

**2026 OPU/SEIU Negotiations
OPU Opening Statement
February 12, 2026**

Good afternoon and thank you all for being here.

On behalf of the Universities, I want to begin by thanking the Union bargaining team for your dedication to this process and for the work you do every day not only in representing our campuses but in representing your members as well. We recognize the time, preparation, and commitment that collective bargaining requires, and we appreciate your willingness to engage seriously and thoughtfully in these negotiations.

As we begin this round of bargaining, it is important to acknowledge the broader context in which we are all operating. Higher education in Oregon is at a crossroads. Our public universities are confronting an inevitable enrollment cliff driven by demographic shifts, steadily increasing operating costs, heightened legislative scrutiny, and, more recently, significant changes in how the federal government interacts with higher education. These pressures are not theoretical—they are present, they are real, and they are shaping the decisions all Universities across this state are being forced to make.

You are likely aware that the Higher Education Coordinating Commission has made clear in its recent public communications that Oregon's universities are expected to

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demonstrate increased accountability, fiscal discipline, and long-term financial sustainability. The HECC has emphasized concerns about declining enrollment, structural budget imbalances, affordability for students and families, and the need for institutions to make difficult choices sooner rather than later to avoid deeper disruptions. This level of oversight reflects the seriousness of the moment and underscores that the status quo is no longer sufficient.

Each of Oregon's public universities faces significant financial stressors on both the revenue and expenditure side. On Tuesday, HECC presented to the legislature's Joint Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Education and said that the short-term revenue outlook for the universities suggests that structural gaps will persist. HECC identified that State funding per student is lower in Oregon than in neighboring states, making the public universities more tuition dependent. This is at a time when headcount enrollment fell 6.0% and the enrollment cliff is just in its early phase.

For those not familiar, the enrollment cliff is a phrase used for the projected, sharp decline in the number of traditional college-aged students (18-year-olds) in the United States. This decline is driven by the significant drop in birth rates during the 2008 recession, and this demographic downturn is predicted to cause a roughly 15% reduction in college enrollment between 2025 and 2029.

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On the expenditure side, the growth rate of spending for retirement benefits is now more than double that of wages. Oregon’s public universities spend more on employee benefits as a percentage of wages, than do other states. As HECC said, “it is difficult to see how financial sustainability will be achieved without improved cost efficiency.”

Financial sustainability is front and center at all of the universities in that they are either in the midst of budget reductions or have recently completed those reductions. And, for the first time since my arrival to the Oregon Public Universities in 2012—and likely for the first time for many of you in this room—one of Oregon’s public universities, Southern Oregon University, faced such significant financial distress that it declared financial exigency. Declaring exigency is a last-resort measure, and its declaration is intended to preserve the long-term viability of the institution.

As outlined in SOU’s provisional plan, a key document underlying the exigency declaration, several key factors led to this unprecedented step. These included sustained enrollment declines that materially reduced tuition revenue; rising fixed and contractual costs that outpaced available resources; limited remaining reserves after years of deficit spending; and the conclusion that incremental adjustments were no longer sufficient to stabilize the university’s finances and future. The plan also

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makes clear that exigency was pursued to allow the institution to restructure in a way that could protect its core academic mission and remain accessible to students in the region over the long term.

Against this backdrop, we want to acknowledge the Union's primary goals in these negotiations. We understand that you are seeking to bargain fair wages that keep up with the cost of living; to maintain affordable health insurance and strong PERS contributions; to secure sustainable workloads, remote work equity, and meaningful employment protections; and to strengthen union presence through mandatory new employee orientations, access to new hires, and clear, enforceable layoff language. These priorities matter deeply to you and your members, and we recognize the importance of addressing them seriously at the table.

At the same time, we also need to be candid that there may be challenges in meeting these goals. The realities facing higher education in Oregon—declining enrollment, constrained public funding, increased legislative oversight, and the financial conditions described by the HECC—place real limits on what the Universities can sustainably commit to. Acknowledging these constraints is not about dismissing the union's priorities, but about being candid about the environment in which bargaining is taking place.

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From the Universities' perspective, our core bargaining goals are focused on ensuring that we can continue to serve students and communities across Oregon. Specifically, we are seeking to maintain and strengthen our ability to adapt quickly to an ever-changing financial and technological landscape while honoring the rights of union members; to work within the budgetary constraints facing the Universities when reviewing wage increases; to continue offering what we believe are the best healthcare and retirement benefits in the Pacific Northwest and among the most generous in the Country; and to insist on contract language that allows our universities to remain operationally effective, competitive, and affordable for students.

I also want to briefly return to something I said during the 2023 negotiations. At that time, the Universities expressed a desire to avoid bargaining strictly over positions and instead focus on interests—separating the people from the problem, focusing on underlying needs rather than fixed demands, and creating options for mutual gain grounded in objective criteria. That approach remains our goal in this round of bargaining as well, and we hope the Union is willing to engage with us in that same spirit.

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In closing, despite the very real challenges we face, the Universities remain optimistic that by working together in good faith and acknowledging both our shared interests and our constraints, we can navigate this difficult moment and reach an agreement that ensures student accessibility and success, supports employees, and helps ensure the long-term health of Oregon's public universities. We look forward to the conversations ahead and to the work we will do together at this table.