

My View: PSU needs help: Vote yes on tax initiative

By Al Fitzpatrick

OPINION

Oregon's public universities attract eager minds who want top-notch educations and access to our state's fantastic natural surroundings. Whether you're drawn to Portland, Eugene or elsewhere, there's a fit for everyone.

But as attractive as Oregon's institutions of higher learning are, they are increasingly difficult to afford. They are being squeezed by our state Legislature. For the past 20 years, lawmakers have been chipping away at financial support for the state's seven public universities. The state once funded 80 percent of universities' budgets; now it funds 25 percent. Among the 50 states, Oregon ranks an embarrassing 46th in funding for higher education.

Portland State University has found this funding crisis to be particularly troubling. Founded to serve local World War II veterans, its financial foundation is different from that of other higher education institutions in Oregon.

PSU is primarily focused on serving the local community. Its student body reflects this mission. Eighty percent are in-state students, more than any other public university in Oregon. Many students are older and non-traditional, with families and full-time jobs.

Although most students work, they too frequently have to choose between buying books, buying food or paying tuition. The line at the on-campus food pantry routinely stretches far down the block. As a result, we are losing some of our best and brightest. One in three PSU students drops out during the first two years, primarily because of cost. Not only does this mean too many students must abandon their educational dreams, but it also hobbles the economy.

Not only would a well-educated workforce benefit local employers, but a stable and living wage allows graduates and their families more latitude as consumers. We can't afford to be outpaced by the states and countries that are investing more in education than we are.



PSU's staggering funding shortfall is largely passed on to students and their families, and graduates often have crippling IOUs that hamper their ability to succeed. This is a desperate crisis, to be sure, and one we can't wait any longer to abate.

That's where Yes for PSU comes in. It's a ballot measure campaign we fully support that will levy a tiny tax on metro area businesses. The tax is designed to raise \$40 million annually. If voters approve the measure in November, this money will go directly and solely toward PSU students' needs in the form of scholarships, more teachers, and more advisers, tutors and counselors — all badly needed. Workers will not pay a dime of this tax. Businesses will, however, pay 0.1 percent of their total payroll. If a company's annual payroll amounts to \$500,000, it will owe \$500 in additional taxes.

The Yes for PSU measure calls for a small investment that will go a long way toward supporting the needs of many hard-working college students, not to mention the business community. We know, for example, that 66 percent of PSU grads go on to pursue careers in the Portland metropolitan area. That's what we call return on investment.

The Portland State University Foundation is in full support of this measure, as it should be. Its mission is to support PSU as "a leading public urban university." On its current downward spiral, PSU is in danger of failing its students and the community it's dedicated to serving. Please support Yes for PSU, for everybody.

Al Fitzpatrick is a retired educator and school administrator. He received his master's degree in educational administration from Portland State University in 1984 and was an adjunct instructor at PSU off and on for 20 years.