

What Can a Struggling University Do if It Can't Cut Any More? Change.

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Lee Gardner

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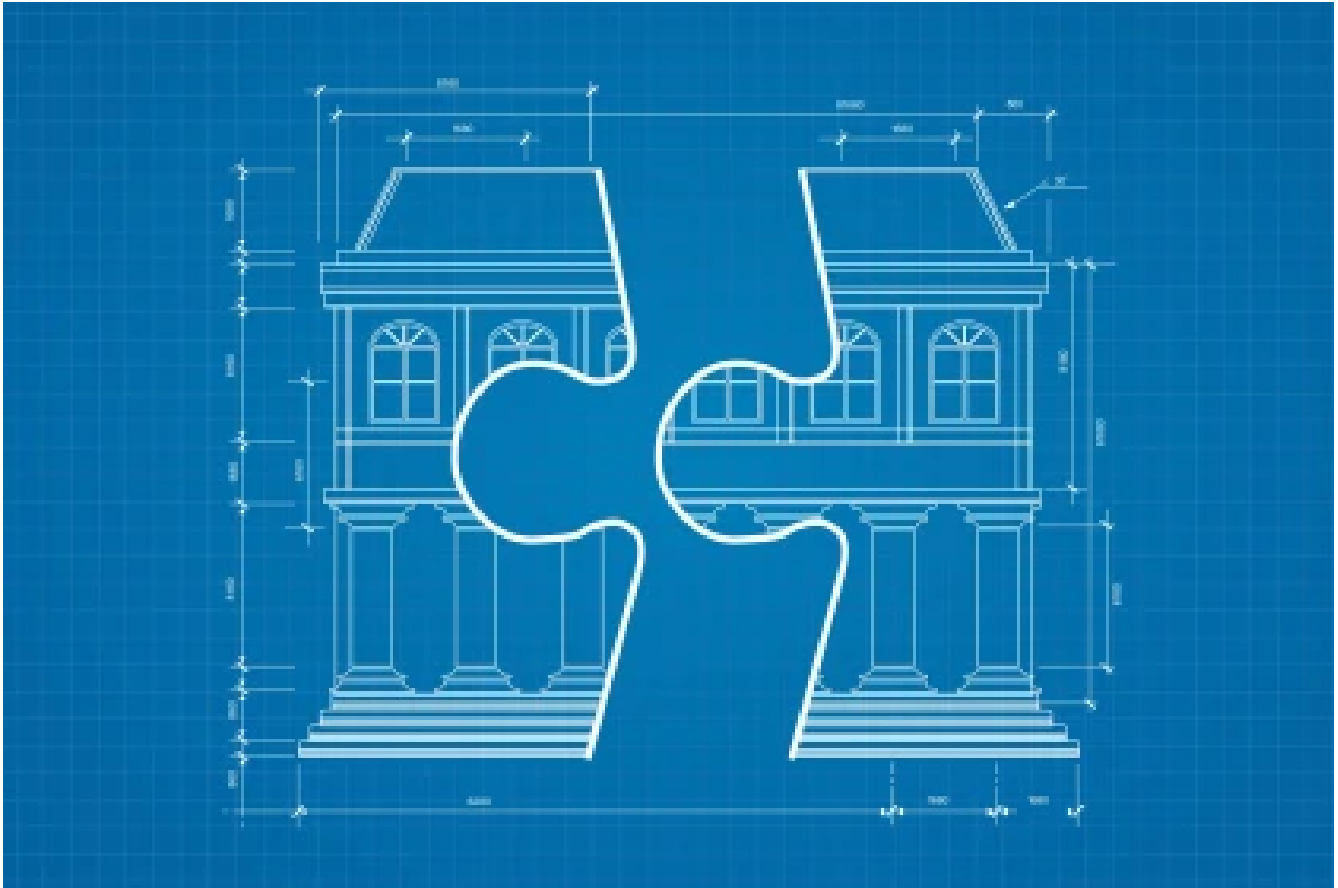


Illustration by The Chronicle; Getty

Like many struggling colleges in recent years, Southern Oregon University has cut and cut.

It eliminated about a third of its faculty and staff positions through several rounds of budget slashing over the past three years, and it declared financial exigency in 2025. Total student headcount has declined by 14 percent since 2014, according to state data. Faced with more financial shortages in early 2026, it hired a consulting company to make recommendations, which included yet more cuts.

But now Southern Oregon is doing something different to try to staunch the bleeding. Instead of continuing to shrink, the university is trying to shift how it functions. With the help of an emergency infusion of \$15 million from the state to cover the institution's cash shortage through fiscal year 2027, its leaders are rethinking how a regional public university can serve its mission rather than verging on failing to do so.

Richard J. Bailey Jr., the president since 2022, says he reached a point in recent months where he had trouble imagining Southern Oregon being able to continue educating students if another round of cuts became necessary. “I was still in that mindset of using the structure and the framework in which we had existed for the last 50 years,” he says. “We can’t just be a smaller version of who we were before. That becomes a death spiral.” The [Vitality Plan](#), a blueprint for rethinking Southern Oregon’s operations and academic offerings finalized by the Board of Trustees in July, is meant to make the most of what it has rather than continuing to pare back the traditional regional-university approach.

The new plan retains some common budget-cutting principles, some of them contained in the [report](#) prepared for the institution by Deloitte, a consulting firm. For example, the university will streamline some of its business operations and eliminate about 60 full-time equivalent positions. (The university is cutting fewer programs than recommended in the Deloitte report.) But Southern Oregon is making other changes. For example, it will consolidate its structure so that all academic departments report to a single dean. Representatives for Deloitte did not respond to an attempt to reach them for comment.

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The plan also calls for changes designed to offer students more, rather than less, than the university was able to offer them last year. The plan mandates that courses be designed around the land and culture of the Rogue Valley, making the most of the university’s setting as an experiential-learning resource. “The bioregion, the indigenous histories, the arts ecosystem, the rural economy, and the wilderness are the course content, not field-trip backdrops,” the plan reads, in part. Students will be assigned faculty mentors, and the academic calendar will be rethought to better benefit students’ lives and learning, such as making room for immersive-learning blocks. None of these tactics represent radical innovations, but they are not typically part of the regional public university playbook, much less all at once.

Budget cuts and attempts to find new savings and revenues, like those suggested by the Deloitte report, had helped keep the university open and serving students, but Bailey worried “how much more blood we can get out of this turnip,” he says. “The Vitality Plan is really transforming what we do, and it’s allowing us to keep the optimal number of pathways open for students, but the way it is allowing us to do that is by fundamentally changing the way we’re delivering service.”

Like many professors at Southern Oregon, Lisa Wileman is weary of budget cuts. She supports the Vitality Plan “100 percent,” she says. An alumna of Southern Oregon and mother to two alumni, she is the chair of the Faculty Senate and chair of the mathematics

department. Mathematics was briefly eliminated as a major last year during budget reductions. After successfully arguing to reduce the department from six to four full-time professors — one retired and another changed his affiliation to physics, though he later left the institution — it was reinstated. She is working with other faculty members to preserve as many programs and faculty lines as she can but says she understands that without the Vitality Plan, the university might be shutting its doors.

Wileman was among many professors who pushed back strongly against the recommendations of the Deloitte report, which she felt were too draconian. Under the Vitality Plan, the university's academic departments will not only save administrative costs but should be less siloed and more ready to collaborate and, hopefully, innovate with new programs, courses, and learning opportunities.

She thinks that building more interdependence between departments is likely to redirect energy away from competition and toward cooperation. In the past, amid rounds of cuts, it's felt "a little like Hungry, Hungry Hippos," Wileman says, referring to the kids' game. "There's a limited number of students, and we're all fighting for them to be part of our degrees and taking our classes, because if we can get credit for them, then we can prove that we deserve to stay at the university."

'A Framework for Other Institutions'

Regional public universities, especially those serving more-rural areas, face the same problems that many colleges face, plus a few that are unique to their situations. Like many institutions, they have become accustomed to nearly a century of growth in enrollment and state support, says Cecilia Orphan, an associate professor of education at the University of Denver and co-director of the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges. That has led to institutions that have built up layers of administration and scores of academic programs that they may no longer be able to support amid declining enrollments due to demographic shifts. If colleges can make smart choices in this period of retraction, it could be to the good, Orphan says. "The challenge is that we still have a mindset that locks onto growth as an indicator of institutional health rather than maybe right-sizing or thinking about what are the appropriate number of programs for the students."

Regional public universities are better positioned to make bold moves than are some other institutions, Orphan says. Public flagships, for example, are more tethered to tradition and prestige, while regional institutions "can experiment with new models and ways of doing things," she says. "The trick is to make sure that their mission to serve people and places remains central."

The type of changes the plan proposes are “not something that we can snap a finger and just make happen,” Bailey says. “That’s going to take a lot of work, but it is the key to making the Vitality Plan transformational, and quite frankly, it’s the key to our future success as an institution.”

Experiments like the ones ongoing at Southern Oregon will hopefully “provide a framework for other institutions to think through how to get through this,” Orphan says, “and get really focused on what you want to do and what you want to be.”