

OUS comments on conditions report of Southern Oregon University

Faced with significant financial challenges, shrinking state support and looming decreases in enrollment, Southern Oregon University has shown remarkable resilience and willingness to do the hard and often painful work of financial retrenchment and an all-hands-on-deck student recruitment effort. This provides a much-needed foundation for the future. The question is then whether what is built on that foundation can provide a sustainable future for the University, one without the disrupting highs and lows of recent decades. The attached report by the University and these comments on that report represent a first draft answer to the question about the future of Southern Oregon.

The State Board of Higher Education offers its appreciation to Southern Oregon University for both its recent actions to lay the foundation for a sustainable future and for its discussion of lessons learned from the past and plans for the future laid out in the report. We offer the following summary comments.

Are the enrollment and completion initiatives recently undertaken at SOU sufficient to the magnitude of the challenge? While the University acknowledges historic patterns of slow growth and enrollment swings, it tends to credit upswings to actions on the part of the University and down swings to outside forces, including competition from jobs when the economy improves. The volatility of enrollment has been matched by disruptive expansion and contraction of program and staff resources. The enrollment initiatives outlined in the report are impressive but the record cautions that they will succeed and be durable only with a more focused and sustained effort than in the past. The report also notes the lack of a college-going culture in the region. Many regional institutions are now struggling with whether this is simply a given for them or something for which they need take more responsibility.

Will the University have the capacity and the will to rigorously monitor the progress of its enrollment and retention initiatives? When resources are tight and exciting new initiatives such as the honors program and the houses have been initiated it can be difficult, financially and culturally, to keep asking whether they are working. Yet, we note that the challenges these initiatives address have been identified before and prior initiatives launched with great promise. Whether it is the on-campus initiatives or relationship-building with sister institutions in the region, it will be vital for the new Board of Trustees to have solid information about not only the promise of the initiatives but their performance.

Is the identity of the University as a “regional comprehensive university” fully reflected in its enrollment, regional relationships, program alignment, and resource allocation? For Southern Oregon, a specific question was posed:

Southern Oregon University has pursued becoming a “destination campus,” “the public liberal arts college of the West” at the same time it plays a central role serving the communities and students of the region. Given resource constraints, how does it balance these and set priorities between them?

The University report states: “we always strive to find a balance in providing both a liberal arts education while meeting the professional and workforce needs of our region, and indeed it is that strong liberal arts curriculum which allows us to meet those needs.” For the record, the question posed to the University in the instruction was not a challenge about its status as a liberal arts college, rather the emphasis on becoming a destination campus. Even though the explicit response in the report provides little guidance about how the University will set its

academic and financial priorities, the range of initiatives outlined does suggest it is pursuing a broader and deeper embrace of the University regional role. Also for the record: will the HECC and Legislature recognize and reward university efforts toward a fuller embrace of their regional roles?

Director Thorndike: I have read and re-read the conditions reports and responses. SOU has in my view taken the situation at hand and responded with a comprehensive realignment of the institution. The caliber of the administrative team and the tools to manage the institution I believe are in place. Our administrators are working with the faculty and institution to have the right programs offered that make economic sense and meet student's needs to reach their goals. It will continue to be hard work to make it all work but I am pleased with our direction. Student centered first, meeting our regional and state needs and continuing to develop as a destination for a wide range of students who will find what they want at SOU. The HECC will reward SOU for meeting these priorities with appropriate resources. The editorial from the Klamath Falls newspaper heralding the work between SOU and KCC in credit transfer is one example. Reading the list of valedictorians from local high schools in the Medford paper on Sunday who will be attending SOU is another great example of meeting the needs of our regional scholars.