



EASTERN OREGON
UNIVERSITY

FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK:
MONDAY MUSINGS

February 10, 2014

Colleagues,

The February legislative session started last week and is already in full swing. Along with institutional governance, two very interesting bills have caught our attention as they deal with affordability of higher education.

The first is proposed by Senator Mark Haas and he is calling it the "Oregon Promise." If the bill passes through both chambers and becomes reality, Oregonians who graduate from an accredited Oregon high school will automatically receive two free years at an Oregon community college of their choice.

The second bill, sponsored by Representative Mark Johnson, would require each of the Technical and Regional Universities (TRUs – EOU, WOU, SOU and OIT) to propose at least two pilot programs that would include a "Fixed Cost Bachelor's Degree" at a greatly reduced price than what is being concurrently offered. In the pilot phase, the selected programs must also be programs that have a proven demand and need in the region.

At first blush, I can see why the general public would support these bills and the issues they are trying to solve. College tuition is not inexpensive and the associated student debt is mounting. Juxtaposed to this reality is the need to increase the number of high school students, as well as non-traditional students, who attend college. Through these efforts, Senator Haas and Representative Johnson are also acknowledging that a college degree is a crucial element to transcend one's socioeconomic status, build our economy and lead to better employment opportunities and other individual benefits.

However, these two bills also concern me on two levels. First, the pragmatic view believes they could easily become unfunded mandates. For example, if Senator Haas' bill becomes law, it is estimated as much as \$250 million would need to be appropriated to send every high school graduate to a community college. Granted, not every one would take advantage of this opportunity, but even if a fraction did, the lower end allocation would still surpass \$100 million.

Community colleges may receive these funds, or they may not. The amount will be subtracted from the total allocation for post-secondary education through various means - reduced from the general budget and/or reduced from the funds provided for student aid to universities. Either way, this would have a significant and detrimental impact on our students and our University.

The Fixed Cost Degree would also have a fiscal impact if indeed the state did not fund these pilot programs at a level that would be considered "fully funding" the educational costs, which in a simple mathematical formula means that the State's Appropriation Level + Tuition = Full Educational Costs. For well over a decade, this formula has not balanced due to the continued and significant decline in state appropriation. I am not sure there is the willingness or ability to address these critical funding issues.

My second level of concern regarding these bills is that more often it seems political leaders view higher education in terms of technical training for a job and these two bills are furthering the conversation. As we know, the value of higher education goes beyond technical training for a specific job. Our goal is to provide skills and enhance the talents of critical thought, to empower the mind to probe and delve into difficult questions and be creative in finding new solutions.

Higher education also aims to provide the foundation of thought so that our students will be aware of broader societal issues, and become more responsible and conscious of these actions or inactions. These are the values of a broad-based undergraduate curriculum we strive for and the outcome is not as easily and immediately measured.

I think all of us support affordable education as an admirable goal. Not a "cheap one," but a higher educational program that is accessible and attainable to all who have the ability and desire, and may lack the resources to achieve it. I do commend Senator Haas and Representative Johnson in their efforts as these bills provide the foundation for this discussion to occur.

However, I also hope that as we move through all of the significant changes that are occurring in the higher education landscape that we do not lose the underpinning of the values of a university degree – in educating and enlightening the whole person – at the expense of the immediate outcome of gainful employment.

Star of Eastern Oregon University

Last week I received the following e-mail from Assistant Professor of Business Laura Gow-Hogge:

My 5 1/2 year-old daughter was performing with the Mini-Mountie group at the women's basketball game this weekend. After the game, I asked her if she had a good day at mommy's school. She turned and looked at me and said, "Mommy it's not your school, it's our school. I play soccer here with Coach Jen and Mark, I do Mini-Mounties with Miss Kate, I get to see Lynn for lunch who always remembers my name, I ride bikes with Tay (Ryan Dearing's little girl - her best friend), I get to go to the volleyball games and football games with grandpa and you." And I replied, "You are right, it is our school, the community's school!"

It really touched me to the core to realize that at 5 1/2 she could have such a strong connection with EOU and see it as her school, too. I think this is because of the outstanding job that people are doing to connect the youth in our community to us. The soccer players and dancers that Cassidy has come in contact with have been outstanding, positive, and powerful role models and have represented EOU in a brilliant way that will continue to shine on long into her

future as the barrier to the idea of going to "college" has dissipated and the idea of moving on to "our school" grows. A powerful message for a kindergartner or any youth!

So, the Star of Eastern this week is Ms. Cassidy Gow for her great observation and the acknowledgment of all of the EOU faculty and staff members who are committed to serving our students – both current and future – and our community.

Kudos and Miscellaneous

The next Ars Poetica Literary Lecture Series will feature husband and wife duo, Robert Wrigley and Kim Barnes, reading at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 11 in Pierce Library. For details go to www.eou.edu/news-press/ars-poetica-wrigley-barnes.

Our theatre department's production of "Rabbit Hole" continues its run with performances at 7 p.m., Feb. 13-15 in Schwarz Theatre. The Pulitzer Prize-winning play by David Lindsay-Abaire portrays a family dealing with the death of a child. Audience members who saw it last weekend have commented on the powerful nature of the performance and the message it conveys. Find out more at www.eou.edu/news-press/theatre-rabbit-hole.

At 7 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 19, our writing students will help raise awareness of the needs of the Oregon Food Bank when they read from their original works of poetry at Joe Beans. The event is part of the Roundhouse Reading Series collaboration between Ars Poetica and Community Connection of Northeast Oregon, Inc., an affiliate of the Oregon Food Bank. Donations of non-perishable food will be accepted at the door. Visit www.eou.edu/news-press/roundhouse-reading-fights-hunger.

Thank you for all for your continued support and dedication EOU.

Very Respectfully,

Bob

Bob Davies
President