contracting bachelor's degrees out to the lowest bidder, most likely a for-profit, online university. This would severely lower the quality of education that Oregon's students receive, at a time when we need to be educating people better to meet swiftly changing conditions, not cutting back on their education to pre-fab cheap degrees. Oregonians deserve better, and Oregon's employers need a well-educated workforce, not people who get substandard education on the cheap. Online and distance learning may have their place, but they are no replacement for personal interaction between students and highly-qualified dedicated faculty. Moreover, this fixed-cost plan could cause great harm by steering students into getting the cheap degrees instead of the