

The Perception Gap:
The Gulf Between Public Opinion and Public Higher Education in Oregon

by

Bridget Burns

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APPROVED:

Brent Steel, representing Political Science

Jeffrey Hale, representing Sociology

Robert Sahr, representing Political Science

Bridget Burns, Author

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The Perception Gap: The Gulf between Public Opinion and Public Higher Education in Oregon

Introduction

In 2003, Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski announced his vision of a constitutional amendment that would create and fund the equivalent of a “G.I. Bill” for low-income Oregonians. Calling the program the *Access Scholarship for Education Trust* (ASET), he proposed the development of ASET for the coming legislative session (Kulongoski, 2003). The concept itself - and the prominence granted to it by the Governor - was unprecedented in Oregon politics. Public higher education officials were ecstatic at the prospect of becoming the primary focus of a Governor’s public agenda and welcomed the much-needed support for their most vulnerable students. However, less than a year later, ASET had become a distant memory.

Initially, progress seemed possible. The Governor and the State Board of Higher Education commissioned the Access and Affordability Working Group to create the new ASET grant. The working group dove into the topic eagerly, gathering regional and national experts on the subject of need-based financial aid. They focused on developing a model for delivering state dollars that could provide a clear gateway for Oregonians – a gateway into higher education, and out of poverty. They also commissioned a public opinion research firm to conduct preliminary research on what Oregonians thought of higher education and state investment in need-based aid; but as a result of this research, the working group discovered a barrier to the creation of ASET in the form of resistant public opinion.

The research firm Davis, Hibbits and Midgall conducted focus groups in Medford and Portland and discovered an attitude toward higher education that surprised the working group (Davis, Hibbitts, & Midghall, Inc., 2004). While people felt that it was beneficial to the state for Oregonians to attend college, they believed that the individual benefit was greater than the public benefit -- and therefore that individuals should pay their own way. The public opinion survey results, summarized in the following excerpt, shocked the working group:

In response to the factual information on the (ASET) trust, the participants' own reasons to support showed an awareness of the connections between higher education and other state needs, such as an increase in the standard of living, better jobs/employment, less need for social services, stronger economy, and other reasons. Their top reasons to oppose showed skepticism regarding student eligibility standards, a concern that it would be a "handout," a concern over the use of resources that are needed elsewhere, as in K-12, and questions about the need for a constitutional amendment (Access and Affordability Working Group, 2004).

As a result of these findings, development of the ASET program collapsed, and the working group turned to wrestle with questions such as: *If higher education is in the best interest of the public, why doesn't the public support it more? Why is it so hard to get the average voter to care about higher education? What image problem does higher education have that it might be unaware of? Does the public lack trust or confidence in public higher education?*

These questions lie at the heart of this paper. Support for public higher education in Oregon has declined substantially over the past two decades, even though the connection between education and economic prosperity remains clear and widely understood. This essay examines the various public attitudes toward publicly funded higher education in Oregon, as reflected in a survey of 1,300 Oregonians. In the

following section, literature is reviewed discussing public opinion of higher education, including previous studies of Oregonians' opinions on this subject. Next, surveys from which the data of this study are drawn from are discussed, followed closely by analysis, and hypothesis testing about the links between an individual's knowledge and background, and their attitude toward publicly-funded higher education. Finally, key demographic segments of the Oregon population were identified upon which institutions of higher education should focus upon when attempting to sway public attitudes toward greater support for their mission.

This essay's primary focus centers on the research question: *What are the demographic, values, knowledge, and self-interest factors that predict perception of higher education in Oregon?* This paper's goal is to provide greater understanding of the beliefs, knowledge, and demographic variables that lead some Oregonians to value and support funding higher education, and to identify those variables that are associated with perspectives toward publicly funded higher education. Increased understanding of these factors can aid those working in public higher education to develop policies that have a greater chance of obtaining funding, support and success.

With limited funding available for public higher education, a clear idea of which demographic segments are more and less likely to support public funding of higher education – and, critically, *why* they hold their respective opinions – is essential in the ongoing effort to educate the public, secure consistent policy support, and (ideally) stabilize funding for higher education. For example, long-term efforts to develop an appreciation of the benefits of higher education among citizens may be most strategically directed toward those groups who exhibit a lack of understanding about the aims and

effects of higher education, or who lack trust in higher education institutions.

Alternatively, attempts to mobilize support for higher education during a particular budgetary process would logically focus on those segments of the population that most strongly support higher education already. But whatever the specific goal, advocates of higher education need clearer understanding of higher education's supporters and detractors in order to advocate effectively.

Education officials have an important and compelling message to communicate to citizens: higher education improves the life of the individual and society, and economic recovery is directly connected to the strength and availability of higher education. Millions struggle in poverty every year, yet have the potential to do much more with their lives if given the opportunity of higher education. Moreover, it is in the best interest of society at large that people get out of poverty, and higher education has been empirically shown to provide a pathway out of the poverty cycle. Hopefully, by better informing the outreach efforts of state higher education officials and policymakers, this study will contribute toward these goals.

Literature Review

State Higher Education Funding and It's Implications

Public higher education officials often struggle with the tension between their academic mission and the need to appeal to politicians and the general public in order to keep their doors open. Universities are “the holy grail of the academic world,” and administrators would prefer to focus on that higher purpose rather than compete with the variety of public agenda items frequently jockeying for support and funding

As Gitlow (1984, p. 19) states:

[a] body of opinion exists among academicians that they and their institutions are and should be above market tests, pressures, or constraints. They see their place and role as infused with some great and overriding societal mission which puts them beyond the usual economic forces that characterize a market, secular society.

But regardless of the frustration felt by public higher education administrators and faculty, institutions share many characteristics with market-driven private sector industries, and “competition and shifts in demand in the marketplace for goods have their counterparts in the markets for educational services, reflected in enrollments and tuition revenues” (Gitlow, 1984, p. 19). Like businesses, institutions of higher education have a limited number of levers to adjust when times are tough (e.g., tuition, enrollment caps, class size, compensation).

Oregon’s institutions of public higher education exemplify this tension between academic mission and the market- and politically-driven realities of funding. One of the many effects of the comparatively low level of state funding that Oregon provides for higher education is its resulting below-average faculty compensation: “Universities in only seven states - Alaska, Idaho, Maine, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota and

West Virginia - pay lower average faculty salaries than Oregon” (Eugene Register Guard Editorial Board, 2007), and stories of college professors receiving less pay than their former students within a few years of graduation are not difficult to find. Other financial levers that are used by administrators in response to declining budgets include increasing class sizes or the use graduate students to take up teaching loads. As an example of market-driven practices in academia, the latter option can be seen even outside of budget crunches, as Anderson (1996) notes when he criticizes some professors’ practice of abandoning their classrooms for more profitable research -- often due to administration pressure to seek grants or publications over teaching -- while leaving the task of educating students to teaching assistants who may not be qualified for the job. These moves, in turn, result in criticism directed at both the faculty and the administration.

Jencks and Riesman (1969) examine the various transitions within higher education since its inception in the United States and describe the strong connections and difficult relationship between politics and the cost of higher education in the United States. Legislators pressure the institutions to achieve measurable outcomes, yet fail to fund the institutions at the level necessary to achieve those outcomes. Political pressure is frequently directed at the most publicly visible measure: keeping tuition costs low. Yet as state budget appropriations decline, the pressure within public institutions to raise tuition arisen from the need to balance the budget. Higher education thus frequently finds itself at odds with public sentiment on the subject of cost.

Although the cost of undergraduate education remains a priority within Oregon’s public higher education system, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2006) awarded Oregon an “F” in affordability. Indeed, Oregon’s public

higher education system has been scrutinized by the media for increasing tuition even as it has allegedly fallen in the quality of education due to increases in both class size and its dependence on graduate teaching assistants. Administrators attempt to make clear the relationship between declining public funding and increasing tuition, but find that the subject has limited traction in the eyes of the public and media. As Weerts and Ronca (2006) elaborate, this trend is fairly consistent throughout the United States, with funding in decline both at the federal level and in most states in recent years. To put the situation in perspective, Oregon public higher education institutions continue to experience new record highs for enrollment each year (see Table 1), yet overall the state system of higher education is being funded at an inflation-adjusted level similar to 1992. Moreover, Oregon faces greater challenges than most states, as the ten-year enrollment increases for the Oregon University System have trended higher than the national average for public universities (40% for Oregon versus 25% nationally). Given the rising costs and limited funding available, the stakes are high for postsecondary public education in Oregon.

While enrollment is at an all time high in Oregon, in comparison to other states Oregon ranks very low in total costs when considered on a per student or per degree basis -- though members of the Oregon public may lack this comparative perspective of the cost of higher education. As Figures 1 and 2 indicate, Oregon is comparatively very efficient compared to other states in terms of degree-delivery costs for both large public research institutions and smaller schools; respectively, Oregon ranks third-from-last in total funding per degree for large research institutions and ninth-from-last for other public bachelors and masters degree granting institutions.

Table 1: 10-Year Enrollment Trend for the OUS
(Source: Oregon University System Fact Book, 2010)

10-year increase: 39.5% 5-year increase: 19.9% 2-year increase: 12.0%		
Year	Total Headcount	Increase from prior year
2000	69,508	+3.2%
2001	73,883	+6.3%
2002	78,111	+5.7%
2003	79,558	+1.9%
2004	80,066	+0.6%
2005	80,888	+1.0%
2006	81,002	+0.1%
2007	82,249	+1.5%
2008	86,546	+5.2%
2009	91,580	+5.8%
2010	96,960	+5.9%

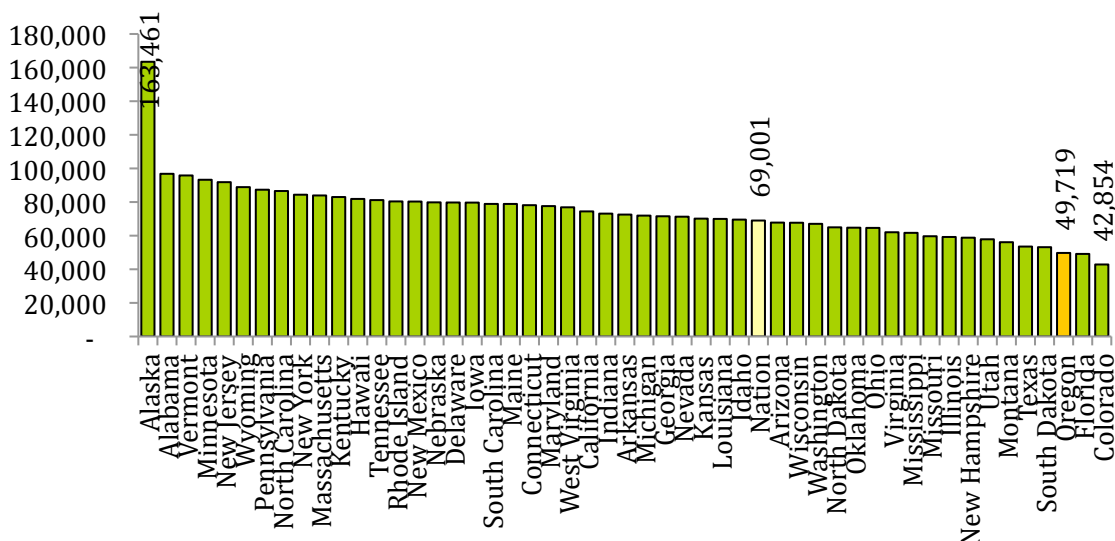


Figure 1: Public Research Institutions
Total Funding per Credential/Degree (State & Local, Tuition & Fees)
 (Source: Oregon University System, 2011, compiled from NCES, IPEDS)

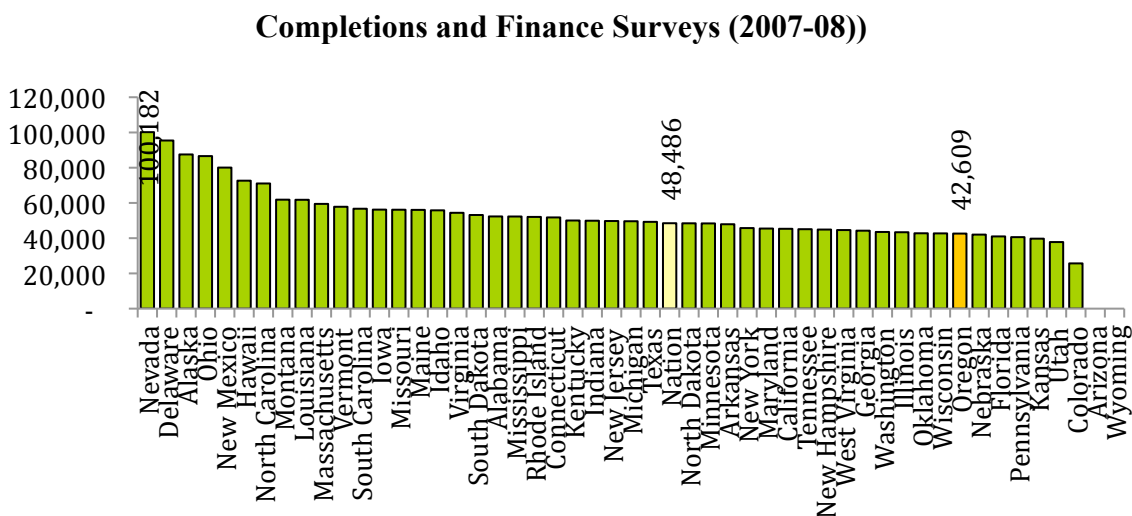


Figure 2: Public Bachelors and Masters Institutions
Total Funding per Credential/Degree (State & Local, Tuition & Fees)
 (Source: Oregon University System 2011, compiled from NCES, IPEDS)
Completions and Finance Surveys (2007-08))

However, despite Oregon's relative efficiency in delivering degrees with comparatively low total funding per student and degree, and despite its record high enrollments, the Oregon population is actually becoming *less* educated as it ages. Figure

3 compares Oregon to the United States and other nations, illustrating how Oregonians are reversing the typical trend of greater educational attainment with each passing generation. When one considers that - with an aging population nearing retirement - the state lacks the ability to replace its workforce with equally educated younger adults, this trend holds chilling prospects for the future of the state in economic and social terms.

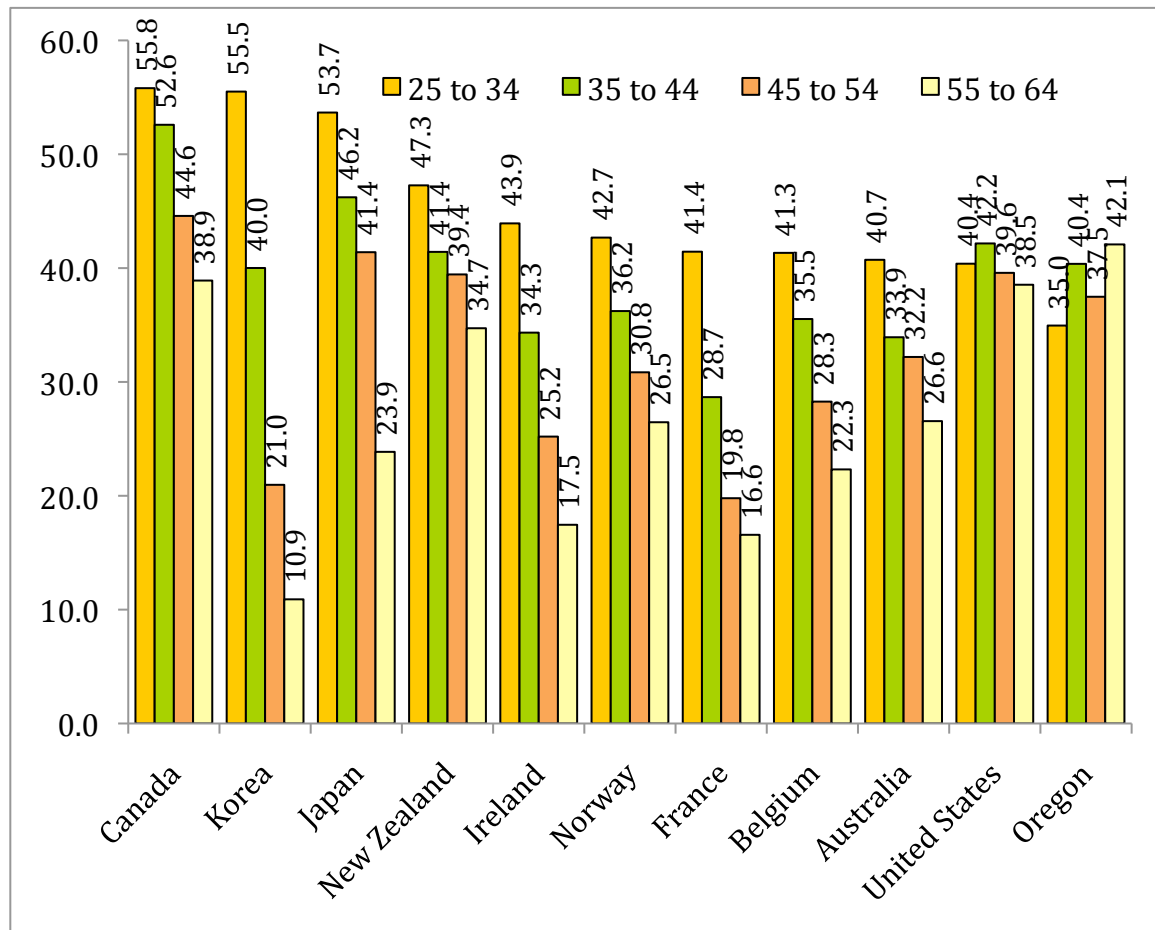


Figure 3: Younger Adult Oregonians Are Less Educated Than Older Oregonians
 (Source: Source: Oregon University System, 2011, compiled from OECD, Education at a Glance 2008)

Attainment of higher education clearly has a significant impact on an individual's lifetime earning potential (see Figure 4) – and thus on the tax revenue base for states. In

addition, on an aggregate level, the employment market increasingly demands a highly educated workforce. In the 1970s the United States had more jobs for high school dropouts than for college graduates, but this trend has more than reversed in recent decades; today, dropouts have only 11 percent of jobs, compared to 33 percent in the 1970s (Carnevale, et al., 2010). There has been a 70 percent increase in the need for college education by occupations that previously didn't require higher education (Carnevale, et al., 2010). Conversely, the opportunities available for those who do not complete a college degree grow increasingly limited.

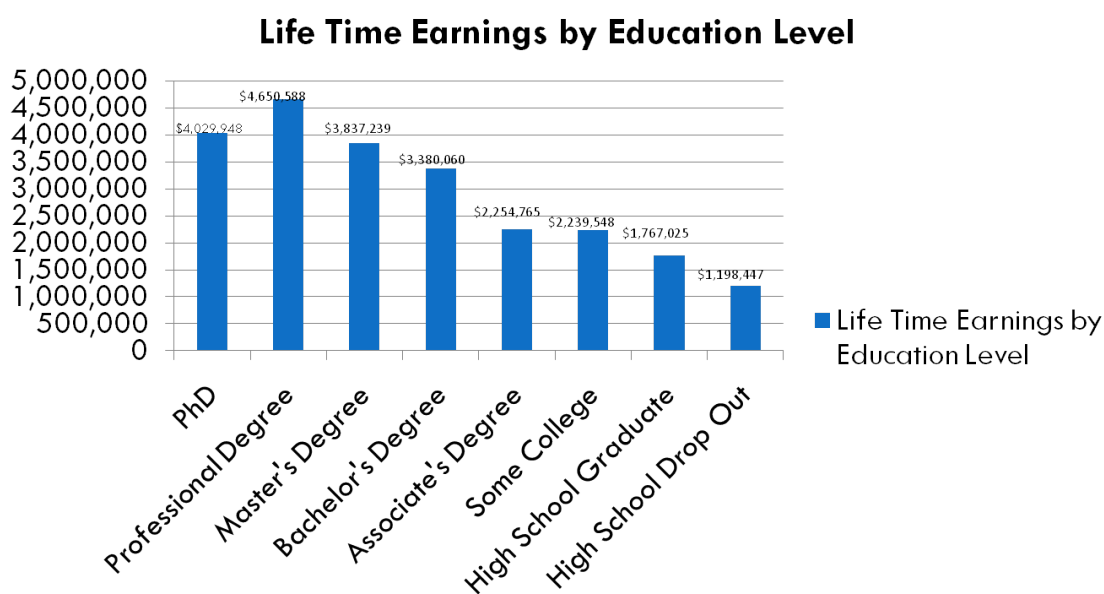


Figure 4: Life Time Earnings by Education Level
(Source: Carnevale, et al., 2010)

Beyond the realm of economics, college-educated populations exhibit higher levels of civic participation, including increases in voting behavior and volunteerism than

do those units less educated (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005). Given the positive effects associated with attainment of higher education degrees that are discussed above, it would logically follow that the public benefits from higher education and so logically should support it. Nonetheless, the key trends in Oregon, such as its record enrollments combined with the flat level of state funding for the past twenty years, and the decline in education on a generational basis, do not bode well for education in Oregon.

Public Opinion Research

As discussed above, a troubled funding cycle has left public higher education without a stable and sufficient funding base while the number of students it serves continues to grow. The 2004 survey by Davis, Hibbits, and Midgall that studied public opinion regarding the proposed ASET constitutional amendment revealed that the public felt students should be responsible for paying for their own education. Yet previous opinion polls in the state of Oregon had indicated the public was keenly aware of the role that higher education plays as the state's economic engine, contributing jobs, research, and much needed services for the state as a whole (Oregon University System, 2001). Thus there is a troubling duality: the public understands and appreciates the value of higher education, but does not want to pay for it. Meanwhile, as more students are priced out of public higher education by the increasing cost of tuition, and the population becomes less educated, the state economy suffers accordingly. In this section, previous surveys of public opinion regarding higher education are considered, including their findings and limitations.

The *Oregon Values and Beliefs Study* showed that Oregonians believe that quality

public education and adequate healthcare are top priorities (Oregon Values and Beliefs, 2002). This study revealed that individuals perceive education as important in the abstract, but it left many important questions unanswered. It did not provide a demographic analysis of the respondents' opinions, nor did it ask about the level of support respondents would be willing to provide. There have been limited studies that attempt to correlate demographics to viewpoints, but those surveys have typically been devoted to K-12 education (Hibbits and Midgall, 2004). Even when studies do not address higher education funding directly, however, some findings in these K-12 studies indicated that the public's highest priority with K-12 education is preparation for college, further supporting the conclusion Oregonians value the goal of attaining a college education.

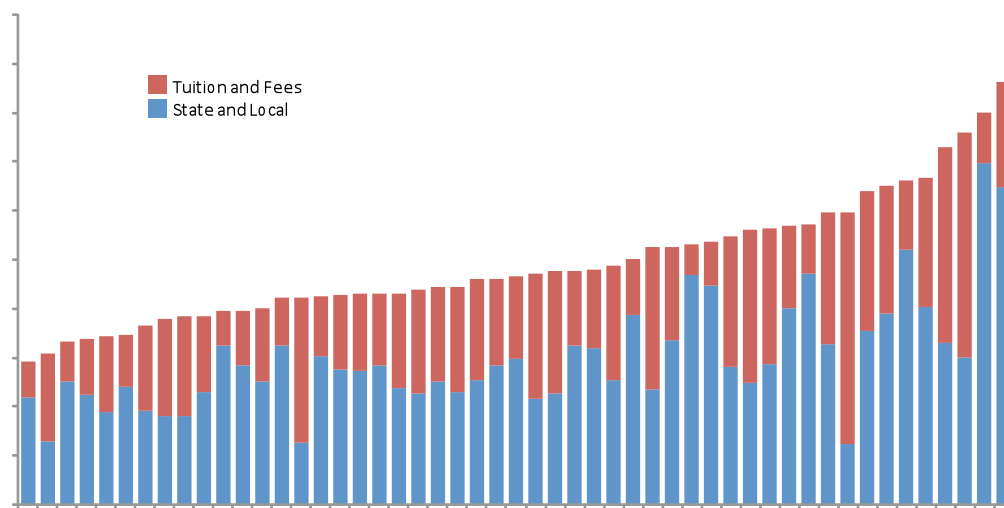
A nationwide study produced several key findings about education funding (Immerwahr, 2002). Notably, it concluded that half of the public, when asked, did not believe that higher education was doing enough to keep costs down. This outcome is important to note because one of the goals of this survey is to measure people's acceptance of the link between greater funding for higher education and greater quality in higher education. If people believe that mismanagement or waste by higher education officials are the causes of higher education institutions' current financial plight - as opposed to other factors such as the economy, bureaucratic restrictions, or lack of funding - then they would be more likely to respond negatively in a survey about higher education. If the public holds a perception of irresponsible spending, they will be reluctant to give more money to higher education.

The Immerwahr (2002) survey also concluded that the public was reluctant to improve financial support for higher education due to a perceived lack of change in the

standards and practices of the higher education industry. The subjects of the survey felt that, whereas other industries are forced to improve themselves and adapt to various changes in their markets, higher education remains stagnant, archaic and elitist. Members of the business community voiced concern that higher education institutions fail to take responsibility for institutional efficiency and refuse to address escalating costs, and legislators who were polled raised concerns about higher education's lack of engagement with K-12 students and tended to perceive higher education as "aloof." Not surprisingly, university faculty members who were polled did not share this opinion. The responses from academia were "strikingly different" from those of the legislature; faculty members focused on requests for more financial support and independence. In sum, this study suggested a significant disconnection between the perceptions held by those inside and outside of the ivory tower, and suggested that suggested that the subjects did not understand the notion of the "public purpose" of higher education.

A 2006 study (Public Agenda, 2006) reported a laundry list of opinions voiced by individuals surveyed for their thoughts on higher education. According to the survey a majority of Americans believe that getting a college education is more important today than it was 10 years ago – despite more than half stating that their job does not require a college degree. At the same time, two-thirds of those surveyed mentioned that it is possible to be successful in today's working world without a college degree. Finally, an overwhelming majority stated that if someone really wanted to go to college they can "find a way to pay for it and almost anyone can get financial aid" (Public Agenda, 2006). Thus, this survey identified the sentiment – similar to that expressed in the ASET focus groups in 2004 -- that individuals could easily bear the burden of financing their college

education without needing to depend upon society. This attitude is problematic, however, in light of the comparatively low percentage of the overall cost per degree that is paid for by state public dollars, relative to tuition (see Figure 5).



Sources: SHEEO State Higher Education Finance Survey 2008; NCES, IPEDS Completions Survey; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (Public Use Microdata Samples)

Figure 5: Total Cost of a Degree: Tuition and Fees vs. State and Local Revenue (Jones, D., Longanecker, D., & McGuiness, A. (2010)).

Another obstacle in higher education's quest to attain public support is the perceived education sector infighting between K-12 and higher education. Rather than the entire education enterprise banding together to advance an overall education agenda, state budget constraints frequently pit sectors against each other to compete for the same general fund dollars. Immerwahr (1999) describes the perception in the late 1990's that those in the postsecondary education field enjoy the luxury of public esteem, while those in the K-12 arena face constant criticism and misunderstanding. It is important to note that in 2004 a highly effective advocacy group on behalf of K-12 emerged in Oregon (Chalkboard Project, 2004). Even at the time of publication, Immerwahr (1999) pointed

out that higher education's "honeymoon" with the national public would be ending shortly.

As previously discussed, higher education fills a critical role in society, providing many benefits both economic and social -- and there is a degree of urgency surrounding the subject because of higher education's stagnant state of funding and rising enrollment. The studies and surveys discussed in this section confirm that the public values higher education and recognizes many of its benefits - at least in the abstract. Yet these same studies indicate that the public feels there are many problems, such as waste and mismanagement, inherent in higher education; and that it feels higher education is generally affordable, financial aid easily available, and that the responsibility for funding higher education should fall on the individuals attending school. These studies, however, are limited in that they fail to investigate demographic and other critical variables that would enable us to understand *why* there is a disconnect between appreciation of education and unwillingness to invest in it; nor do the previous studies sufficiently investigate which segments of society are more or less likely to support increased public higher education funding. On the whole, there is a limited understanding of the public's opinion of higher education. Nonetheless, the existing literature expresses clearly the interest in -- and the importance of -- developing a better understanding of the public's views about higher education funding.

Methods

Survey Process

This study involved a survey of randomly selected members of the public in Oregon. The samples were purchased from Survey Sampling Incorporated (SSI), which is the largest and most reputable sampling company in the U.S.; Gallup polls and many other university polling agencies have used SSI for various samples because of their high quality. All samples contained only potential respondents 18 years old and older. Surveys were sent to 1,300 individuals randomly selected by SSI. Names were drawn from voter registration lists, telephone directories, property ownership records and driver's license records.

A mail survey was utilized that was designed following Don Dillman's Total Design Method (Dillman, 1978). The survey was designed to take fifteen to twenty minutes for each subject to complete. Each potential respondent was contacted up to four times, if necessary; the first contact was a postcard announcing the survey. After two weeks, the survey was mailed with a cover letter and postage pre-paid envelope. Two additional mailings (if necessary) each included a reminder letter, a copy of the survey, and a postage pre-paid envelope; these went out to non-respondents beginning four weeks after the second mailing. Responses were tracked using a number on the outside of the survey that was coded by county. This number coding was used to track the county in which the respondent resides, but was not to be correlated with their name or other information. In total, 711 subjects responded to the survey, an exceptionally high response rate of 55% that can only be attributed to the persistent approach of the "total design method" featuring several contact points.

Variables: Indicators of Public Support of Higher Education

Based on the literature reviewed and general knowledge of higher education funding politics, there are several hypotheses surrounding possible predictors of public opinions about higher education in Oregon. Demographic variables are divided into four categories for analysis:

1. Socio-demographic characteristics

Factors such as age, education level, gender, and the number of years a person has lived in Oregon.

2. Informed status

Subjective measure: The respondent's self-assessment of their knowledge of higher education funding.

Objective measure: A question about the national ranking of Oregon public higher education funding.

3. Ideology and partisan identification

Each of the two major political parties is analyzed in comparison to an independent-omitted dummy variable, and there is a self-identifying variable for ideology.

4. Situational

This variable category focuses on the statuses of being a government worker or having children currently enrolled in public higher education in Oregon.

Coding, Variables, and Model

The model adopts several independent variables and two questions as dependent variables. Crosstabs, multiple regression, and a variety of analytical tests were run to find statistically significant relationships between the independent and dependent variables. Variables focused on in this paper include the following:

Independent Variables

- Age
- Gender
- Years lived in Oregon
- Level of Education
- Political ideology/Partisan identification
- Having children
- Having children in Oregon public colleges
- Government worker status
- Informed/Self-assessed informedness

Dependent Variables:

- Question 1. Additional state funding would lead to higher quality college and university education in Oregon.
- Question 2. Better use of state funds would lead to higher quality college and university education in Oregon.

Hypotheses:

The following are hypotheses generated based upon the review of literature.

Hypothesis 1: Political ideology

Conservative respondents are less likely to support additional funding for higher education. Liberal respondents are more likely to support the notion that additional funding will help improve quality at Oregon higher education institutions.

Hypothesis 2: Party identification

Republicans will be more likely to oppose the notion that additional funding will help to improve quality, while Democrats will be more likely to support the notion that more

additional funding will help to improve quality at Oregon

Hypothesis 3: Children

Individuals with children will be more likely to support additional funding for Oregon higher education institutions, in comparison to individuals who do not have children.

Hypothesis 4: Age

Older individuals will be more likely to oppose additional funding for Oregon higher education institutions, in comparison to younger respondents.

Hypothesis 5: Children in Oregon public colleges

Individuals who identify as having children within Oregon public higher education institutions are more likely to support additional funding in comparison to individuals who do not.

Hypothesis 6: Knowledge

Individuals who exhibit more knowledge about higher education in Oregon are more likely to support the notion that additional funding is needed, in comparison to individuals who exhibit less knowledge about the subject.

Analysis

The results of two survey questions that deal with general perceptions of the quality of Oregon's higher education system begin this analysis. Table 1 illustrates a fairly negative view of higher education in Oregon, and indicates a general attitude that public higher education should be concerned about. When inquiring about individual attitudes toward public higher education in Oregon, a majority of individuals found that the quality in the current system was a problem. Given this information, Oregon public higher education

needs to spend outreach time and efforts on the subject of quality.

The second question asks for a judgment of whether quality has risen or fallen compared to five years prior; again, the response is troubling for Oregon. Over half of respondents found that the quality is either slightly or greatly worse. Only six percent of those surveyed responded that the quality of education in Oregon has improved. This is a strong indicator of negative public perception, and demonstrates the public's belief that Oregon higher education generally has a problem with quality – and that it is getting worse.

Next, two questions were included in the survey to help develop understanding of individual's perspective on higher education funding. The two questions pertained to whether or not individuals thought that the current system of public higher education in Oregon needed additional funding to increase quality, or whether the current system had enough funding but needed to spend that money more wisely in order to improve quality.

Table 1
Perceptions of Quality

Question: How much of a problem is the quality of education in Oregon's public colleges and universities today?

21%	1. Big problem
36%	2. Somewhat of a problem
15%	3. Not much of a problem
28%	4. No problem

N=706

Question: In the past 5 years, do you think the quality of education in Oregon's public colleges and universities has improved, stayed the same, slightly worse, greatly worse?

6%	1. Improved
35%	2. Stayed the same
24%	3. Slightly worse
35%	4. Greatly worse

N=706

Table 2
Attitudes Toward Higher Education Funding

Question: Additional state funding would lead to higher quality college and university education in Oregon.

	1	2	3	4	5
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
N=706	9%	12%	32%	25%	22%

Question: Better use of state funds would lead to higher quality college and university education in Oregon.

N=706	2%	4%	28%	36%	30%
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Table 2 is particularly revealing about the public's trust in Oregon higher education. Although the public generally feels that more money would increase quality, they also demonstrate a general distrust in higher education officials and express the sentiment that officials could be using their money more wisely. An important area to note is the high degree of uncertainty in the population. Roughly one-third of all respondents did not have a clear opinion on the subject, nor did not feel informed enough to respond. The high degree of uncertainty makes a strong case for the need to do additional outreach in order to cultivate the trust and confidence of the public.

Table 3 provides a clear view of the sample population and their demographics. Generally this survey sample is an older population that is slightly more female than male, and is fairly well educated with an average of having some college education. The average age of 706 respondents was 51.4 with a standard deviation of 17.4, and those who responded were 53% female and 47% male. The average education level achieved by those who responded to this survey scored a 5.3 on a 1-7 scale, with 5 being "some college," and 6 being "college graduate." The average respondent to this survey attended at least some college. Another helpful demographic identifier in the sample is how long the respondents have lived in Oregon, with this population averaging at 31.4 years. Having lived here that long, the sample population should be very familiar with Oregon public policy and institutions. Two variables were selected to determine the level of informed status of the survey respondents. The respondents were first asked to assess how informed they felt they were about higher education in Oregon on a 1-4 scale. A 2.1 average score on the self-assessed question indicates a response between "somewhat informed" and "informed." Thus, the average respondent considers themselves

moderately informed.

Table 3
Control Variables for Orientations Toward Oregon Education System and Funding

		<i>Mean (s.d.)</i>
<i>Socio-demographic variables</i>		
Age	<i>Respondent Age in Years</i>	51.4 (17.34) N=706
Gender	<i>Dummy variable for respondent gender</i> 1= female; 0= male	.53 N=711
Education	<i>Dummy variable for educational attainment.</i> 1=grade school to 7=graduate school	5.3 (1.3) N=704
Years	<i>Years lived in Oregon</i>	31.4 (22.8) N=704
<i>Informed variables</i>		
Informed	<i>Self-assessed informedness concerning public higher education issues in Oregon</i> 1=not informed to 4=very well informed	2.1 (0.9) N=710
Know	<i>Dummy variable for correct answer concerning knowledge of Oregon public higher education funding</i> 1=correct answer; 0=incorrect answer/DK	.39 N=677
<i>Ideology/Partisanship variables</i>		
Ideology	<i>Self-assessed political orientation</i> 1=very liberal to 5=very conservative	2.95 (1.0) N=676
Democrat	<i>Dummy variable for identification with Democratic Party</i> 1=Democrat; 0=else	.38 N=710
Republican	<i>Dummy variable for identification with Democratic Party</i> 1=Republican; 0=else	.28 N=710
Independ	<i>Dummy variable for identification with Democratic Party</i> 1=Independent; 0=else	.34 N=710
<i>Situational variables</i>		
Kid-college	<i>Dummy variable for children currently in Oregon public college/university</i> 1=children currently in Oregon public higher education; 0=else	.12 N=710
Govt	<i>Dummy variable for public sector employment</i> 1=public sector employee; 0=else	.13 N=710

When asked a factual question in order to determine the true knowledge of the respondents (it inquired about how Oregon's public higher education funding ranked when compared nationally) only 39% of the respondents were correct while most were incorrect (61%). Conclusions drawn from the self-perceived informedness and knowledge variables indicate that this population is generally slightly less informed than they perceive themselves to be. If this sample population is accurately reflective of the state, it appears that Oregonians believe that they are more informed about public higher education in Oregon than they actually are.

When looking at self-assessed political orientation, the average respondent was "moderate" to "conservative," with a mean score of 2.95 and a standard deviation of 1.0 on a 1-5 scale (with 1 being very liberal and 5 being very conservative). When creating dummy variables for the political parties of Republican, Democrat, and Independent audiences can see that 38% of the respondents were Democrats, 28% were Republican, and 34% identified themselves as Independents. This clearly shows that there is political diversity among survey respondents, and also that it is a fairly representative of the population, considering the age of the respondents.

There were two situational variables identified to be potentially of interest in impacting perspective of public higher education in the literature. The first was a question about whether or not an individual had children in an Oregon public higher education institution, and the second inquired about whether an individual works for the government. The literature concluded that government workers would be more liberal and likely to support public education, while those with children currently enrolled in Oregon institutions would also. These variables have a relatively limited ability to impact

this particular study, as only 12% of respondents have children in Oregon public higher education and 13% of respondents work for the government.

Table 4 presents two OLS models that assess the effect of the various independent variables on views of the quality of Oregon higher education now and over the past five years. The older a person is, the more likely they are to believe that quality in higher education is a problem. However, the more informed a person believes themselves to be increases the probability that they believe higher education quality has improved in the past five years. Individuals who are knowledgeable about higher education in Oregon are also likely to see a problem with quality, as reflected in the positive relationship between the two variables. People who are actually knowledgeable are slightly less likely to view higher education quality as a problem when compared with those who are only self-perceived to be informed. This means that being informed has a slight reduction in perception of quality problems, which is a slightly positive outcome for public higher education.

Finally, government workers are also more likely to believe that quality is a problem in higher education. This outcome is surprising, considering that government workers are often assumed to be protective of public institutions and thus could be sensitive to the criticism that they lack quality. Perhaps their proximity to the issue gives them greater understanding of the financial constraints and enrollment pressures public higher education is under in Oregon.

Table 4
Regression Estimates for Public Perceptions of Oregon's Public Colleges¹

	Quality Today	Quality Last 5 Years
	Coefficient (Std. Error)	Coefficient (Std. Error)
<i>Sociodemographic</i>		
Age	-1.09*** (.03)	-.02 (.03)
Gender	.04 (.07)	.12 (.07)
Education	.06 (.04)	.03 (.03)
Years	-.02 (.02)	-.01 (.03)
<i>Informed</i>		
Informed	-.56*** (.05)	-.42*** (.05)
Know	-.30*** (.08)	-.02 (.03)
<i>Ideology/Partisanship</i>		
Ideology	-.04 (.05)	.03 (.04)
Democrat	.11 (.09)	.22** (.09)
Republican	.33** (.11)	.36*** (.10)
<i>Situational</i>		
Kids-college	-.20 (.12)	.36*** (.12)
Govt	-.42*** (.12)	.15 (.11)
F Test=	22.45***	13.45***
Adjusted R Square=	.26	.17
N =	661	661

¹The dependent variables are displayed in Table 1.

Significance levels: * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

Respondents who view themselves as informed are more likely to believe quality has improved in recent years. This is an interesting outcome in comparison with the other regression results, showing that those who think that they know more than they do are under the impression that things are getting better when it comes to quality in Oregon higher education. Republicans were more likely to believe that quality has decreased in recent years when they are compared to Independent voters.

The final statistically significant outcome was the correlation between having children in college and believing that quality has gotten worse. Those with children in college were more likely to believe that quality has declined in recent years, an important attitude that should be troubling for public higher education administrators.

While these are the only a summary of the statistically significant relationships, there are some additional correlations worth noting. Although it was anticipated that gender would have an influence on perception of higher education in Oregon, there was no statistically significant relationship. Education and years lived in Oregon also failed to provide a statistically significant outcome, though the relationship demonstrated that there was a positive relationship between the longer a person lives in Oregon and their view that quality in the past five years had improved. In comparison to Independents (the omitted dummy variable) both Republican and Democrat voters were less likely to see a significant problem in higher education quality now but were more likely to feel that higher education quality has gotten worse in the past five years.

Therefore, after looking at the various demographic, values, and knowledge predictors for public opinion of higher education in Oregon, it can be concluded that those who are older, government workers, knowledgeable, and believe themselves to be

informed are more likely to see a problem with quality in Oregon public higher education. This information would indicate that if Oregon public higher education institutions wish to counter public opinion that quality is a problem in Oregon, they would be well served to direct their efforts toward those populations. Additional outreach should be focused upon people who currently have children in Oregon public colleges and those who are Republicans and Democrats. Conversely, it appears that Independent voters do not think that quality has gotten worse in the past five years, but they do appear to view quality as a problem in higher education.

There is often a public debate about whether or not government needs additional funding, or simply needs to do a better job with the money it has. Table 5 was intended to shed meaningful light on those opinions (particularly toward public higher education) and find out more information about the types of individuals thinking that way about higher education in Oregon. Using two questions in the survey about whether additional funding was needed within Oregon higher education in order to improve quality, or whether there needs to be a better use of state funds in order to improve quality (see Table 2) results showed limited statistically significant demographic predictors: Education level, knowledge, political ideology, and party identification (particularly when contrasted with political Independents.)

Table 5
Regression Estimates for Public Perceptions of Oregon's Public Colleges and Universities Funding Situation¹

	Additional Funding Needed Coefficient (Std. Error)	Better Use of State Funds Coefficient (Std. Error)
<i>Sociodemographic</i>		
Age	.08 (.07)	.01 (.01)
Gender	.11** (.04)	-.11 (.01)
Education	.11** (.04)	.10*** (.03)
Years	-.03 (.02)	-.02 (.01)
<i>Informed</i>		
Informed	-.05 (.05)	.05 (.05)
Know	.59*** (.09)	.33*** (.08)
<i>Ideology/Partisanship</i>		
Ideology	-.37*** (.05)	-.05 (.04)
Democrat	.34*** (.10)	.28** (.09)
Republican	.32** (.12)	.26** (.10)
<i>Situational</i>		
Kids-college	.12 (.12)	.12 (.11)
Govt	.27* (.13)	-.15 (.11)
F Test=	21.55***	7.27***
Adjusted R Square=	.26	.09
N =	662	662

¹The dependent variables are displayed in Table 2.

Significance levels: * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

Increased education correlates to a slightly greater likelihood that a person will believe that a better use of state funds would contribute to additional quality. While education is a statistically significant predictor for the perception that funds need to be spent better, it is not as significant a predictor for the perception that additional funds are needed. Both variable relationships, however, are positive. This outcome is not particularly surprising in light of the individual's likely exposure to higher education, and the possibility that more highly educated respondents are likely to have been personally affected by Oregon public higher education.

The hypothesis about the relationship between knowledge and belief that more funding would be beneficial was supported. Those who are more knowledgeable about higher education, to a significant degree, tend to believe that additional funding is needed, though they also share the view that higher education could better use the state funds they already have. Individuals who are knowledgeable (those who answered the factual question correctly) about Oregon higher education were .59 units more likely to believe that additional funding was needed when compared with less knowledgeable individuals. The more knowledgeable a person is, the more likely they are to believe that current state funds need to be better utilized.

The most surprising of the findings in Table 5 is the outcome of the omitted dummy variable representing political Independents. The results showed that party affiliated Republicans and Democrats were significantly more likely to believe that additional funding was needed than non-party affiliated Independents. The hypothesis about partisan identification and ideology was supported, but this most interesting outcome was not an element of the initial hypotheses. The dummy variables for political

identity were recoded to contrast the views of political independents with both Republicans and Democrats. This conclusion shows that political Independents are much more likely to disagree that public higher education needs more money when compared with their party identified Republican and Democrat counterparts. These outcomes indicate that Independents are significantly less likely to support additional funding for higher education when compared to their Republican and Democratic counterparts.

While the relationship between political Independent identification and the view that funds need to be used better was not as statistically significant, it too was a positive relationship. None of the literature indicated anything about the relationship between identifying as a political Independent and public support of higher education, but clearly more research should be conducted to better understand this correlation. It could possibly be that those who are in political parties are more supportive of government in general, which would be very helpful to know when engaging in public opinion work. If political party affiliation is generally more supportive of government, focused outreach work should be directed toward those who are not in the parties. Conversely, if public higher education officials are looking for the groups that are more likely to support them, they could use the pre-existing databases of political parties to efficiently convey their messages. It is difficult to read much further into this data point because political Independent status covers a vast ideological spectrum (e.g., Green Party to Libertarian)

The hypothesis about political ideology – that conservatives would be less likely to support funding than liberals – was also supported. Respondents who identify as more conservative were significantly less supportive of the statement that additional funding was needed. This is unsurprising because conservative politics often align with an “anti-

tax” mentality, and thus would lead to lower support for additional public dollars going toward higher education when compared with those who are more liberal.

Other findings presented in Table 5 supported the hypotheses, but were not statistically significant. Variable relationships worth noting include the correlation between opinions of higher education and age, gender, years lived in Oregon, having children in college, and self perceived informedness. Women are slightly more likely to believe that additional funding would contribute to quality improvement in Oregon public higher education. This is consistent with literature that indicated that women would be more sympathetic to government programs. Age has a slightly more positive relationship with the belief that additional funds are needed, than with the belief that funds should be used better. Conversely, the length of time that a person has lived in Oregon has a negative correlation with both attitudes (though it also is not a significant predictor.) This supports the hypothesis about the relationship between age and these viewpoints, although it not a significant predictor. Those who perceive themselves to be more informed about higher education are less likely to believe that additional funding is needed, but do have a greater likelihood to believe that current funds should be used better. If a person has children in college there is a positive relationship with the belief that additional funding is needed, when compared with those who do not have children in college, but as with the other situational variable (being a government worker) it was not determined to have a statistically significant outcome in terms of determining a person’s view of funding issues in Oregon public higher education. The table 5 model explains 26% of the variation in public perception of whether or not Oregon higher education needs additional funding in order to improve quality by looking at the situational,

ideology/partisanship, informed, and socio demographic variables were focused on in this table.

In general the hypotheses were supported, although much of the data did not exhibit statistically significant relationships. Perhaps the most surprising outcome of the analysis was the finding pertaining to Independent voter status. Future research should focus upon the relationship between party identification and belief systems about public entities, higher education, and education in general to further understand this unexpected outcome.

Conclusions

Although Governor Kulongoski's ASET dream never came to fruition, the viewpoints expressed in those focus groups were important in making clear that higher education must spend more time understanding the views of the Oregon public in order to better understand how to communicate with them. The research presented in this paper has helped make a contribution toward that end by shedding light on the relationship between Oregonians' views of higher education funding and their various demographic, political and other characteristics. If Oregon public higher education cares to increase public support for additional funding to improve quality, they should consider targeting Independent voters and more conservative audiences because they support higher education less than their counterparts in other groups, and gains might be more substantial.

Although this survey's sample size was small, and the population of respondents was perhaps somewhat older than the state average, it still brings forward a sense of the

perspective of Oregonians. This survey was issued in 2007, and thus a follow-up survey with similar questions would be helpful in shedding light on any opinion shifts over the past few years. This study can serve as a foundation for future research in several areas that should be visited with regularity every few years to determine the potential impacts of policy or funding changes. The findings suggest further investigation into the relationship between party affiliation and opinion of public programs such as higher education, K-12, and other government programs. It might also be effective to conduct a survey that focuses on the state as a whole, as well as a smaller subsample population that focuses on the greater Portland area, because Portland contains a majority of the population in Oregon, and recent elections indicate that it has differing views from those held throughout the rest of the state.

Further areas of inquiry for possible study include:

- Public comfort levels with various tuition rates.
- Public perception of the actual cost of education and the financial impacts upon students.
- Why does the public value higher education (e.g., college football, opportunity for socioeconomic advancement, the impact on volunteerism and political participation, something else entirely?)
- To what degree the public values higher education (e.g., would they choose higher education over other public services such as K-12, social services, police, etc.)
- What the public believes “quality higher education” consists of.
- Whether the public is aware of Oregon’s competitiveness and efficiency in higher education.

- What “support” for higher education actually consists of and what kind of support is meaningful to the public (e.g., support public funding generally, support an alma mater, donate, make higher education a significant issue when meeting with legislators, wearing school-branded clothes, sending a child to college).
- Do forms of support increase when higher education does something “right” or is support unrelated to the performance of higher education?

Finally, this research should be repeated every two to four years in order to determine if changes in quality, funding, tuition, or other “levers” impact public perception.

Additional research could also include qualitative media research, comparative public opinion research between similar states, and qualitative opinion surveys of legislators and politicians.

The research presented in this essay indicates that a majority of respondents believe quality is both a problem in Oregon higher education, and that it has been declining. Considering that, although it is not generally recognized by the public, Oregon higher education is already very efficient when compared with other states – and therefore, that there is very little waste to cut or reallocate towards more effective ends – there is thus a critical need for additional state financial investment to improve quality. The public higher education community should focus on the lessons learned in this research pertaining to the willingness to support additional funds for higher education.

The most compelling and surprising correlation was between unwillingness to support additional funding and Independent voter status. Independent voters are a relatively unstudied population, and as more social movements mobilize “fringe” voting groups (e.g., the Tea Party movement), it becomes even more important to focus on

outreach to populations outside the perceived “mainstream.” Oregon public higher education outreach efforts should also be focused toward more conservative groups and opinion leaders if they wish to develop public support for additional funding among the groups that are most opposed to it today.

Conversely, Oregon public higher education can be proud of the fact that those who are more knowledgeable about Oregon higher education are generally supportive of additional funding. This suggests that public opinion outreach work has been successful at developing support; however, those who are knowledgeable also believe that public higher education can be doing a better job with the money it has. More outreach work to draw attention to cost saving measures, increased efficiency, and performance outcomes would be fruitful, because these groups appear to listen to what is going on in higher education.

Recently, the Oregon University System has been pushing to change its relationship with the state as it encourages the legislature to adopt a new governance proposal that would increase the number of performance outcomes for which public higher education institutions would be held accountable, in exchange for additional freedom from the state. The university system appears to have accepted that an increase in financial support from the state is unlikely at this time. Their new strategy is to rethink the fiscal and administrative connection with the state, and they are actively pushing for the adoption of their proposal in the next year. Regardless of whether this takes place, public institutions continue to need public financial support, and public opinion outreach should be directed toward populations that have an unfavorable attitude towards public education funding – namely, Independents and conservatives.

Similar obstacles in public opinion will continue to face the state as it attempts to reform the way that public higher education in Oregon is funded. The best way to eliminate the gaps of understanding and appreciation of higher education quality lies with more outreach to the public that highlights the level of quality within Oregon public higher education, and the efforts undertaken to increase quality and to reduce any perceptions government waste. More research is needed on the subject -- particularly on testing messages and their effectiveness at swaying public opinion -- as well as on the ways in which people interact with and learn about higher education, so as to better understand what methods of outreach work best. This research is a step in the right direction, but leaves many wrestling with more questions about Independent voters, the ways they think about government, and the way they interact with public higher education.

The stakes for public higher education are extremely high in Oregon. Enrollment is up, state investment is flat, and quality is perceived to be slipping. All of this is taking place as the economic downturn persists longer than anticipated, and the unemployment rate remains steadily around ten percent. As the state continues to struggle with how to invest in postsecondary education it is important to think critically about the manner in which public higher education interacts with voters, the way they communicate with average Oregonians, and how the public perceives them.

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