

The Oregonian

Two steps back

If legislators can't raise higher ed pay, they should pledge to fix Oregon's boom-and-bust budgeting

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From his post in Baltimore, 2,800 miles away, Wim Wiewel assumed Oregon was the kind of place that invests heavily in colleges and universities.

Then he got on an airplane. And he saw Oregon up close, with its volatile budget, quirky funding practices and anemic support for higher education.

"It made me stop and think, 'Is this a job that is doable?' " says Wiewel, the newly hired president of Portland State University. He cites a recent labor dispute at PSU over low salaries as one challenge stemming from weak public funding.

"It's not an abstract issue," he adds. "It has real consequences in daily life."

Those consequences could get more real in a hurry.

The Legislature may quietly backtrack this spring on part of a promise it made last year, with great fanfare, to reinvest in higher education. The Legislative Emergency Board has withheld \$28 million that legislators earmarked to boost faculty pay at the state's seven four-year universities. If the economy continues to sour, faculty and staff may never see the money designed to boost their below-par salaries and improve recruitment and retention.

From a university point of view, this is the worst of both worlds: The public thinks you got a raise in 2007, but you never see the money. Then when you come back in 2009 to lobby for the raise you lost, the public thinks you're relentless and greedy.

It's enough to send a few hundred professors to their respective psychology departments for some crisis counseling.

The state's 20-member emergency board has the unenviable job of rebalancing the budget when the full Legislature isn't in session. Members must spread cuts among big-ticket items such as K-12 education, health care, human services and corrections. These services tend to have louder advocates, more legal mandates and more vulnerable clients than higher education does, so Oregon's universities often come in last.

Around here, every funding boost seems to be accompanied by a bust. This is how Oregon's colleges and universities ended near the bottom of the national heap for affordability and public funding.

Last year, state lawmakers set aside money from the corporate kicker to serve as a rainy day fund. That smart decision will help limit some of the damage if Oregon faces another recession. Now, state leaders need to look for additional ways to shake off the boom-and-bust blues -- starting with the kicker formula itself, or the taxing policy that still allows big corporations to pay as little as \$10 a year while ordinary families dig deep.

Meanwhile, you'll have to excuse the disappointment among Oregon professors and adjunct instructors with full classrooms and uncertain salaries. They think they're about to lose a promised raise.

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