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Western Oregon University: The Value of a Regional University

As the new President of Western Oregon University, I wanted to introduce myself to the community and also take a moment to remind Oregon of the value of its regional universities. I am a first-generation student, and I have spent my career at regional institutions that serve a diverse student body. A small setting focused on student success and retention is often the fertile ground where students who may be underprepared can thrive and find their pathways into positive and productive careers.

I'm from a farm in rural Georgia. My mother graduated from high school, and my father only completed the seventh grade. For me, college was a mystery, something I needed and wanted, but also something that was a source of fear and anxiety. I needed a small school when I entered college; I needed a feeling of belonging to a community; I needed a real support system that was interconnected. I needed what WOU offers every day.

Access to higher education is important for our citizens, but access alone is not the solution to educating more Oregonians. And we know that those who hold a four-year degree will earn significantly more on average than those who do not. They will also have more career opportunities and choices, and thus more social mobility. We know that strengthening our workforce and developing new and thriving economies in our state will come from more citizens with higher degrees. And it will take our community colleges and our research-focused institutions for sure.

But I believe that the regional universities provide a unique environment that is key to success for a large percentage of our citizens. WOU is a place where students are empowered to take control of their educational journeys and are offered the support and flexibility they need to be successful.

Here at Western Oregon University, we serve a very diverse student population. Our students are 36% students of color from Oregon. Our students are over 40% first-generation and low income. We are an emerging Hispanic Serving Institution and the oldest public institution of higher education in the state of Oregon. We produce the most classroom-ready teachers of any institution in Oregon, and our graduate programs are growing. We offer special partnerships with Amazon and SEIU for their employees, and our location in Salem is providing easier access for residents in greater Salem.

Our alumni are leaders throughout the state, and they consistently point to the learning environment at WOU that prepared them to be successful. Our students graduate ready to work in collaborative environments, to think creatively, to communicate effectively, and to lead positive change in their communities. Indeed, a graduate from a regional university often has a particular kind of drive and work ethic that makes them some of the strongest citizens and employees.

I came to this institution because of the power it has to change the world. A regional university, like Western Oregon University, sees a student as a whole person, a complex individual who seeks to walk through the doors that a college degree can open. And here we walk with our students, providing support and guidance, always believing they can achieve whatever goals they set. I ask all of Oregon to think about the unique value and opportunity that WOU and the other regional public institutions provide to our state. It is an educational environment we absolutely can't afford to lose.

Jesse Peters
President, Western Oregon University