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Oregon University System restructuring bill approved by Senate *SB 242 will provide greater autonomy, improve efficiency*

SALEM – Landmark legislation to restructure the governance of Oregon’s public university system received broad, bipartisan support in the Oregon Senate this morning. Senate Bill 242 is the product of an interim workgroup that met to examine best practices for improving the quality, efficiency, and affordability of Oregon’s seven-university system.

“This new compact sets a new foundation for higher education. It is audacious enough to re-imagine a new way of creating opportunity and education for Oregonians,” said Senator Mark Hass (D-Beaverton), who served of the Higher Education Workgroup and is chair of the Senate Education and Workforce Development Committee. “This bill acknowledges higher education is the key to success in this state – to higher incomes, to greater learning, to a stronger workforce, all of which are critical to make our state work better.”

Specifically, SB 242 restructures the Oregon University System (OUS) as a public university system rather than as a state agency. This will help increase autonomy and give the public university system greater ability to manage its own resources. Additionally, SB 242 creates the Higher Education Coordinating Commission, led by 15 members appointed by the Governor. The Commission will work to develop a statewide, comprehensive vision for higher education and workforce development at all levels, putting community colleges and universities at the same table for the first time.

“This bill will significantly improve coordination at all levels of post secondary education, allowing our community colleges and universities to work more closely together to deliver better services to our students,” said Senator Rod Monroe (D-Portland), who co-carried the bill on the floor and serves on the board of Mt. Hood Community College. “This legislation incorporates input from a broad range of stakeholders, and that work has produced an innovative piece of legislation that will improve the quality and affordability of higher education in Oregon.”

Because the public university system will no longer operate as a state agency, OUS will be exempt from certain laws that have become burdensome on the agency. Instead, SB 242 incorporates several accountability measures, including a performance compact and biennial performance reports that seek to tie the state’s investment with desired outcomes in higher education. The Legislature will work with the newly created Coordinating Commission to set specific goals, for example higher graduation rates.

“This is a fundamental shift in our approach to higher education in Oregon,” said Senate Majority Leader Diane Rosenbaum (D-Portland). “These tough times call for us to re-think business as usual and this piece of legislation is a shining example of our work this session to deliver services more efficiently and encourage Oregon’s economic recovery. Restructuring higher education is key to Oregon’s growth and our ability to compete in the global economy.”

SB 242 is supported by a broad coalition of business groups, including the Oregon Business Association, the Association of Oregon Industries, and the Oregon Business Alliance. The bill now goes to the House for a vote.

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