A message from Oregon college students: Don’t wait to adopt UO’s plan

Published: Tuesday, March 15, 2011, 6:00 AM

By Guest Columnist

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As students enrolled in Oregon universities, we want our voices to be heard as the Oregon Legislature debates changes in higher education. Too often, the voices of everyday students -- not those involved in campus politics or employed with student lobbying groups -- are drowned out or forgotten.

We want our elected officials to understand that changes are needed now to make Oregon college education more affordable and more accessible to every student. Each election, we hear politicians talk about Oregon’s potential, hearing words like “hope” and “opportunity” and “future.” Oregon’s future is now. We’re it.

If Oregon wants to keep its best and brightest students from leaving and attending colleges out of state, the state needs first to get its act together with its own universities. Where one attends college has a lot to do with where he or she will look for a job, build a career and start a family. So better higher education will mean creating more opportunities for college grads in Oregon to build a business, teach, work for a nonprofit or, perhaps, one day, maybe even run for office.

The March 6 editorial in The Oregonian “The UO has the right idea: more private support” caught the attention of a lot of Oregonians, including many UO students. We hope the governor and elected representatives take this message to heart. We can only hope that the Legislature doesn’t wait to implement these ideas. When it comes to higher education, Oregon has already been waiting long enough for big ideas and big change.

Most of the focus in Salem has centered on who is in charge of our colleges and how they are managed. But those debates only leave us wondering how these proposals will impact our education and our future? A better management structure can improve education for students. So bring the management to the people of the universities and empower the university presidents, faculty, staff, alumni, donors and students to make their school the best it can be. If old rules need to be changed, change them. But please don’t just change the players and call that improvement. Dig a little deeper.

This is where the New Partnership plan comes in. The plan -- to match public funds with private funds raised for each school -- builds on success. Not just the successes of the University of Oregon. Oregon State and Portland State have also had success in recent years raising funds from private sources. And with the larger universities...
taking less and less from the total state budget, over time it will allow the smaller universities across the state more access to state funding. This public-private partnership, combined with a guaranteed tuition cap of 5 percent given on your first day of school, will give college student the ability to know what the next four years will cost. And, right now, it's the only plan that tackles the funding and affordability of a college education, making higher education more accessible in Oregon.

We think Oregon needs this ambitious thinking to improve our universities, and that our legislators are up to the challenge. We bring you a message that all college students feel: The issue is funding and affordability; the urgency is now. We know you can do it.

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