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Oregon's future at risk

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By **Guest Columnist**

Brian FoxBy Brian Fox

In Oregon we have an ethos of rugged individualism and hard working civic spirit paired with natural endowments that have made our state unparalleled in livability and raw potential. What we lack, however, are the direction and institutions to fully develop and apply these assets to their highest use.

Oregon, like the nation as a whole, is struggling for priorities in a new century. This is true in the short term as we seek to feed and shelter victims of the economic meltdown. These pains, though severe, will pass. We must look to the future, and revitalize and modernize the educational institutions that develop our people and our economy so that we do not continue the persistent cycle of deeper recessions and less robust recoveries than our neighbors.

In 2003, the late Ben Westlund stood in the halls of our Legislature and said with clarity words that ring equally true today: Oregon is in need of leaders that "stop being mere politicians who think only of the next election but start being statesmen who think only of the next generation." Just as it takes decades of foresight and effort to regenerate our forests and plains, so too will it take foresight and effort to build a strong future for Oregon.

We have allowed the educational institutions that develop our people to be strangled and to wither over time. Without strong K-12 education that focuses on outcomes for all Oregonians, urban or rural, and universities that produce globally aware, competitive graduates and applicable cutting-edge research, our state will never reach its full potential. Instead of investing in the next generation through our educational institutions, we spend roughly double what other states do on nonproductive institutions – prisons – and are one of only a handful that spend more on incarceration than on higher education.

We are reversing the progress of history as we see declines in educational attainment levels so that older Oregonians today are better educated than the following generations that will replace them in our workforce. This at a time when we will need increased productivity in order to meet the needs of an aging population, and as Asian and other nations pour resources into educating their citizens and building world-class universities so

they may take our place as the global leader of a new century. We will need the expertise only our universities and their graduates can provide to enhance our rapidly vanishing competitive advantage and protect the quality of life we enjoy in Oregon.

We must again today look to our educational institutions, reinvest in them, and allow them to flourish to ensure equality of opportunity for all of Oregon's sons and daughters, and our collective prosperous future. The path for Oregon that I and my generation wish to see and will work for is not that of a mere "stagnant backwater" beholden to more developed economies that former University of Oregon president Dave Frohmayer recently noted, but to unleash our restless spirit to fulfill our potential at Eden's gate.

Brian Fox is a director of the Oregon State Board of Higher Education and a senior at Southern Oregon University.

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