

Proposed Concepts for the Oregon Opportunity Trust Focus Group Discussions

in Medford/Grants Pass and Portland, Oregon in October 2004

Executive Summary

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Purpose

The purpose of the project was to involve the public and explore its attitudes about higher education and helping more Oregonians get a postsecondary education, specifically through the proposed Oregon Opportunity Trust (OOT).

Research Design

Davis, Hibbitts & Midghall, Inc. (DHM) conducted and analyzed the comments of two focus group discussions held in the Medford/Grants Pass and Portland areas in October 2004. Participants were recruited from the Medford/Grants Pass (MGP) and Portland Metropolitan (PDX) areas to represent a cross-section of Oregonians. Each group had 15 participants.

Overall Finding

The majority support the basic policy goal – to make a college education more affordable for all Oregon residents. Most participants started out supporting the proposal.

Participant Reaction to Proposal

- *I think everyone should qualify for the full grant, not just those with a lower income. (PDX)*
- *First come, first serve is poor criteria. Constitutional amendment is poor idea. (MGP)*
- *Funding aside, this could be a truly revolutionary proposal. Other countries put their kids through higher education, why can't we? (MGP)*
- *There should be some type of academic requirement to be eligible for the grant. (PDX)*

Key Concerns

Based on the discussion, written materials, and rankings, support was weakened by the following concerns:

- Is structured as a constitutional amendment
- Is purely “need-based” with no merit component
- Provides no assistance for the middle class
- Includes no academic performance requirement beyond minimum standards of individual school
- Has no post-graduation residency requirement
- Has too short a pre-application residency requirement
- Harms K-12 by siphoning away financial support
- Will raise taxes

Other Vulnerabilities:

Participants identified a number of issues of concern to them that were not covered in the prepared materials. Although these were not always majority views, they did seem to resonate for others:

- Oregon should reduce the overall cost of postsecondary education for the benefit of everyone, rather than creating this new program
- The OOT is redundant – the state already subsidizes postsecondary education and there are other grant programs for students (e.g. PELL)
- This is a welfare hand-out with no accountability for those who just want to party during school; no requirement that students show motivation to succeed and a record of success

Next Steps:

Based on these focus group findings, the OOT needs some major restructuring to keep supporters. Even among the strongest supporters, two changes are clearly needed as follows:

- Consider alternatives to a constitutional amendment, and
- Provide benefits for the middle-class.

Other elements that could be added to strengthen support are as follows:

- Some type of merit-based qualification,

- More rigid pre- and post-residency requirements, and
- Some minimal level of achievement during college.

Whether these changes would be adequate, given the funding challenge, would need to be explored through more research.