

TOO MUCH TUITION? BLAME THE VOTERS.

Funding changes and failed measures have left schools scrambling. BY OMIE DRAWHORN

Students and families are quick to point the finger at universities and blame school officials for continuing tuition hikes. But the problem goes back more than a decade and is rooted in changes in the funding for education and a series of failed ballot measures that would have ensured a more stable funding source for schools.

Oregon universities received an "F" on the state report card under affordability. According to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, low- and middle-income students spend about 50 percent of their income paying for net college costs.

Legislators and UO officials blame high tuition on lack of state funding. "The biggest problem is the failure of the Republican Congress to allocate money to pay the state's share of higher education," says State Rep. Phil Barnhart, a Democrat.

That's small consolation for students such as Matthew Strickland, a senior at UO. "When I started college at the UO, tuition and fees cost me about \$4,000 for 2001-2002. Now it is over \$5,500," he says. "When the cap on financial aid is about \$5,500 a year, I certainly notice the almost \$1,500 dollars that I used to have that I now don't."

Strickland has to take out student loans and has worked up to 40 hours a week to pay for school. "It takes time away from my time to study for my classes and prepare for tests and write papers," he says. "It puts a huge burden on my performance in school to have to work to just keep my head above the rising tide of debt."

The lack of state funding goes back to the passage of Measure 5 in 1990, which was designed to limit property taxes. It shifted funding for schools from property taxes to income taxes and from local to state government.



"When Measure 5 took effect, property taxes that paid for K-12 declined, so the state had to come up with billions of dollars to fund the schools," said Barnhart.

That meant universities received less money from the state, so Oregon universities had to raise tuition to make up the difference. In fall of 1990, tuition was \$490 a term. Five years later in fall of 1995 it had risen 76 percent to \$863, not including extra fees students pay for certain classes.

"Universities had to raise tuition to maintain quality and access to courses," said Michael Redding, vice president in the Office of Government Affairs at the university. "It wouldn't help students if we had to reduce course offerings."

Oregon University System spokeswoman Di Saunders said OUS immediately saw the effect of the higher tuition costs: fewer students were applying and many more were dropping out. New enrollments dropped by 12,000 statewide. But this fall, enrollment has picked up and it looks like the number of new students at UO might even break the record of 20,044 set in fall of 2002.

But Measure 5 wasn't the only blow voters dealt to schools. Measure 28 would have created a temporary increase in Oregon's income tax in January 2003 during a period of recession and high unemployment. But voters shot it down. The following year, voters rejected another temporary funding Band-Aid, Measure 30, which would have created an income tax surcharge to help balance Oregon's budget. Some of that money would have helped fund education.

When Measures 28 and 30 failed, the University of Oregon adopted tuition surcharges in both the winter and spring quarters of 2003 and undergraduate students had to shell out \$10 more for each credit hour.

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