

Opinion:

An investment in higher education is an investment in Oregon's economy

By Jayathi Murthy, Jordan Papé, and Karl Scholz

Murthy is president of Oregon State University. Papé is CEO of The Papé Group. Scholz is president of the University of Oregon.

*Published in **The Oregonian** on February 23, 2025*

Much of the discussion about Oregon's funding for education has focused on the K-12 system. But lawmakers cannot continue to overlook higher education, which is just as essential to the state's future.

Our legislators and political leadership must recognize that **Oregon's approach to higher education funding is limiting opportunities for students and weakening the state's economic future.** While other states have made strong investments in their public universities – keeping tuition costs down, expanding programs and driving economic growth – Oregon has yet to take the same steps forward.

Now, Oregon stands out as one of the worst in per-student public university funding in the country, according to the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. **In 1990, the state covered more than 60% of university operating costs; today, it covers less than 30%,** shifting the burden to students and families.

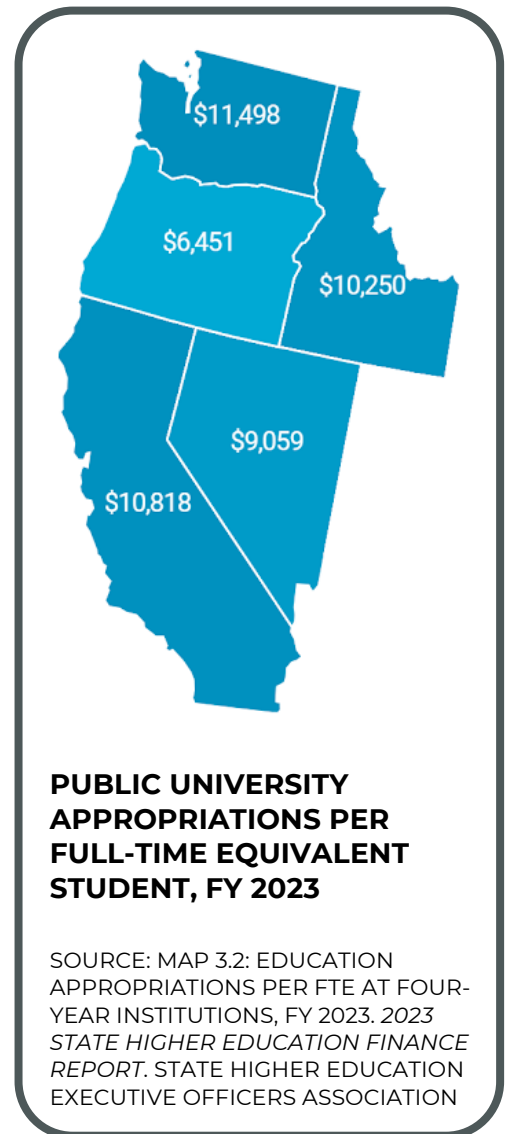
The result? **Average resident tuition and fees at Oregon's public universities is now the highest in the west,** putting college out of reach for many Oregon families.

While recent funding increases have helped keep this problem from becoming worse, they haven't been nearly enough to start closing the wide gap between Oregon and its neighbors, all of whom invest more per student in their public universities. **Oregon students shouldn't be left behind** – they deserve the same opportunities as their peers in states that have prioritized higher education.

And the consequences of chronic underfunding of higher education go beyond the hit to Oregon students. They spell trouble for the state as a whole.

Oregon companies – especially in high-growth sectors like clean energy, advanced manufacturing and technology – depend on a pipeline of skilled workers to remain competitive. **When that pipeline runs dry, businesses must look to other states for talent**, losing time and resources while undermining Oregon's economic potential.

But we know what works, and we've seen it succeed. **When states invest in higher education as part of a comprehensive economic development strategy, the returns are undeniable.** North Carolina's Research Triangle shows how strong public universities create innovation hubs, attracting major employers and emerging research and technology companies. Georgia has done the same with Tech Square, where Georgia Tech's investment in research and industry partnerships has helped turn Atlanta into a technology and business powerhouse.



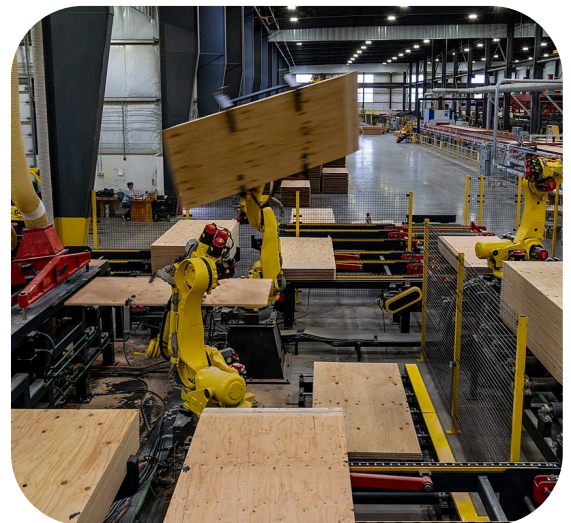
Both states invest more than twice per student in their public universities as Oregon does, and the results speak for themselves – stronger economies, more jobs and a competitive edge in attracting talent and industry.

Oregon has that same potential.

In the southern Willamette Valley, our nationally well-regarded research institutions are ready to drive a similar transformation.

Our universities already have joint initiatives underway, including those aimed at strengthening the state’s semiconductor and mass timber industries. The Corvallis Microfluidics Tech Hub—a collaboration of more than 60 organizations, including Oregon State University, the University of Oregon, businesses and industry — was recently awarded **\$45 million in federal funding** to advance a field essential to making artificial intelligence more energy efficient, with tremendous potential in biotech and advanced chemical manufacturing.

And the TallWood Design Institute, which has attracted almost **\$50 million in research funding since 2016**, brings together our universities’ forestry, engineering and design expertise to advance the use and performance of mass timber. Efforts like these channel federal dollars into Oregon, drive local innovation and support high-wage jobs.



These collaborations go even further when universities and businesses join forces. The UO’s Knight Campus for Accelerating Scientific Impact and OSU’s Jen-Hsun Huang and Lori Mills Huang Collaborative Innovation Complex represent hubs for researchers and businesses to work side by side, turning ideas into products and startups into sustainable companies.

By aligning academic research with workforce demands, these partnerships ensure students graduate with the skills employers need while driving economic growth across Oregon.

But these collaborations depend on strong public universities.

Without sustainable state funding, **Oregon risks undercutting the very institutions that make this work possible**—weakening businesses, local communities and the state’s long-term competitiveness.

The solution is clear: the Oregon Legislature must choose to invest in its public universities as part of its economic development strategy.

Increased state funding will strengthen the pipeline from education to employment, helping businesses find the workers they need while giving every Oregon student the opportunity to succeed.

As leaders in education and business, we stand ready to work together to realize this vision. But we cannot do it alone. **Oregon’s public universities need the resources to stabilize, innovate, and deliver on its promise.** By prioritizing funding for higher education, we can ensure that Oregon is not just competitive but a leader in the 21st-century economy.

The path is proven, the benefits are clear, and the time to act is now.
