



Informational Hearing on College Affordability

House Higher Education and Workforce Development Committee

April 27, 2017

Thank you Chair Reardon, Vice-Chairs Whisnant and Alonso-Leon, and members of the Committee. For the record, I am Sean Pollack, Academic Policy Specialist with HECC's Office of University Coordination. On behalf of the agency, thank you for this opportunity to review some recent research and reporting HECC has done on affordable baccalaureate degree programs available here in Oregon and in other states.

Affordability is a pillar of HECC's strategic plan and one of the central challenges for today's student populations and institutions. Along with the Legislature, we are committed to making sure that financial need is not a bar to accessing high quality public post-secondary education.

As part of our report on HB 2973 from 2015, HECC focused on several affordability options and innovations:

- Fixed-cost degree programs
- Ten Thousand Dollar degree programs as exist in Texas and Florida
- Oregon specific programs that focus on cutting costs by leveraging available aid and cutting time to degree.

The best known and arguably most successful of "fixed price per term" models is Western Governor's University, which allows its students to take as many credits as they are able for approximately \$3,000 per term. Students earn credit in a competency based learning model. Western Governors is accredited by Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, as are all other Oregon public institutions. Their price model is feasible in part due to a lack of in person teaching and campus infrastructure. All instruction is distance learning or online, with students conferring remotely with academic course mentors and advisors.

Both Texas and Florida's public institutions have launched "\$10,000" baccalaureate programs:

- In Texas there are two programs currently operating serving small cohorts of students at rural state institutions. One is a program in Organizational Leadership for adults with prior learning. Another is a STEM degrees program for well-prepared high school students. These programs meet many definitions of affordability, but they are new, and have yet to produce significant numbers of graduates. The combined enrollment will not likely exceed one percent of Texas' annual baccalaureate output.
- Florida has a \$10,000 degree program available at its state colleges, which are similar to community colleges in Oregon except that they grant baccalaureate degrees in certain fields. Again, enrollment numbers are not widely published but they represent a small fraction of the approximately 800,000 students enrolled in the Florida State College system.
- These programs share several features in common, besides a price lower than the traditional four year degree:
 - Each was a policy priority for that state's governor
 - They required high levels of philanthropic and state subsidy to launch
 - They serve small cohorts of students

In Oregon, the public universities are also meeting the affordability challenge with their own institutional initiatives. Just a few examples of these institutional efforts:

- Portland State University's "Four Years Free" program subsidizes Pell-Eligible students with a "last-dollar" scholarship, provided the students are first time freshmen, have a high GPA in high school, and follow a prescriptive academic pathway.
- Southern Oregon University's Accelerated Baccalaureate can cut nearly 25% off the expected price of a four-year degree, again with academic eligibility requirements.
- Portland State and Oregon Tech are also making significant efforts to aid students who are close to degree but may have stopped for a variety of usually financial reasons. PSU's Last Mile uses degree audits to find students who are close to degree but have been out of their academic program. Oregon Tech offers College Completer scholarships for students who have high levels of debt and may have exhausted their financial aid eligibility. These and other initiatives

recognize that the truly unaffordable degree is one left unfinished, with the long-term economic benefits unrealizable.

It is also important to note that HB 2973 passed into law before the Oregon Promise was fully established. This program has really changed the conversation in our state surrounding affordability. The broader availability of financial assistance in a last-dollar program like Oregon Promise makes other non-financial initiatives more important than ever for ensuring that our students are able to finish their intended degree programs with as few excess credits, unnecessary debt or unnecessary delays as practicable. To create true affordability, financial support must be conjoined with all the necessary advisory and academic supports that help students choose courses wisely and find their passion that leads to a successful academic pathway.

Thank you for the opportunity to present today. If you have any questions, please contact Kyle Thomas, Director of Legislative and Policy Affairs, at kyle.thomas@state.or.us.