

Statement from the Senate President and Vice President on the University Budget

Among the many effects of the global pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus is a significant impact on the budget of the University of Oregon. There is tremendous uncertainty around the timing, duration, and magnitude of the fiscal consequences, but little doubt that we will need to make substantial temporary and long-term cuts to our operating budget within the next 6 - 9 months.

The necessity for large cuts with relatively little forewarning is challenging for the University and stressful for its students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Writing as faculty members who hold leadership positions in the University Senate, our assessment is that any decisions about how, when, and where to reduce the budget expenditures should balance the following concerns.

First, the academic mission of the university to educate our students and create new knowledge must be protected. We are under no illusions that the ways the University of Oregon serves its mission will remain unchanged through the epidemic. The University has already witnessed tremendous upheaval in teaching and research—courses transitioned to remote delivery and research labs temporarily shuttered—and more is sure to come. At the same time, we are heartened to see the many ways that faculty, staff, officers of administration, and upper administrators are reinventing their work in ways that nonetheless meet our shared expectations for the quality of our teaching, research, scholarship, and creative works.

If we are to be successful, the coming years will need to see this ingenuity exponentiated. It is not an exaggeration to say that UO must find new, creative ways to accomplish its mission within the next few years. We can do this, but only through careful, thoughtful, and collaborative planning by faculty, staff, and administrators. We can create a new path toward our mission that is shared by people at all levels of the institution if we do so collectively, by bringing together the expertise, knowledge, and experience of faculty, staff, and administrators, and guided by a commitment to shared governance of our university. The tools we will need are strong leadership that focuses first on serving the mission of the university, radical transparency into the budget and operations of individual units that ensures we are all operating on the same information, a commitment to shared sacrifice, and a sense of a common purpose and understanding that we all have a role to play in shaping the form the University of Oregon takes in the coming years.

Second, the people who dedicate their lives and careers to fulfilling the mission of the university are critical to the success of the University of Oregon in both academic and fiscal terms. The University makes a commitment to students to deliver high-quality, engaged pedagogy in our courses and programs. Only career and tenure-track faculty can meet this obligation, and we rely on critical support from staff and officers of administration to do so. When we offer a course or program, we are bound to live up to the standards we set for ourselves. To the extent that staffing reductions are necessary, they must respect the realities of these programmatic needs. Now is the time for us to achieve clarity, through rational and transparent processes, on exactly what resources are required for each unit to fulfill its mission. Budgetary decisions should follow from a frank assessment of these needs.

Third, it is clear to us from the simple fact that personnel costs are about 80% of the University budget that reductions to personnel costs must be part of any solution to maintain the fiscal solvency of the institution. However, in light of the first two concerns, these reductions must be made as a last resort, only after all other possible means of saving costs have been exhausted or cannot be implemented. Efforts must be taken to decrease operating costs, reduce travel expenses, eliminate overage pay, re-assign idle personnel, provide voluntary phased retirement options, and so forth. Though we deeply appreciate the efforts to reduce costs without personnel changes, we also understand that a blend of personnel and non-personnel cuts will eventually be necessary. The University must retain as much flexibility as possible as we carefully, creatively, and inclusively consider new ways to fulfill our mission while reducing personnel costs.

None of us want to be in this unpleasant position. We must relinquish the illusion that higher education will return to how it was before the pandemic and embrace the idea that now is the time for institutions of higher education to reinvent themselves in bold ways. We close with a call to our UO leaders and colleagues across campus to join us in boldly facing the challenges that lie ahead. We know that faculty, staff, and officers of administration are ready to take on this important task in systematic ways. We look to the leaders in central administration to take the first step: Articulate clear, mission-driven priorities and expectations and commit to transparency in unit budgets and operations. Together, we can engage in bold and transparent actions that exemplify the kinds of shared sacrifices and change that this moment demands. Such actions will nurture a sense of common purpose by recognizing the important role of all stakeholders and including them in the process. We believe the faculty are ready to help.

The University of Oregon exists to serve a mission of education and knowledge creation. We, together, thoughtfully and earnestly, need to arrive at a shared vision of how we can serve our mission of excellence in teaching, research, and artistic expression, and commitment to fostering the development and wellbeing of our students, community, Oregon, and beyond, now and in the post-pandemic world. Only then can we set a course to undertake the changes necessary to emerge from this difficult time positioned to realize our shared vision.

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