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Setting a new course for higher education

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By **Guest Columnist**

By Emily Plec and Linda Burgin

Former University of Oregon President Dave Frohnmayer and several other State Board of Higher Education members have called for a radical restructuring of our higher education system, allowing our public universities to become private corporations. The interest in and attention to the Oregon University System are warranted, but the conversation is moving off course.

Every institution requires re-examination from time to time. But the underlying problem is not the structure of Oregon's system, but rather, as Frohnmayer himself pointed out, a chronic and debilitating lack of support. Oregon has failed to adequately fund higher education for decades.

We are all stakeholders in this failure, and the stakes are very high. For the first time in generations, it may be harder for our young people to get a college education than it was for their parents. But before we buy into a plan that consolidates power without any certainty of increasing resources, we need to ask some tough questions.

Have funding and performance increased at Oregon Health & Science University and other educational institutions that have chosen the public corporation path?

What does privatization do to tuition costs, course offerings, public accessibility and taxpayer oversight?

What other models are out there? Is any a good fit for the nature and the goals of our university system -- to help all Oregonians move forward in a tough economy by educating and empowering the next generation of Oregon leadership?

And given the critical need for more public involvement and support, isn't this the very worst time to strip the transparency of oversight and accountability from our universities?

Yes, we need to streamline bureaucracy and reduce political meddling, but as part of a comprehensive set of reforms that meet the needs of the state, not a gimmick that gives campuses more freedom to do as they please.

To gain needed public acceptance, any new approach must emanate from a process that engages faculty, staff, students, parents, alumni, businesses and community partners. Only such a collaborative process will produce the solutions that have the support needed to see them through to fruition.

If we come together to identify and pursue sensible solutions to our real problem -- the persistent and pernicious underfunding of education in Oregon -- we can maintain and strengthen a university system that has produced so many of Oregon's brightest minds without depriving the public of its right to participate in the process.

With proper support, we can return to the important work of fostering the education of Oregon students without having to overfill classrooms or reduce offerings to the point that it becomes difficult for many students to meet graduation requirements in four years. And, of utmost importance, parents and students can once again plan for a future that includes an affordable quality education.

To achieve these goals the university system will have to participate in an honest and open dialogue involving all committed and relevant participants to meet our commitment to the students of today and tomorrow.

What we don't need is a quick fix in the form a permanent redesign of our universities that assigns administrators more authority and less responsibility and -- even worse -- offers no assurance of additional resources. Switching to a corporate funding model is no panacea and might actually prove counter-productive.

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