



TO: HECC Commissioners, higher education partners, other interested parties
FROM: Ben Cannon
DATE: March 4, 2021
SUBJECT: HECC Strategic Planning Update and Potential Broadening

Current status of HECC's strategic plan update

In August 2019, the HECC launched the development of a new strategic plan for meeting the State's postsecondary goals, consistent with its responsibilities under ORS 350.075 (d). The Commission expressed that this plan should help generate a new consensus among legislators, institutions, stakeholders, and the Commission about an ambitious path forward for postsecondary education that expands opportunity and equity for Oregonians through increasing levels of public investment, public accountability, coordination, and responsiveness to student and workforce needs.

At that time, the Commission established that a new Strategic Plan should be developed in conjunction with partners, take a holistic view of Oregon's postsecondary system, and anticipate the changes that will be required in order to meet state goals for increased access, affordability, attainment, and equity. It indicated that the completed Plan should not be regarded as a "*HECC* Strategic Plan", but rather as a roadmap for postsecondary education and training in Oregon generally, with implications not only for the HECC but also for its many partners including the Legislature, Governor, public and private colleges and universities, other education and training partners, as well as faculty, students, and staff. For the HECC specifically, its [Strategic Framework 2017-21](#) will continue to provide direction and guidance to HECC staff and the Commission as they develop policy, budget, and other priorities.

Between October 2019 and March 2020, HECC and its consulting partner Coraggio Group conducted large-scale public and stakeholder outreach, published key findings in an [Insights Report](#), engaged a high-level Planning Team in the development of what it had begun to call a "Strategic Roadmap," and planned several stakeholder and legislator retreats for additional feedback.

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak in March, HECC and its Planning Team made the difficult decision to suspend continued work on the Strategic Roadmap until at least Fall, 2020. In announcing the suspension, the Planning Team invited all stakeholders to keep in mind several interim "guiding principles" that had emerged from its work:

1. Postsecondary education and training are central to Oregon’s return to strength and prosperity.
2. Affordability and access to postsecondary education and training require investments of the state funding.
3. Equity must be central to all we do.
4. To achieve our shared goals, we must all commit to collaborate and work together in new ways.

Since October 2020, the HECC and its staff have drafted – with significant feedback from stakeholders and partners – a briefing paper (attached) that describes the changed context for postsecondary education as a result of COVID, the disparate economic and health impacts of the pandemic, and the country’s ongoing reckoning with racial injustice. It concludes by sketching a series of proposed strategies in the following categories, each anchored in the State’s goals for increasing equity and student success:

1. Provide sustainable funding for Oregon’s colleges and universities
2. Align statewide capacity to the needs of Oregonians today
3. Fund financial aid
4. Transform and innovate to serve students best
5. Make alternative pathways to training and employment available

These strategies represent the central pillars of the HECC’s draft Strategic Roadmap.

Potential additional consideration of higher education structure

Last month I requested the Commission hold a special meeting in March, 2021 to review the status of the Strategic Roadmap and to consider adding to the Roadmap a commitment to evaluating Oregon’s existing structure for the oversight, delivery, and coordination of higher education. Several factors led to my request for the Commission’s consideration of this potential addition:

1. Oregon’s higher education structure has not been evaluated systematically since the dramatic changes that it underwent between 2011 and 2014, including the creation of separate Boards of Trustees for each public university, the dismantling of the Oregon University System, and the creation of the HECC. While it strikes me as premature to reach the types of conclusions that would support structural changes as sweeping as those made 7-10 years ago, it may be appropriate to take stock and consider what refinements to the current system, if any, should be made.
2. Demographic trends and other pressures strongly suggest that Oregon colleges and universities will experience an increasingly crowded and competitive “marketplace” for at least the next two decades. This exposes highly tuition-dependent institutions – including all of Oregon’s public colleges and universities – to greater risk.
3. The pandemic has introduced a generation of students and faculty to distance education. While cognizant of its limitations, future students also seem likely to expect greater access to college anytime, anywhere. This creates challenges and opportunities that State and institutions may or may not be structurally well-positioned to meet.
4. Citing various and disparate reasons, a number of key state legislators have recently expressed frustration that current higher education structures are not optimized to meet our objectives. While they have not typically proposed a specific “solution,” their level of concern alone may warrant a comprehensive evaluation and recommendations.

I want to be clear that I am not proposing that the HECC alone undertake an evaluation of Oregon’s higher education structures -- or even that such a project necessarily be HECC-led. While ORS 350.075(3)(h)(C) authorizes the HECC to “advise the Governor and Legislative Assembly on issues of university governance,” I envision a project that is potentially broader in scope (ie not limited to “university governance”) and that is undertaken more collaboratively than this statute suggests. This is consistent with other elements of the HECC’s draft Strategic Roadmap that will require partnership or leadership from other higher education entities in order to be realized.

Finally, the HECC and its partners should also consider how the evaluation process suggested here could complement – or even be combined with – other efforts that may be launched over the next several months. Those include an Oregon Council of Presidents’ proposed study to guide the future of higher education in Oregon, a legislator-proposed Task Force on Student Success for Underrepresented Students ([HB 2590](#)), and a legislator-proposed process to permit institutional mergers ([SB 1](#)).

There are risks in undertaking the type of structural evaluation suggested here

Finally, a note of caution: any undertaking along the lines of what is described here should not come at the expense of our efforts to work within existing structures to improve higher education outcomes for Oregonians. I am very wary of the phenomenon – too common in Oregon – where structural “reform” substitutes for addressing more profound, underlying barriers. For example, I cannot envision structural changes to Oregon higher education that on their own significantly improve outcomes, equity, and affordability in the absence of corresponding progress on public funding for students and for institutions. If structural change is perceived as an *alternative* to supporting other efforts – improving funding, streamlining pathways, creating more inclusive campus cultures, expanding outreach, etc. – or if it absorbs too much of the HECC, institutional, stakeholder, and/or legislative bandwidth that is required to make progress on those other issues, it should probably not be undertaken. Any consideration of structural or governance issues must be undertaken in connection with clear goals for student, state, and institutional success and should not be undertaken for their own sake. Ultimately, the Commission and its partners should weigh these risks against the risk of being perceived as having failed to evaluate and capitalize on the potential benefits of strengthening Oregon’s higher education structure.