

GUEST COLUMN: SOU's future is something to be excited about

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By Rick Bailey



Email guest column submissions to letters@rv-times.com (Rogue Valley Times image)

If Southern Oregon University is a canary in the coal mine for public regional universities in Oregon and across the country, here's an update: The bird is alive and singing.

We have confronted an outdated, out-of-balance financial structure for higher education in Oregon and a long-anticipated demographic cliff — fewer students coming through our high schools. We have examined each of our programs from every angle, laid out a plan to bring costs into alignment with revenue for the long term and thoughtfully conceived a strategy to position SOU as a leader in the evolving national landscape of public higher education.

That's cause for excitement — not just the recognition we're receiving for creative problem-solving, but the fact that we are using a financial predicament as a pivot point that will transform SOU into something sustainable, responsive and, honestly, better.

Our students should be excited by our focus on the Rogue Valley — its natural resources, businesses, organizations and people — as a living laboratory where relevant capstones, internships, mentorships and research projects bring together academic theory and hands-on experience. They should be excited about an interdisciplinary approach that promotes the sharing of relevant coursework across majors, and streamlined pathways to completion of their bachelor's and graduate degrees.

Our partners throughout southern Oregon should be excited about our emphasis on regional values and new opportunities to enlist SOU students, applying their fresh and inquisitive minds to the everyday routines of our businesses, schools and organizations. They should be enthusiastic about their role in the shaping of our region's future workforce — its professionals, leaders and innovators.

A new study of Oregon's three regional public universities showed that SOU has a total annual economic impact of \$730 million statewide and \$532.5 million in southern Oregon alone. Everyone from Bandon to Brookings, from Prospect to Provolt and from Redding to Roseburg should be excited about the prospects of our university's continued influence in every aspect of life in the Rogue Valley and beyond.



Much has been published about SOU’s fiscal challenges over the past several months — and rightly so. But today, our attention is focused on the future. We are reimagining the role of a regional public university for a new era — a role that honors our history while embracing the realities of a changing higher education landscape. Our focus is on building a university that is rooted in its region, connected to community needs, responsive to workforce opportunities and committed to student success. This is more than a recovery. It is a deliberate effort to create a different kind of university for the future.

Our task over the past several months has been to guarantee SOU’s future by reducing expenses by at least \$20 million per year — about a fifth of our overall budget — and to preserve our students’ pathways to success, in the process. We did better than that by committing to tearing down a siloed and inefficient departmental structure and replacing it with an interdisciplinary system of academic cornerstones that promote coursework coordination among our students’ majors. We will leverage faculty expertise to provide our students the broadest possible set of academic options, and will make experiential learning – research published, performances staged, films completed, communities served, children taught or watersheds restored — an essential part of each graduate’s portfolio.

Reductions have a human face and disrupt the lives of valued friends and colleagues, and those decisions are not made lightly. But by rethinking our approach and transforming our academic delivery model we will achieve our savings target and maintain all but one of our undergraduate programs.

Our pioneering approach is designed to be disciplined, accountable and achievable — and it creates the best opportunities possible for our students and community members. We have taken an approach that is less about cost-savings and more about redesigning our brand of higher education.

Under our new model, this region is the laboratory where our students will explore, discover and create. SOU’s interdisciplinary academic design and fast-track options will allow flexibility, and our students will graduate human-connected and technologically aware.

Your regional public university is ready to serve, with a ground-breaking academic and operational structure, and strengthened long-term financial foundation. We are excited for our future and invite you to be a part of something unique in an era of disruption and uncertainty. We welcome your thoughts and input as we build a better university — and a better community — that benefits us all, well into the future.

Rick Bailey is president of Southern Oregon University.

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