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USSA to lobby for higher ed

■ **ASSOCIATION:** The local student chapter plans to 'unleash' higher education

By Jennifer Schmitt
Community Editor

Federal financial aid funding, affirmative action and the Higher Education Act are facing federal attack, and students need to get involved to preserve higher education, said the president of the United States Student Association.

Kazim Ali, USSA President, said the national student lobbying association's goal for the year is to "unleash education" and make it available to more prospective students.

The USSA uses a grass roots approach to raise support and awareness for higher education issues that affect the 3.5 million students the organization represents, Ali said.

The University and all of the colleges and universities in the Oregon State System of Higher Education are members of the national student association.

In past years, a local chapter of the USSA was funded by University students, but students voted in 1994 and again in 1995 not to continue supporting a chapter on this campus.

The vote was reversed last spring when students voted on and passed a referendum allocating 50 cents per student per term to a USSA fund.

"We are still in a transition phase right now," said Matthew Scotten, ASUO president. "We just got the funding back last year."

Other state universities and colleges have a person acting as a field organizer for their chapters.

"The money is going to be spent on hiring a full-time field organizer to deal with federal issues statewide," Scotten said. "Until we have enough to hire, we are saving the money. Some money is being spent on local activities we have set up for this

year." Members involved in USSA have been setting their action plans for this spring.

"We plan on doing a lot of grass roots things," Scotten said. "We want something quantitative to show the need and importance of the issues when we go to Washington, D.C."



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University representatives will be trying to preserve federal support for state grants such as the Oregon Need Grant. The percentage of federally supported grants has dropped from 70 percent of financial aid being grants in 1970 to only 30 percent of aid being grants today, Scotten said.

"We really need federal support for state grants to work well," he said. "That support has been dropping, which increases the debt burden for students, especially with the rising cost of tuition."

The Pell grant and state/student incentive programs are also in danger, Ali said. State/student incentive programs are programs in which the federal government shares the cost of the grant with the state.

"The main issue of educational access is economic access," Ali said. "If need grant programs are eliminated, the effects would be devastating to needy students."

The USSA is planning community empowerment forums and postcard campaigns to raise support and awareness for federal financial aid, he said.

The University will also be assisting the national student association in defending attacks on affirmative action, Scotten said.

A federal bill is being introduced to Congress this year which would declare gender and

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— Kazim Ali
USSA President

race based programs unconstitutional.

But Ali said the access problems in education are race- and gender-based and as a result need gender- and race-based solutions.

"This is not about quotas," Ali said. "Affirmative action is simply what it says: it is a positive step forward."

Mentoring and recruiting programs for students are some examples of affirmative action that should be high priorities, he said.

A national day of action is being held on Mar. 4 in support of affirmative action, and students are encouraged to write letters of support.

"This is a time to realize the Martin Luther King dream," Scotten said. "I don't think banishing affirmative action is a good idea."

The Higher Education Act, passed in 1965, is reauthorized every five years, and this year it is up for reauthorization again.

As part of the reauthorization, USSA representatives want to add legislation that will allow higher education to be considered "work" under welfare requirements, Ali said.

"There have been studies linking education and public assistance," he said. "If we can get people educated, then there is a greater chance they won't have to rely on welfare programs in the future."

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