

Time for Salem to take higher ed route to future

People discussing Oregon's universities get used to working with a limited number of words: "survival," "cutbacks" and, in certain years and during certain months, "football."

Second-term state Rep. Chris Harker, D-Beaverton, has another word he'd like to use: "greatness."

On Oregon's campuses, for years, that word has been found mostly in dictionaries.

"There are aspects of greatness that we should be working for," says Harker. "We owe it to the young people of the state, and to the state's economy, to aim high."

Harker, a member of the House higher education subcommittee, has a couple of reasons for thinking universities are key to Oregon's future. There's what he's done: The first in his family to go to college, he earned a Ph.D. in physiology from the University of Michigan, came here to work at Oregon Health & Science University and now runs a business helping more than 100 universities with grant applications and research operations.

Then there's what he's seen, such as the vast amount of federal money flowing to Durham County, North Carolina — home of Research

Triangle Park, a corporate research superpower, bounded by and driven by Duke University, the University of North Carolina and North Carolina State.

Corporations seem to like the neighborhood.

"If we could build a couple of powerhouse research universities here," says Harker, "the effect on the state would be transformative over time."

The gap between the higher ed system Oregon would like to have and the one we actually have is vast, especially after decades of disinvestment. And nobody thinks that higher ed, or anything else, is getting a shower of money this session.

But this session, an idea is surfacing that in the 21st century, having a university system that's an economic engine for the state is no longer optional.

"Part of why I get so excited," claims Harker, "is that I believe things are arranged to make significant changes."

The legislative agenda this year is crowded with higher education proposals. At least the system is being talked about — even if the word "greatness" is still not exactly at the center of the conversation.



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The core proposals, from the system itself and a legislative task force, amount to the least that needs to be done. They would give the system more independence, letting universities find more efficiencies, and keep the Legislature from helping itself to tuition money when it finds itself running short.

It's a vital adjustment. But in a state currently around 45th in the country in spending per university student, it's not likely to jump-start Oregon significantly closer to where it needs to be.

"I don't expect the state is going to do that with public dollars," admits Harker, "certainly not over the time frame we need to."

Such as, before Oregonians younger than 35 — already less educated (not to say less prosperous) than Oregonians in their 50s — conclude that the double decline is just part of living here.

That brings up the proposals from the University of Oregon: first, to allow state universities to create their own governing (and fund-raising) boards, and for the state to issue \$800 million in bonds for UO, to be matched by the university's own fundraising, and then limiting the state's support to paying the interest on the bonds.

"(UO President) Richard (Lariviere) was really bold in doing what he did there, and people had their toes stepped on," says Harker, "but he really pushed the conversation in a significant way."

The Legislature's not about to write an \$800 million bond check to UO any time soon; the state doesn't have the bonding space at the moment, and there's a problem with an approach so narrowly directed at one institution — even one that glories in describing itself as "the state's flagship university." The separate governing board idea could also work for Oregon State and Portland State, although the regional campuses would need some protection.

Harker takes the long view — probably the only way to be hopeful about Oregon higher education.

"We're not giving Richard everything he wants, but it won't be a complete rejection of his proposal," Harker expects. "We'll begin the process. We know we'll be back here in 2012."

Possibly, of course, when the Legislature comes back for its short session next January, Oregon's economy will be surging back, research and brainpower will seem less important, and the state's bottom-feeding university funding will no longer be an anchor-like drag on its future.

Or maybe we'll still be looking for an occasion to use the word "greatness."

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