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COMMUNITY BOOM

'Free tuition' proposal affects more than just budget concerns

As the school year starts up, the Oregon Legislature is discussing an idea that could swell the average Oregon community college classroom size and make higher education accessible for more students.

Senator Mark Hass, D-Beaverton, has been championing a proposal that would make two years of community college free for many high school graduates. "We want to give access to every high schooler in Oregon, either as trade training or college courses," he says.

Some worry that community colleges may not be prepared to handle a sudden influx of new students, especially considering that from 2006 to 2011, Lane and most other community colleges saw an enrollment surge of around 37 percent, according to the Oregon Community College Association. This is credited widely to the state of the economy and a need for trained members of the workforce. In the last two years, that story has changed.

"Now that people are going back to work, we're seeing a decline in enrollment," says Mary Spilde, the president of Lane Community College. Even if this wasn't the case, Spilde says it would be LCC's job to "be as flexible and innovative as possible to accommodate student need."

Certain qualifications will also restrict a tidal wave of new students. Recipients would have to be Oregon residents who have graduated high school with a 2.0 GPA or better.

The big question is money, and no one has any answers yet, but the outlook is hopeful. "We've looked at it, and the cost is feasible and practical," Hass says.

In 2012, a slight bump in funding helped mitigate the rising cost of college across the state, but school spending has been on the chopping block in the Oregon Legislature for over two decades, since Measure 5 was passed in 1990, capping property taxes earmarked for school funding. In 2011, funding for public universities in Oregon was decreased by 11 percent, according to *The Oregonian*.

Hass estimates the initial cost of the program would come in at just over \$200 million. This could be made up partially from a waiver from the Pell Grant, an option which "makes a lot of sense," according to Hass.

Community colleges have had to depend even more on tuition revenue as state funding has decreased.

"This would need to be funded; there could not be an expectation that we could just throw the doors open," Spilde says.

At a first look it is a huge expenditure, but Hass sees it as a money-saving investment. "It doesn't take long for those investments to come back to you," he says, pointing to multiple studies that indicate increased numbers of trained workers and students with degrees consistently lead to decreased amounts of welfare and unemployment, as well as an increase in tax revenue from those who are getting jobs. "This could easily pay for itself," Hass says. — Jordan Tichenor

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