

EDITORIALS

FINAL EXAMS AT THE CAPITOL

Higher ed's Legislature grades still up for grabs

People in higher education know all about Finals Week.

You're cruising along, thinking you're doing fine, and suddenly it's make-or-break time. Then, depending on what happens in just a few days, you're either rejoicing over what you got or mumbling that you didn't see that coming.

For the higher ed system, it's Finals Week at the Legislature. It seems to have been a good term but not much is locked in yet. In a time when money is as scarce as sunshine, the university budget seems likely to be about the best the system could hope for, although it needs to be propped up with stick-in-the-throat 8 percent and 9 percent tuition increases.

As Jim Francesconi, of the State Board of Higher Education and the advocacy group The Oregon Idea, commented last week, "We can't keep raising tuition, underfunding workforce programs and failing to take advantage of research that creates jobs."

But mostly, that's a test for a future Finals Week.

The community college budget is still under

some strain, still looking for those last persuasive facts to submit, such as that the system's enrollment has been exploding since 2007. (Twenty-nine percent of Oregon's 2009 high school graduating class enrolled in community college.) Community colleges' ability to make up the difference with tuition hikes—or lucrative out-of-state tuition—is considerably more limited.



DAVID SARASOHN

Exams were last week, but for more than 150,000 Oregon community college students, this is Finals Week.

Senate Bill 242, cutting the universities loose from state agency status and legislative micromanaging, seems to be set. Its final success was

setting the date of the change at next January, protecting the system from one last unspent tuition grab when the Legislature meets next February.

The University of Oregon's plan to set up separate institutional boards of trustees has been put off until next February. But both UO President Richard Lariviere and the Duck mascot were in the Capitol on Thursday doing some last-minute cramming on behalf of Gov. John Kitzhaber's master plan to bring all of education under an Education Investment Council.

As often happens, Ducks are paddling under the surface. The governor's plan—and the new overall higher ed coordinating board set up by Senate Bill 242—would leave the State Board of Higher Education less to do. The board's withering, or actual disappearance, would bolster the case for institutional boards, a point that UO lobbyist Courtney White made to the Register-Guard last week.

At the same time, there has been a bumpy track for some higher education capital construction in the Legislature. Given Oregon's unusual position as a state that does not generally build higher education buildings, campuses have been obliged to devise plans based on private contributions, revenue and some state bonding capacity.

Oregon State, for example, devised a plan, in cooperation with its student government, to use out-of-state tuition to put up a classroom building. It requires legislative approval of the bonds, even though the university would pay off the bonds from its own income. That and other buildings, including the Portland State Sustainability Building and three community college buildings previously approved, are running into resistance from House Republicans,

which could derail the entire projects.

"It seems we're running into roadblocks between wanting to improve the university system on the one hand and being willing to support the efforts to do that," said Ways and Means co-chair Sen. Richard Devlin, D-Tualatin, late Friday. "I think it's troubling."

Monday on Finals Week, the Ways and Means Capital Construction subcommittee—featuring all the Legislature's heaviest hitters—will try to resolve this. Before the Legislature closes its books, it needs to deal with not only university grades, but also university buildings.

Last week, Boeing and Microsoft each pledged \$25 million for scholarships to Washington state university students. The impact is not exactly game-changing—the \$1,000 scholarships will amount to less than next year's increase in University of Washington tuition—but the action demonstrates Washington corporate commitment to the importance of higher education to the state's economy.

Even before Finals Week, they get an A.

David Sarasohn, associate editor, can be reached at 503-221-8523 or dsarasohn@oregonian.com. See other writing at oregonlive.com/sarasohn/