



OREGON STATE SENATE

May 28, 2015

SB 81
Ways & Means
Education Sub-Committee

From the famed bottle bill to the popular beach bill, Oregon is proud of being first to adopt bold ideas.

But being first isn't necessarily better. As journalists say, "Get it first, but first get it right."

The free community college concept is such a case. It is bold, visionary and promises long-term benefits.

And Tennessee did it first.

Last fall, their Community College doors swung open, free to Tennessee high school graduates.

Thousands of young people walked through those doors and are now taking classes to become welders, medical assistants, mechanics, dental hygienists, digital media producers, microelectronics workers, solar cell specialists and police officers. The majority of them didn't cost Tennessee a dime.

These students were required to apply for federal funding. And more than 80 percent qualified for full or partial US Pell Grants -- grants, not loans. This is how Tennessee can afford to make it work. The state picks up only the gap federal funds don't cover.

This is why Tennessee's increase in Applications for Financial Aid (FAFSA) applications skyrocketed last year -- the biggest increase of any state in the country.

Thousands of students are in classrooms and hundreds of millions of federal dollars are raining down on Tennessee -- something that wasn't happening a year ago.

We like to study things in Oregon. And for the last two years, we have been studying how to make this happen here. Under the Obama administration, funding for Pell Grants has doubled. It would be smart for Oregon to take advantage of those dollars.

Most of us agree that without some kind of training or education after high school there is often a well-worn path to poverty. And poverty is expensive. A lifetime of food stamps is much more expensive than the annual community college tuition of \$3,000.

So we've seen Tennessee's law take effect. We've seen the greater than expected flow of federal money into that state.

Mostly we've seen that it works.

According to Mike Krause, executive director of the *Tennessee Promise*, "It's completely changed the conversation for students and their families and our employers."

People in Tennessee and Oregon are searching for ways to deal with the reality that our technology-based economy needs a better educated workforce than the days when kids walked out of high school and into a lumber mill or an auto factory.

Like Tennessee, Oregon has a growing population of young people who have no job, no post-secondary education and no opportunity to get ahead. The Oregon Youth commission says each one of these 70,000 young people between 18 and 24 costs taxpayers about \$14,000 a year in social services and direct costs to society.

The day one of them goes to work as a welder at Gunderson Marine is the day they leave the welfare roles.

Oregon's proposal now before the legislature is similar to the Tennessee law, with mentoring services and the requirement of community service in order to help students realize their opportunities and give back to communities.

In this case it's OK to be number two if we can take advantage of federal money while putting kids into training programs who might not otherwise have the opportunity.

We may not be first, but advancing opportunities for Oregon's sons and daughters is getting it right.