Massive tuition increase at Oregon public universities

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Oregon's Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) voted unanimously last week to approve hefty tuition hikes, reversing an earlier vote to block tuition increases at two of the larger state universities.

Thursday's decision raises tuition by an onerous 8.4 percent at Portland State University (PSU) and 10.6 percent at the University of Oregon (UO). In-state tuition for 2015-2016, with fees, is currently a prohibitive $8,337 at PSU and $10,762 at UO. With this increase, students will be paying hundreds of dollars more—over $700 more at PSU while UO tuition will increase by nearly $1,000. Out-of-state tuition, which is roughly three times as much as in-state, will have a lower percentage increase.

PSU has an enrollment of over 28,000 students while UO, located 113 miles south of Portland in the town of Eugene, has an enrollment of over 24,000.

Mired in an ongoing budget crisis, the state of Oregon has budgeted no extra money for higher education, maintaining flat funding despite myriad rising costs. The Office of Budget and Finances has forecast a $1.7 billion shortfall for the next biannual budget. Of the over $20.8 billion in income, the lion's share will be personal income tax, contributing 84 percent or $17.5 billion. Less than 5 percent comprises corporate taxes.

Oregon's public universities had requested that the state add another $100 million to the next two-year budget for higher education. Funding, however, is to remain flat from the current biennium at $667.3 million. Tuition and fees constitute nearly 70 percent of total revenues for the state's university system. Oregon, which had consistently ranked in the bottom five states in the US for public university funding, recently climbed up to number 37.

The increased tuition, however, leaves unclear the full extent of cuts to programs by both schools. PSU, in response to the commission's earlier vote, at that time projected an additional $5 million in cuts on top of the $9 million already planned. These cuts to programs, faculty and staffing were to have partially offset a $20 million shortfall at the school this fall. No information has been released on plans for increases to fees, food or housing.

UO President Michael Schill warned that even with a 10.6 percent tuition increase there will still be $9 million in cuts. If the tuition increase did not pass there would have been $15 million in cuts.

Last March, UO issued layoff notifications to 75 non-tenured faculty and four classified employees. Since 2015, 107 jobs have been cut. According to the Eugene *Register-Guard*, the heaviest blow will be to the School of Architecture and Allied Arts non-tenured faculty, "most of whom have been in their positions for 10, 20 and even 30 years."

Miriam, a freshman at UO, explained that the cuts will result in fewer classes being offered and larger class sizes. "In the Romance Language department, where I am studying Spanish, the faculty cuts, I don't recall the exact number, are pretty substantial. Students organized several rallies to protest the tuition increase. But, there was a lot of dissatisfaction with the ASUO [Associated Students of the University of Oregon] because two of the leaders were in favor of the tuition increases." Miriam continued, "Many students simply won't be able to attend college since they are already maxed out. In addition to paying for education they have to pay living expenses."

A comment in the UO student paper, the *Daily Emerald*, noted: "The university just got a 500 million dollar donation for a new research facility, 15 million should be nothing to them. Apparently [Nike founder

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Phil] Knight's ego is more worthy of funding than our education."

All seven Oregon public universities will see increased tuition and fees for students. The other five colleges are enacting tuition increases either above or below the 5 percent level and have been perfunctorily approved by HECC or, with less than a 5 percent increase request, escaped the proceedings entirely.

The HECC, a 14-member body appointed by Democratic Governor Kate Brown, had voted down an increase at PSU and UO earlier this month citing a lack of student participation in the proposed hike. That decision was taken amid growing opposition by students on both campuses, which are two of the largest schools in Oregon's seven-campus public university system, with a combined enrollment of 52,000 students. In the second hearing, both school administrations asserted that student input had been sought.

Answering the criticism of lack of student participation, outgoing PSU President Wim Wiewel's letter to the commission pointed to a campus-wide meeting with students and special meetings with small groups of students. "In total, I feel that there were meaningful opportunities for engagement by a broad and diverse group of students in this process," Wiewel wrote. UO wrote a similar letter.

Students, however, viewed this process in an entirely different light, organizing protests and speaking at the hearings to denounce any increase to already insufferable school costs. Thursday's hearing allowed only one hour for public comment for both proponents and opponents.

Given the subsequent vote to approve the increases—7 to 1 for UO and 8 to 0 for PSU—it is obvious that the commission viewed the initial rejection as a delaying tactic rather than a principled defense of students' right to an education. The second vote was timed for near the term's end, when students are preparing for finals, restricting their ability to organize an opposition. Incoming ASUO President Amy Schenk said many UO students couldn't attend the meeting because of midterms, and since the meeting was called last Thursday, ASUO has had no time to organize.

All levels of government have cut funding for higher education over the last 25-30 years. At the federal level since 1976, Pell Grants, the primary assistance for lower-income students, have gone from covering nearly 75 percent of public college costs to a little over 30 percent. Meanwhile loans have become the dominant means of funding school costs. Student loan debt reached a record $1.31 trillion in 2017, second only to home mortgage debt.

A recent study shows that for the majority of working class and moderate income students, only 1 to 5 percent of colleges were affordable. In a report released in 2014, Richard L. McCormick wrote, "Among the factors threatening college attendance today, the most pervasive is the decline of government support ... and the resulting increase in both tuition and student debt. A quarter century ago, a typical in-state student attending a public college or university probably paid about a third of the cost of his or her education, while state appropriations covered the rest; today the proportions are reversed, and such students are expected to pay most of the cost of their own education."

We encourage PSU and other students to attend the International Youth and Students for Social Equality meeting this Wednesday, at Portland State University, Millar Library, Room 320 to discuss the socialist program in defense of the right to an education.

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