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To: State of Oregon, 79th Legislative Assembly (2017)

From: Dr. Niles Lehman, Professor, Department of Chemistry, Portland State University
 Dr. John Perona, Professor, Department of Chemistry, Portland State University
 Dr. Ken Stedman, Professor, Department of Biology, Portland State University

Re: Overwhelming PSU Faculty Support for SB 214

The faculty at Portland State University (PSU) would like to express their strong support for SB 214, which “Provides that post-doctoral scholars at public universities and Oregon Health and Science University are not eligible to participate in Public Employees Retirement System or optional retirement plans offered by universities.”

We feel that passage of this Bill would greatly strengthen the research activities among Oregon universities and bring Oregon in line with the policies that exist in other states.

Our strong faculty support is can documented from three sources:

1. In February of 2014, the PSU Faculty Senate passed a resolution to support the creation of a new category of employees, the post-doctoral trainee, with the intent that such employees would not be required to make PERS contributions. These contributions are not ultimately received by the vast majority of individuals holding such short-term appointments, because they remain in these positions for shorter than the five-year vesting period. The text of the resolution is as follows:

Office of Human Resources will create a new category of employee termed “Post-doctoral Trainee” to distinguish such limited term-researchers from Research-Associate Post-docs who intend to remain at PSU for an indefinite period. “Post-doctoral trainees” will be appointed for a limited term of no more than 5 years, the vesting period. Such employees will not be required to make contributions to PERS, although they may invest in any retirement plan of their choosing for which they qualify.

2. In June of 2016, the PSU Faculty Senate voted 40 in favor, 2 opposed, and 2 in abstention to a resolution to support an Oregon Legislative action to remove the requirement that post-docs contribute to PERS at the current rate (i.e., the actions of SB 214).

3. In February and March of 2017, a poll was taken of the science departments at PSU to assess faculty support for SB 214. All participants were shown the text of the Bill as available on February 22, 2017. The results across these departments were nearly unanimous in favor, as follows:

ANTHROPOLOGY: 6 in favor, 0 in opposition

BIOLOGY: 22 in favor, 0 in opposition

CHEMISTRY: 13 in favor, 0 in opposition

ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE AND MANAGEMENT: 15 in favor, 0 in opposition

GEOGRAPHY AND SYSTEMS SCIENCE: 10 in favor, 0 in opposition

GEOLOGY: overall support for the bill (no numbers available)

PHYSICS: 10 in favor, 1 in opposition

Overall (of those numerically counted): 76 in favor, 1 in opposition

There are very clear substantive reasons for why our science faculty overwhelming support SB214:

- The Bill will advance scholarly research at PSU, especially in the sciences, because postdoctoral scholars provide a pool of Ph.D.-level individuals who are highly skilled in their specialty areas. These individuals embark on short-term postdoctoral positions because the additional training they receive is often essential to obtain permanent positions in academia, government or the private sector. At the same time, their high level of already-acquired skills greatly elevates the caliber of the research environment, as they provide hands-on training, act as role models for graduate and undergraduate students, and free faculty to spend more time in fundraising, publishing, and otherwise raising the profile of their research.
- A stronger research environment at PSU will have positive ripple effects in the economy of the Portland metropolitan area. A larger pool of highly skilled Ph.D.-level individuals can be expected to attract more investment and businesses to our region. This will also raise the profile of PSU in its transition to a full-fledged research university. Portland is among very few major metropolitan areas in the United States that historically have not been home to a well-regarded research university. SB214 will contribute to advancing the city in this very important respect.
- Under the present rules, extramural grant funds are drained to contribute to the retirement of individuals who never receive that benefit. Thus, the rules effectively function as a tax on research grants that is used to generally support the Oregon PERS system. Many PSU faculty engaged in research are concerned that this amounts to a misappropriation of grant funds. Extramural funders, especially federal agencies such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Science Foundation (NSF) and Department of Energy (DOE), provide funds to individual researchers at PSU under contracts to accomplish very specific objectives. While salaries for postdoctoral fellows and direct benefits (such as health insurance) are clearly appropriate expenditures, contributions to support the financial vitality of PERS appear not to be.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute our perspective in this important matter before the legislature. Thank you very much for your consideration of our ideas and advocacy.