

HIGHER EDUCATION'S SLIDE

Watering the soup

A REGISTER-GUARD EDITORIAL

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The University of Oregon has adopted a range of strategies for responding to the long-term decline of state financial support. It has courted private donations, chased federal grants and recruited high-tuition out-of-state students. As the accompanying table shows, the UO has also placed a heavy teaching load on its faculty, while also relying on an unusually large number of part-time faculty. It's an effective cost-saving measure in the short term - much like pouring four quarts of oil into an engine that needs five.

With one exception, the percentage of full-time faculty at the UO is markedly lower than at any of the institutions the Oregon University System regards as the UO's peers. The exception is the University of Colorado at Boulder. In 1992 Colorado voters adopted a ruinous spending limitation that left the state ranked 48th in spending for higher education. Before voters suspended the limit in 2005, UC-Boulder was forced to adopt many of the budgetary strategies the UO has put in place - including a shift to part-time faculty.

Partly as a result of its low percentage of full-time faculty, the UO also has a higher ratio of full-time students to full-time faculty than all but two of the peer institutions.

Some universities have faculty-intensive programs the UO lacks, lowering their student-faculty ratios. For a broader comparison, the chart also lists the other public universities that are members of the Pac-10 athletic conference. The UO stacks up no better against this set of peers - none has a lower percentage of full-time faculty, and only one has a higher student-faculty ratio. These are indicators of distress, and they point in the same direction as statistics offered in earlier parts of this editorial series: Higher education in Oregon is in trouble.

A university can make good use of part-time faculty. Some talented teachers and researchers are too busy outside of academia to join the full-time faculty; a university is fortunate to claim even a portion of their time. Part-timers can help departments meet temporary staffing demands. Many part-time faculty members are at the beginning of their academic careers and will eventually find full-time positions.

Employing part-timers simply because they cost less, however, is self-defeating in the long run. A university faculty is meant to be a community of scholars; part-timers are

granted only provisional membership. Many part-timers put up with their low pay and status in hopes of moving into a full-time position; if these hopes stand little chance of being realized, the best part-timers will leave and the rest will become embittered. When a university's faculty includes a high percentage of part-timers, a disproportionate share of the responsibility for such matters as governance and leadership is shifted to the full-time faculty.

The worst effect is on the students. At the UO, students can claim only half as much of full-time faculty members' attention as their counterparts at many other institutions. UO faculty can and do make up for this by working longer hours, and part-time faculty members do their best to fill the gap. In the end, however, students attend a university because of the faculty - and at the UO, this resource is spread thin.

The co-chairs of the legislative Ways and Means Committee have proposed a higher education budget that would postpone any meaningful improvement. The pay and working conditions of faculty appear to be of little concern to legislators. They should study the chart, however, and ask themselves how long the UO and its sister institutions can survive by watering the soup.

Faculty spread thin at UO

Low percentage of full-time faculty affects undergraduates

<i>Selected universities:</i>	Percent full-time faculty	Full-time undergraduates per full-time faculty
University of Oregon	70.8	13.8
University Virginia	89.2	6.5
University of Michigan (Ann Arbor)	79.1	5.9
University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill)	88.9	6.2
University of California (Santa Barbara)	81.7	14.2
University of Washington	93.0	5.4
Indiana University (Bloomington)	85.0	16.0
University of Colorado (Boulder)	63.4	10.5
University of Iowa	85.8	8.9
Oregon State University	82.0	8.2
University of California (Los Angeles)	78.4	6.6
University of California (Berkeley)	74.7	9.7
Arizona State University	78.8	11.8
Univesrity of Arizona	84.4	17.5
Washington State University	84.2	9.4

Source: The Education Trust, 2005