

# State ready to end session

■ Lawmakers who are dealing with a bevy of higher education issues are now also rushing to finish the budget

By Andrew Adams  
Oregon Daily Emerald

Just as the end of the school year is fast approaching, so too is a close to the 71st legislative assembly session. And just like students scrambling to prepare for finals, state legislators are also working hard to finish their final — the state budget.

While the release of a final version of a budget by lawmakers is still a few weeks away, other bills with implications for higher education have already made their way through the Capitol building. Issues such as scholarships, campus construction and even morality also garnered attention this session.

But while those who have been working in Salem this session do not discount the importance of these bills, they always return to the budget when discussing the action in the legislature.

John Wykoff, legislative director for the Oregon Student Association, said this session could have had some serious negative impacts for higher education, but fortunately, he said, those did not materialize.

"This might be one of those sessions where you gauge your success on what didn't happen," he said.

Wykoff said while funding cuts to the Oregon University System and a tuition increase may still occur, some bills that he said would have affected higher education negatively were, in the end, killed.

Two examples he gave were House Bills 2480 and 2476, which never made it out of committee, that would have allowed students to not take required classes they found morally objectionable. Critics of the bill, such as Wykoff, said those bills would have seriously limited the range of a student's educational experience at an Oregon university.

Rep. Betsy Close, R-Albany, said in a previous interview that the bills would have protected students from any offensive "propaganda" and protected their academic freedom.

Wykoff also said there were a handful of other bills that may have imperiled need grants, but those also never went far in the legislative system.

Grattan Kerans, director of government relations for the Oregon University System, said several bills made it through the session that will have a significant effect for the state's universities.

He said Senate Bill 329, which was signed into law by Governor John Kitzhaber, will make university parking structures exempt from municipal taxes.

This was just one of other bills that should help fund construction projects on campuses. Kerans said Senate Bill 327 will enable schools to build "quite a host of things across the state."

The bill will increase the student building fee by \$10 over the next two funding periods, and the funds generated by the increase will go towards the construction of buildings for student services, such as student unions and gyms.

State risk insurance will also be extended to include students, and Kerans said this will provide more

incentives for companies to hire an intern for the summer.

Both bills have been heard and passed through committees, so Kerans was confident they would pass.

But Kerans said no one in Salem close to higher education could ignore the budget, which at times seemed to loom menacingly over the horizon.

He said at this point there was "a lot of intense negotiating back and forth," between the House and the Senate, and he expected the budget to be released soon.

"We probably won't know for another week or two, or possibly three, what the bottom line is for our budget," he said.

OUS funding was slashed by nearly \$100 million in Gov. Kitzhaber's first budget proposal, but Kitzhaber restored \$45 million to higher education in his second proposal. Those in Salem say they have heard the co-chairpersons of the Ways and Means Committee also plan to add more funds back into the budget in their second proposal, but admit that restored funding is not certain.

Michael Redding, the University's director of governmental affairs, said "obviously the budget has been the biggest issue."

Regarding University affairs, he said there is the Senate Concurrent Resolution 3, which congratulates the University on its 125th anniversary and another resolution that honors former University President Paul Olum, but few other bills had a direct implication for the University.

"Most of the discussion surrounding higher education in this session has all been budgetary," he said.

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