

Submitter: Rob Fullmer

On Behalf Of:

Committee: House Committee On Higher Education

Measure: HB3499

Chair Lively, members of the House Higher Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in favor of HB 3499. Oregon is currently near the bottom of the fifty states when it comes to the percentage of its budget committed to higher education. Since measure 5 passed in the 90s, the trend for state investment in our future through funding higher education has trended disastrously downward, and now students are paying nearly three quarters of the cost of their education at our universities. A decade ago when the University of Oregon pushed the legislature for an independent board after the Oregon University System chancellor fired their president for directly defying the directive not to increase pay for highly paid university employees while low wage workers were being asked to sacrifice, it was offered as a way to improve an underperforming system. Since then we've learned it's clear that governing boards are not the solution to keep costs down for students and quality of education high by limiting adjunctification - the practice of having more and more credit hours taught by contingent faculty.

Having independent boards has increased competition between institutions, which those of us who fought against the creation of the boards in the early part of the last decade warned about, and has exacerbated the differences between the haves and have nots among universities. The regional universities, which includes Portland State University for the greater Portland metro region, are seeing their enrollment nosedive, with catastrophic consequences for programming and staffing. You've all likely read about the retrenchment taking place at Southern Oregon University and may have heard about the PSU president's announced plan to significantly reduce staffing. This is just the beginning of what will assuredly be a precipitous downhill slide for our regional institutions, which includes community colleges.

Prospective students attending these institutions are cost conscious. For the past decade they have had to carefully weigh the price of college against any potential earnings benefit they expect they'll enjoy - if they manage to get a degree - versus the lost wages and time they spend earning one. It's been a close call, but more and more of them had been deciding to forgo the degree in favor of the work experience and compensation. With a tight labor market and record inflation, there are a lot of jobs out there that are paying wages that make the calculation for those coming out of high school an easy one - college is not in their plans. This is only going to get worse as tuition spikes because the governor and ways and means co-chairs budgets don't fund even current service levels; once inflation is accounted for the regionals are looking at a sea of red ink and a further attenuation of high quality wraparound services that are essential for many of the students at these institutions to succeed.

I have served on the Higher Education Coordinating Commission. I've been a member of both the recent higher education governance task force and the under-represented student success task force. After working in higher education for the last 35 years, I've been watching Oregon higher education unravel before my eyes. Frankly, the University of Oregon and Oregon State University are going to be fine. They are name brands, attract lucrative out of state students, and for historical reasons get relatively generous allocations given the other resources they have access to. Boards, no boards, it doesn't matter as much for them in terms of solvency (governance is a different story). The technical and regional - again, including PSU - universities are in real trouble. Failing to act now to address this will lay the groundwork for an even bigger crisis down the line. Having a viable state higher education system is a huge driver of a successful state economy. Oregon is on track to not have one in most of the state. HB 3499 is needed now.