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## Higher ed (gasp!) gets campaign TV time

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Higher ed

Over time, TV ads for people running for governor of Oregon have included beaming spouses, rolling mountains, editorial endorsements, adorable kindergarten kids and --in a bold breakthrough offered this year by Bill Bradbury --a Segway.

But generally, one Oregon theme has never been considered ready for prime time --or even for the cable news off-hours specializing in political ads:

Higher education.

After all, what candidate would want to be seen with a scruffy college student --or worse, a professor --instead of an adorable kindergartner?

And candidates would always rather seem tough on criminals than soft on sophomores.

But this year's campaign for governor has been a different moment. Oregon universities are actually getting some TV time that's not on ESPN.

An ad for Democratic front-runner John Kitzhaber promises "two years of college for all Oregon students who have earned it," even if the film shows adorable pre-schoolers. A spot for Republican Chris Dudley talks about "transforming universities for innovation and job creation" and even shows a picture of one.

For Oregon's universities, this is unprecedented electoral attention. And even though their timing is not great --it's as if Cinderella is finally invited to the ball, just when the ball is being canceled for lack of money --it's always better to be talked about.

And the campaigns are saying encouraging things, even if not in great detail.

"It's through higher education that we can really drive the economy," said Kitzhaber policy director Scott Nelson on Friday. "Absolutely, the state needs to invest all it can in universities," although, of course, that may not be

much. Kitzhaber's campaign website promises "Supporting additional resources for research infrastructure for facilities and matching grant," which may be no more than encouraging universities to find more money on their own.

Still, it's nice to be mentioned.

Kitzhaber's higher education thinking also includes considerable attention to community colleges and more coordination among the various elements of the education system. His website talks about the principle of "40-40-20" --40 percent of Oregon's population with four-year degrees and 40 percent with other postsecondary training --a considerable upgrade from where we are now.

According to Dudley's website, "As Governor, Chris Dudley will unshackle Oregon's colleges and universities from outdated regulations that cost too much money and limit innovation and accountability of individual institutions; will reverse the decades-long retreat from higher education investment."

Those last words could sound almost musical to Oregon universities.

"I'm a big believer in higher education," Dudley said Friday. "I would like for the state to be able to do more, especially in helping kids from Oregon to afford tuition. I think it's so important for our state going forward."

On the theme of giving universities more autonomy, something stressed by every university president in the state, Dudley points out, "We're supplying 8 percent of the budget, and they've got 6300 line-items," specific instructions from the Legislature to the campuses.

Blushing prettily, higher education leaders say they appreciate the attention.

"It's good to see it," says Oregon State President Ed Ray, citing comments by Kitzhaber and Dudley. "There's a lot of white papers floating out there, and maybe that's drawn some attention."

University of Oregon President Richard Lariviere says he thinks the campaign mention is encouraging, and he hasn't even been here long enough to know how unusual it is.

Just to have a candidate for office talk about you, of course, is no guarantee of anything; you can get that confirmed by a lot of adorable kindergartners. Maybe the interest is just a byproduct of the sharp increase in younger voter participation in 2008 or the prospect of a November face-off between two Ivy Leaguers: Kitzhaber (Dartmouth) against Dudley (Yale).

But maybe it's also a sign of a long-delayed realization that you can't talk about the things that Oregon candidates tend to want to talk about --economic development and quality of life --without talking about higher education. It's been an afterthought in Oregon for too long, and now people are beginning to figure out that it's part of why it's better to be Seattle in this recession than to be Portland.

At least, Oregon higher education can know it's nice to see yourself on television.

It's even nicer --and maybe even encouraging --when someone else puts you there.

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