

HIGHER EDUCATION'S SLIDE

A top-tier university?

A REGISTER-GUARD EDITORIAL

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The University of Oregon is the state's leading institution of higher education. It considers itself comparable to the best public universities in the country. Two decades of disinvestment, however, have left the UO straining to retain first-tier status. The Legislature shows a disturbing willingness to allow the slippage to continue. In a series of editorials over the next few weeks The Register-Guard will document evidence of decline at the UO, Oregon's six other universities and the state's 17 community colleges. The decline threatens not just campuses and their communities, but the entire state. A strong system of higher education is the underpinning of a vibrant economy and a healthy society.

The Legislature's grasp of this connection is weak. The House and Senate co-chairmen of the Joint Ways and Means Committee have put forth a budget that scales back increases for higher education that Gov. Ted Kulongoski included in his budget proposal.

The fact that colleges and universities continue to attract students despite steeply declining state support appears to have persuaded lawmakers that an investment in higher education can be put off until later. But even from Salem, the cracks in the foundation should be visible.

Since 1969 the UO has been a member of the elite Association of American Universities, whose 62 members receive 58 percent of all federal research funds. The UO is justifiably proud of its membership in this invitation-only group, and Oregon should take it as evidence that it is home to a top-caliber research university. Only one other school in the Northwest, the University of Washington, belongs. Yet among the association's 34 members that are public institutions, the UO ranks second to last in expenditures per full-time student. The UO is classified by the Carnegie Foundation as having a "high" level of research. All 33 other public universities in the AAU are classified as

having "very high" levels of research, the top category.

The Oregon University System regards eight other public universities as the UO's peers for comparative purposes. All are AAU members: the universities of Colorado, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, North Carolina (Chapel Hill), Virginia, Washington and the University of California at Santa Barbara. All of the UO's supposed peers are rated as having "very high" levels of research. And as the accompanying table shows, all have higher per-student expenditures.

The OUS defends these comparisons as "aspirational." Aspiring to be among such peers is admirable if the ambition has a chance of being realized. Otherwise, it's a fantasy - and in terms of per-student expenditures, the UO should be more realistically comparing itself to such institutions as the University of Nebraska (Lincoln) and Iowa State University. Those are good universities, but they're not great, and they're not members of the AAU.

The Legislature will have to decide whether Oregon's leading university belongs among the nation's best, or should accept a place in a lesser league. Similar decisions will determine the status of Oregon's other universities, and its community colleges. Oregon can't continue to expect first-rate results on a second-rate budget.

Expenditures per full-time student, UO and peer institutions*

UO ranks last among universities Oregon University System regards as comparable.

Expenditures include instruction, student services and academic support:

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| University of Virginia (main campus) | \$14,179 |
| University of Michigan (Ann Arbor) | \$19,524 |
| University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) | \$27,108 |
| University of California (Santa Barbara) | \$11,540 |
| University of Washington (Seattle) | \$21,893 |
| Indiana University (Bloomington) | \$11,348 |
| University of Colorado (Bolder) | \$10,655 |
| University of Iowa | \$12,911 |
| University of Oregon | \$9,222 |

**Figures are for 2005
Source: The Education Trust*