



New University Coalition Leaders: Oregon's Economic Competitiveness Threatened by Chronic Underinvestment in Public Universities

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SALEM, OR – Oregon has long ranked near the bottom of the country when it comes to state support for its public universities – and that trend is continuing, according to the recent [State Higher Education Finance report](#) by the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO).

Oregon's public university leaders say that this data has wide-reaching effects on Oregon's economy.

"Prolonged underinvestment risks jeopardizing Oregon's renewed focus on economic prosperity and business development. This is a blind spot that Oregon cannot afford to ignore," **said Portland State University President Ann Cudd**, who began her term as Chair of the Coalition of Oregon Public Universities on May 5th. She is joined by Western Oregon University President Jesse Peters as Vice Chair for 2026-28. Leadership of the coalition rotates between public university presidents on a set cycle.

These two leaders take on their roles at a time of great financial headwinds for Oregon's public universities. The SHEEO report, published annually, shows Oregon continued to rank 46th in the nation in 2025 in funding for its public four-year universities, investing just 59% of the U.S. average per full-time equivalent student.

Notably, Oregon also ranks far below all of its neighboring states, funding only about half of what nearby states provide in per-student state appropriations for public universities:

- Washington: \$14,811
- Nevada: \$11,396
- US Average: \$11,151
- California: \$11,108
- Idaho: \$10,290
- Oregon: \$6,531

"This underinvestment has a significant impact on students," **said Western Oregon University President Jesse Peters**, Vice Chair of the Coalition. "Every dollar the state chooses not to invest in

higher education must be picked up by an increase in student tuition, and universities can't raise tuition enough to remain sustainable without putting education further out of reach. All of our neighboring states have chosen to invest in higher education and build a strong economic future."

Across the country, an average of 48% of public university revenue comes from student tuition, with the rest covered by public appropriations. In Oregon, the student share is far higher, covering 69% of university revenue. Oregon's net tuition is 55% higher than the U.S. average, resulting in higher costs for Oregonians and public universities that are less competitive on the national stage.

Although the ranking hasn't changed, the state's economic climate and focus has: Oregon faces strong headwinds of rising unemployment, lagging population growth, and stagnant industry investment.

In her [Prosperity Roadmap](#), released last year, Governor Tina Kotek repeatedly calls for Oregon to set a goal of moving into the top 10 in CNBC's ranking of the best states for business. Each of the top 10 states in CNBC's 2025 ranking invested more per student in their public universities than Oregon.

This greater state investment usually corresponds with lower tuition costs. For example, Florida, which invests \$16,249 per student in state funding, collects only \$2,194 in net tuition per student – a far cry from Oregon's \$16,364 in net tuition per student. Florida is ranked the third-best state for business by CNBC, and has the seventh-highest state funding per public university student.

Despite Oregon's chronic underinvestment, public universities continue to play an outsized role in attracting and retaining employers and job growth in the state. Business Oregon, the state's economic development arm, [proudly touts](#) that Oregon is 1st in university licensing, 5th in university start-ups, and 4th in patents per capita, ranking 7th in overall innovation. Furthermore, the agency markets the state to potential employers by sharing that "Oregon universities are at the forefront of academic excellence, preparing students to lead in its key industries" with a strong "knowledge worker pipeline."

Indeed, the availability of skilled labor and proximity to higher education institutions producing graduates in needed fields is ranked as one of the most important factors when business leaders are considering site selection for major investments, according to [industry surveys](#). *Area Development*, a site selection industry publication, sums up the survey results by saying "for yet another year, the availability of skilled labor remains the number one site selection factor, rated 'very important' or 'important' by nearly all respondents."

Oregon's public universities will continue to play a leading role in developing Oregon's economy, with an economic impact equivalent to \$10 for every \$1 of state investment. But university and [business leaders](#) say the message is clear: state leaders must finally prioritize investments in higher education and skilled workforce development if they are serious about pursuing a prosperity agenda.

"Oregon's public universities are the single greatest opportunity this state has when it comes to skilled labor and economic prosperity. Oregon's policy choices should reflect that reality," **said Mary Moller, Executive Director of the Coalition**. "Oregon can only reach its full potential by unleashing the promise of our outstanding academic and research institutions – and doing so without placing the burden even further on the backs of students. This moment calls for commitment, not retreat."

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Dr. Ann E. Cudd became Portland State University's president in August 2023. She is a distinguished philosophy scholar and academic leader with a specialized research focus on economic inequality, capitalism, and gender. She previously served as Provost at the University of Pittsburgh, where she significantly boosted student applications and championed equity initiatives like the Pitt Success Pell Match and anti-racism curricula. With prior leadership roles as a Dean at Boston University and a 25-year tenure at the University of Kansas, Cudd brings extensive experience in administrative strategy and experiential learning. An author of over 60 publications, she holds a doctorate and master's degrees from the University of Pittsburgh and a bachelor's degree from Swarthmore College, underscoring a career dedicated to urban research and social justice.

Dr. Jesse Peters, appointed as Western Oregon University's 25th president in 2022, is a first-generation college graduate dedicated to fostering equitable, student-centered academic communities. Since taking office, he has launched the *Education. Innovation. Community.* strategic plan, secured the university's first Title III grant, and led WOU to become Oregon's first four-year public Hispanic Serving Institution. With a professional background ranging from Faculty Senate Chair to Provost, Dr. Peters holds a doctorate in Native American Literature from the University of New Mexico—a field of study that deeply informs his collaborative leadership style and commitment to indigenous worldviews. Originally from rural Georgia, he prioritizes fiscal sustainability and regional partnership while championing diverse hiring and robust support systems for all students.

The Coalition of Oregon Public Universities (OPU) represents all of Oregon's public universities and works to coordinate strategy, advocacy, and alignment on issues of shared concern. OPU is led by a council composed of the president of each public university, with a rotating chair position. OPU replaced the former Oregon Council of Presidents (OCOP) in 2025.