OSA Testimony January to the State Board of Higher Education

Hello Chair Donegan and members of the State Board of Higher Education. My name is Merriam Weatherhead and I am the Board Chair for the Oregon Student Association. Thank you for allowing me an opportunity to speak with you today. First, I’ll say that since I last spoke we had a major election in our state and nationally. OSA is nonpartisan, so we don’t take stances on individual races or ballot measures. We do however take a great interest in engaging our members across the state in registering the vote and ensuring they turn out to vote, regardless of party affiliation, to make student voices a major part of our civic process. We surpassed our voter registration and “get out the vote” goals and we can officially say we registered 50,750 people to vote in Oregon. We surpassed our goal of 40,000 people, and that means that 1 in every 50 Oregonians was not only registered to vote by OSA, but then called and reminded to vote multiple times during the election. We are very proud of a youth voter turnout rate that far exceeds the national average and we hope student engagement in the election will ensure that elected officials are listening to the needs of students in the upcoming Legislative Session. Our hard work and the number of students we registered is impressive because of sheer numbers but also because these students registered because of the issues that they care about, tuition, financial aid, and policies that make college more accessible.

Today I would like to speak with you about a few items, our budget advocacy, capital construction priorities, tuition equity, and post-secondary education governance.

OSA’s primary legislative priority every legislative session is funding for our schools and need based aid. The Governor’s Recommended Budget was not enough. We know that OUS needs closer to $850 million (which is what you requested) in order to stabilize tuition costs. We will be asking for levels closer to the $850 range for OUS and $510 for the community college support fund because tuition is skyrocketing and students are taking on debt burdens that are too much to bare. More and more students are taking fewer classes in order to work more hours thus extending their stay or choosing not to complete their degree solely based on the growing cost of their education.

What currently frustrates us is that members of the House Higher Education Committee have told us that the message coming from OUS is that the GRB was enough and we ask that you
consider changing your messaging. Or at least make a point of clarifying your disappointment with there not being enough funding. The GRB is not enough and it cuts out the Chancellor’s office and all the shared services that save our schools money. If you truly are comfortable with the GRB budget that sends us the message that you are fine with placing each campuses budget concerns solely on the backs of students. We are saddened by this message and hope it’s not true and ask that you come out stronger for an increase in the OUS budget this session with students.

In regards to capital construction we do believe that increased classroom space and buildings that support student success are important to the quality of our education. Students will be prioritizing our preferred projects at our January and February board meetings. We will also be taking into account a final decision on whether we are going to support Treasure Wheeler’s Opportunity Initiative. We look forward to working with you on campus capital construction projects this legislative session.

OSA will also be working on three policies for the state that could improve access to post-secondary education. The greatest priority in this realm is Tuition Equity, which would allow OUS to charge undocumented students in state tuition. We truly appreciate your support for this issue and we are confident with the strategy for the bill and the increased number of supporters we have for TE this coming session that we will be able to pass this legislation. Legislators are hoping to pass this bill early so you all can make quick rule making and help get students ready for instate tuition for the 2013-14 academic year. Please keep TE in mind as you plan your meetings for the rest of this year. And thank you for your support.

In response to the ever evolving governance discussion happening at the OEIB, the HECC, among legislators, and in the media we want to be clear that as it stands we are opposed to the bills that create institutional boards for PSU and UO. That opposition is based on a lack of accountability mechanisms needed to limit competition. We are also concerned that these policies will result in increased costs based on the decentralization of shared services. There is a lot of ambiguity around the tuition setting and budget approval processes for each campus. We are concerned about what will happen to the regional campuses and finally we are of course concerned that none of the proposals have students, faculty, or staff on the boards. We believe that accountability is never bad for Oregon. We would prefer a statewide system which is why we are open to ideas that include a change of the HECC into something like a Department of Post-secondary Education. It is an encouraging thought to consider having universities, CCs, and financial aid all talked about in the same place. We will continue to keep an open mind about these changes. Experience tells us there will be a lot of iterations between now and June on bills like these and we look forward to a continued dialog with all of you.
There will be many other bills that impact students in the next 6 months and we will take each one under consideration before supporting or opposing any further legislation. For example, at our next board meeting we will be discussing bills about credit for prior learning, online education, and dual credit. Although our budget advocacy will remain our number one priority we know you have an extensive legislative agenda and we hope we can work together to discuss other issues of quality and access. Our issue choosing process was a 6 month long process and we surveyed over 10,000 students across the state. We feel motivated and prepared to talk about the issues we care about with elected officials and you all in the coming months.

Thank you for your time today and I would be happy to take any questions.