

HIGHER EDUCATION'S SLIDE

An 'F' for effort
A Register-Guard Editorial
Published: Sunday, April 8, 2007

Hardly anyone argues openly against state funding for higher education. Gov. Ted Kulongoski and nearly all of the 90 legislators count themselves as supporters of Oregon's universities. Yet for two decades, the Oregon University System has been in decline, with its share of the state fund falling by more than half. The excuse from Salem is that Oregon, given its limited resources, is doing the best it can.

The accompanying table suggests otherwise.

The table shows the change in state appropriations for higher education per \$1,000 of personal income over the most recent five-year period. The figures are a measure of effort. They show how much of the wealth generated in each state is devoted to higher education. By this measure, Oregon isn't trying very hard.

Listed in the table are Oregon and its neighboring states, along with the states that are home to institutions considered by the OUS to be peers of the University of Oregon. To provide an idea of the national range, also included are the states with the most extreme changes over the five-year period (Nevada and Colorado) and the states with the highest and lowest appropriations per \$1,000 of income (New Mexico and New Hampshire).

In almost every state, higher education claimed a lower share of personal income last year than it did five years earlier. Only seven states recorded increased percentages; two reported no change.

Higher education's slice of the pie shrank everywhere else. The decline was most severe in Colorado, because of a ruinous state spending limit that the voters suspended in 2005.

Oregon was not far behind, with a 23.9 percent decline over the five-year period. In addition to Colorado, only five states - Massachusetts, Missouri, South Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia - posted steeper declines. Iowa's percentage was the same as Oregon's.

A declining percentage, however, tells only part of the story. Oregon devoted a relatively small share of its personal income to higher education in 2001 - lower than all its neighbors except Nevada, and lower than all of the states except Colorado that are home to the UO's peer institutions.

By 2006 it had slipped behind Nevada. The gap between Oregon and its neighbors, and between Oregon and many of the homes of the UO's peers, had widened. Combine a steep decrease with a low starting base, and the result is that Oregon ranks seventh from the bottom nationwide in the share of its citizens' income that is used to support higher education.

Over the past week, editorials in this space have detailed Oregon's relatively low level of higher education spending per student, and its relatively low graduation rate. The two are related.

In the weeks to come further editorials will document the state's weak commitment to universities and community colleges.

The weakness of this commitment was demonstrated in Salem when co-chairs of the joint Ways and Means Committee proposed scaling back the governor's modest increases in higher education spending.

It's not that Oregon can't afford universities and community colleges. Other states manage somehow, but Oregon isn't even trying.

A MEASURE OF EFFORT

State tax appropriation for higher education per \$1,000
of personal income (selected states):

	2001	2006	Percent change
Oregon	\$6.94	\$5.28	-23.9%
Washington	\$7.14	\$6.99	-2.1%
California	\$8.19	\$7.30	-10.9%
Idaho	\$9.45	\$8.35	-11.7%
Nevada	\$5.16	\$6.48	+25.6%
Colorado	\$5.21	\$3.43	-34.1%
New Mexico	\$14.13	\$13.45	-4.8%
New Hampshire	\$2.46	\$2.38	-3.3%
Iowa	\$10.97	\$8.34	-23.9%
Indiana	\$7.78	\$7.36	-5.4%
North Carolina	\$11.02	\$10.94	-0.7%
Virginia	\$7.43	\$5.65	-24.0%
Michigan	\$7.57	\$6.11	-19.3%