Oregon Public University Council

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Higher Education Coordinating Commission
775 Court Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

Dear Commissioners:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Higher Education Coordinating Commission outline for the 2016-2020 Strategic Plan. Oregon's postsecondary education system has undergone a massive transformation during the last several years. This 2016-2020 Strategic Plan offers an important reflection point for the Commission and Oregon's public universities and an opportune time to review the opportunities and challenges of our new system.

Legislative findings identified in Senate Bill 270 (2013) clearly state that "the State of Oregon will benefit from having public universities with governing boards that: provide transparency, public accountability and support for the university" and "are close to and closely focused on the individual university." It further guides that these governing boards have a responsibility to create "greater access and affordability for Oregon residents," to "act in the best interest of both the university and the State of Oregon as a whole," and to "promote the academic success of students." These legislative findings serve as guideposts for the continued implementation and future success of our new postsecondary system.

The role of the Higher Education Coordinating Commission is equally essential to our collective success. House Bill 3120 (2013) tasks the commission with "adopting a strategic plan for achieving state post-secondary education goals" and recommending a "consolidated higher education budget request aligned with the strategic plan." It is with these two critical functions in mind that we offer the following collective feedback to the draft strategic plan outline.

Following decades of systemic disinvestment in Oregon postsecondary education, we feel that any strategic plan for higher education must begin with a strongly worded statement about the impact of this disinvestment and a call for sustained investments moving forward. Oregon ranks 47th in the nation in state per-capita funding. We believe that the Commission is uniquely positioned to develop and advocate for a long-term postsecondary funding plan. The heightened interest in postsecondary education enjoyed during the last

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several years is welcome but the gap between rhetoric and the reality of funding remains one of our greatest challenges. The HECC should be our greatest champion for the funding necessary to achieve our state's goals.

We also believe that one of the clearly articulated goals of the strategic plan should be a strong desire to see the new system work and to protect the architecture that was put in place beginning with the adoption of Senate Bill 242 (2011). The State of Oregon has made a strong commitment in establishing our new system and it should be given the time and resources to mature and yield the benefits of institutional autonomy. The Commission is an integral part of this new structure but HB 3120 (2013) clearly notes that HECC "may exercise only powers, duties and functions expressly granted by the Legislative Assembly. Except as otherwise expressly provided by law, all other authorities reside at the institutional level with the respective boards of the post-secondary institutions." Deviating from the intended design of our new system could jeopardize the potential rewards of the redesign. Within the current strategic plan draft outline there are several areas where a well-defined separation of authority is unclear. For example, sections relating to student support, advising and student success appear to infringe on management decisions. We do not believe it is the role of HECC to become a regulatory or grant-making entity. The universities have a strong history of supporting students and evidence-based research on what works. The Commission should focus its efforts on advocating for and allocating funds to support all students based on overarching principles. Universities should have the flexibility to determine how to employ resources most effectively.

The promise of our postsecondary reforms are ahead of us and have to be nurtured to realize their true potential. Oregon has eight distinct universities that serve their regions, state, and nation through undergraduate education, graduate education, and research. The plan outline as presented runs the risk of focusing exclusively on increasing access and lowering the cost of undergraduate education. An accessible and affordable undergraduate education is incredibly important but these goals must be carefully balanced with protecting quality and must include investments in graduate education and research. In the current outline, "research, innovation, and economic development" are relegated to a "missing elements" note at the end of the draft. It's troublesome to think that these elements are afterthoughts in the Commission's 2016-20 strategic planning process, or as is the case with graduate education, completely excluded. These university-specific activities are economic drivers for our state, the nation and the world, and one of the important contributions of Oregon's public universities. We request that the importance of these activities be specifically recognized within the strategic plan alongside other outcomes in the Commission's planning efforts.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft 2016-2020 strategic plan outline. We welcome any questions on these comments or on other aspects of the HECC 2016-2020 strategic plan.

Sincerely,

University Presidents

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