


IFS TESTIMONY HB 4021 2/3/16

To: House Committee on Higher Education, Innovation and Workforce Development
From: Jeff Dense, President, Interinstitutional Faculty Senate 
Re: HB 4021

Chair Read and Members of the Committee,

For the record my name is Jeff Dense, President of the Interinstitutional Faculty Senate. We are the duly elected voice of the faculty of Oregon's public universities.

Mounting debt, along with the related issues of tuition and textbook affordability, is stifling the ability of Oregon students to contribute to the future of our Great State. A recent study by the Institute for Student Access and Success highlights the vexing nature of student debt in Oregon. Over the period 2004 to 2014 the average student debt of Oregon graduates rose by nearly ten thousand dollars, a 51% increase. A commensurate analysis of the rate of inflation over this same time period reveals a 25.4% increase. Hence, the average student debt of Oregon graduates is increasing *twice as fast* as the rate of inflation.

However, this study only tells part of the story. Excluding analysis of the numerous students who have been forced to drop out of college yet confront the specter of repaying their student loans, fails to address the profound economic challenges confronting this important, and often neglected, cadre of students. While statistics widely vary on the average debt of students who are forced to curtail their studies (one study asserts a third of all students nationwide fall into this category), it is important to remain mindful of the duress confronted by these economically challenged non-graduates as the legislature contemplates potential solutions to the student debt issue. Providing a policy 'fix' which addresses the needs of these students as part of HB 4021, in tandem with policies addressing textbook affordability, etc., will greatly enhance the state's ability to reach its lofty 40/40/20 educational goals.

The much-needed reinvestment in higher education approved during the 2015 legislative session, along with the passage of HB 4021, are certainly steps in the right direction to address the key educational cornerstones of access and affordability. However, in order to maximize the impact these policy changes have on student success, a comprehensive policy package may be required. While student debt is firmly in the cross-hairs of a national debate over college affordability, the results of the numerous legislative workgroups related to higher education emanating from the 2015 legislative session, along with an upturn in Oregon's economy, may provide the basis for a multifaceted higher education policy package during the 2017 legislative session. A thoughtful appraisal of how we can address the stifling issue of student debt and other related issues may highlight creative solutions to address the vexing problem of educational affordability in Oregon. An examination of state-level policies addressing student debt, including Connecticut and Minnesota's recently launched Self ReFi program, may highlight 'best practices' which can be implemented in Oregon. IFS is ready to serve on any legislative work groups to be formed as a result of the passage of HB 4021 in order to protect the best interests of our most valuable resource-our students. IFS wishes to go on record in support of HB 4021 and its -1 amendments.

Thank you for your time, and I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.