March 9, 2012

Oregon Education Investment Board members

I offer testimony for your consideration regarding the form of the Achievement Compacts. A useful metaphor is that these Compacts serve as crucial links in the chain between the potential to do better in a unified education system in Oregon and the goal of 40-40-20 and a world-class educated citizenry. The attached analysis shows that the form of the Compacts as initially envisioned will lead to Compacts that will be weak links that are inadequate for the strategic tasks they must perform. The aim of this testimony is to provide a strategic framework and suggest a realistic form for Compacts that can mobilize the human and financial resources to achieve the goal of 40-40-20 and one of the best educated citizenries in the world.

Please read and consider the testimony, particularly its framework and the suggested Compact ingredients. Please take – and create, if necessary - adequate time to agree on a compact form that will work. I suggest it is not an exaggeration to say that the success of the education reform effort requires you get the form of the Compacts right.

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Achievement Compacts are worth Getting Right and Doing Right

March 9, 2012 hearing testimony by Dennis Gilbert*

Introduction

The goal of a 40-40-20 completion rate and "one of the best-educated citizenries in the world" is a bold call worthy of the people and institutions of Oregon. Reaching this goal rests on the potential of a bold vision of a robust, unified, synergistic, Oregon-wide education system, encompassing pre-kindergarten through graduate school. This companion vision provides good reasons to conclude reaching the goal is possible. Beyond the considerable strengths of the existing K-12, Community College, and Oregon University System components, there is significant potential from systemic change, alignment, balance and coordination possible in a unified education system.

Sources of this potential include the following:

1. One of the benefits of having other countries with better education systems (some 15 countries by a recent count) and significant proven teaching advances in different disciplines fully implemented in a relatively few institutions is that there is great potential to learn from others. Generally, making use of these advances working well elsewhere involves a creative process of adaptation done by local faculties. The current education structure contains significant potential for increasing the capacity of the educational system to examine and adapt proven practices to create the necessary best-available learning environments in the world.
    a. A notable characteristic of successful K-12 education systems (Finland, for example) is the provision of far more training support and professional autonomy for its K-12 teachers relative to the US. Thus it is possible to imagine a system in which the collective commitment and intelligence of Oregon K-12 teachers can be mobilized at far higher levels to study, adapt, and implement improvements to create world class learning environments in Oregon.
    b. In OUS schools, where faculty members routinely engage in research and scholarly work is expected of faculty members, students have extraordinary opportunities to be inspired and connected to cutting edge intellectual and research activity. However, the scholarship of teaching and learning is relatively absent. It is possible to imagine the routine support scholarly work extended to include significantly more support of the scholarship of teaching and learning. This would focus on what Lee Schulman called pedagogical content knowledge combining the expertise found in schools of education and content knowledge found in specific disciplines. This understanding is generally necessary for uniformly excellent teaching. In some, relatively few universities, in some fields, like

Physics, robust programs of discipline-based scholarship of teaching and learning is already happening.

c. In community colleges, where faculty members generally do not engage in disciplinary research, faculty members could, if supported focus on the scholarship of teaching and learning, and thus help Oregon reap the benefits of the global education experiments and experience. One could imagine this actually happening. The effect would be huge given the current lack of expectation, support, and authority for community college faculty to carry out such work, and the large numbers of faculty filling part-time positions in transfer programs structurally unable to fully engage in research projects longer than their short term employment contracts. The positive impact by community colleges would be amplified by their role in providing access to people who, for many reasons economic and personal, are returning to the education system. Creating more successful re-entry requires engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning with special expertise, particularly in developmental education where students who have been left out may need a significantly different learning environment to be successful.

2. Separately funded segments of the education system and scarce resources have led to perverse incentives to shift higher cost educational responsibilities away from each segment into others with a loss of total cost efficiency and total education effectiveness. One can imagine that these perverse incentives could be minimized.

3. Successful students move through the system, continuously or discontinuously, terminating with a high school diploma, a community college certificate, or a higher education degree. It is apparent that success or failure in earlier education greatly affects later education (though this should not be simplified with metaphors of an assembly line). A single system can allow enable greater communication, coordination, and alignment, and if faculties have greater autonomy and support for this collaboration, one can imagine significant improvements in earlier education that successfully prepares students for later education.

4. Teachers, in some real way, move in both directions. That is, before people become teachers they go through the system and then go back into parts in which they were students. Since peoples' teaching is heavily influenced by how they were taught and they learned, the later college education of teachers has a large effect on the education of students in their classes. Thus, for example, just as successful college education experiences depend on successful K-12 education experiences, the reality of teacher preparation means that later college teaching experienced by future K-12 teachers will affect the quality of K-12 education. Thus, one can imagine that pedagogical advances in college education will have significant positive effects on teaching and learning in K-12.

5. While one can imagine that moving to a unified education system will achieve significant efficiencies within education, and significant social efficiencies in the sense that costs of state systems involving health and crime will be reduced, investment in an effective unified system will involve financial investment. The real concrete challenges before the education enterprise and the real concrete work of creating a better system for everyone can be expected to command the attention and support of the Oregon citizenry. The potential for this support, however, depends on making the effort transparently real and concrete in terms of what structural and pedagogical changes require what additional funding. Framing the creation of a successful unified educational system primarily in terms of numerical gains in completion and retention is too close to asking for a blank check, and one can imagine that failing to engage citizen support, as it has failed in the past. Fortunately, one can imagine that completing the task before Oregon is an important and exciting one, which if really being done, has every chance of public support to fund it.

The key, strategic role of Achievement Compacts

Agreements between the state and various educational units of the state, the so-called Achievement Compacts, are key to drive and align the efforts of the variety of individual units and to drive and align the larger parts into a system that can achieve the goals of 40-40-20 and a world class educated citizenry. Achievement Compacts need to strategically connect the potential for success and the goals of the educational reform effort. Two key questions then emerge along with their short and longer answers that form the core of this testimony:

> ***Do Achievement Compacts in their initial proposed form adequately connect the educational goal and the potential for successfully achieving it? No.***
>
> ***Can a form for Achievement Compacts be created that will effectively create the necessary strategic connection between potential and goal? Yes.***

Inadequacy of the initial proposed form for Achievement Compacts

The initially proposed form for Achievement Compacts does have some good elements; namely, in the commitment to track progress in relation to the 40-40-20 and education level goals, and in the implicit location of initiative in reaching the goal within the educational system itself. What is stunningly absent, however, is a sense that the compacts are informed by analysis and strategy sufficient to drive and align efforts to success by mobilizing the people involved and the synergy in the creation of the whole system. The low national rankings of primarily K-12 education in the US are well known, but this knowledge alone has not reformed the system nor significantly

increased funding for it. Educators and legislators are also aware of reports like "Academically Adrift – Limited Learning on College Campuses". It is not the lack of recognition of the distance we have to go to solve a very serious problem, but the lack of recognition of and support for a compelling path to a solution that is the problem.

It is widely understood that education has to change, and the initial proposed form for Achievement Compact calls for monitoring the quality of education, presumably to ensure that it is world class. The initially proposed measurement process largely involves persistence and completion measurements, which have been critically examined and generally discredited as a measure of quality. Another initial proposal has been to rely on the accreditation process. This, however, is an empty measure for the kind of process of systemic improvement needed. Oregon schools routinely have and will pass accreditation standards without making the changes needed to reach 40-40-20 and one of the best educated citizenries in the world.

Instead of beginning with strategy and analysis to guide the process of reach our goals, the initially proposed Compact form carries an expectation that success can be achieved mainly through plotting a trajectory of achievement over time to meet the 40-40-20 completion and world class education goal by 2025 and the incentive provided by future funding criteria, part competitive and part not, based on keeping to this trajectory. One can and should appreciate that in this approach there is a laudable element of not micro-managing. However, there can be a structure of support and alignment that also does not micro-manage. And there can be incentives that reward the creation of the dynamics of new system that avoid incentives that reinforce uniform goals on disparate parts of the system. One can appreciate that ongoing assessment can create focus and provide data that can spur change. This was the case in my field, which led to a revolution in physics teaching. However, it was not the data that provided the solution or the explanations of what to do. Yet that is what is needed.

Given the formidable task, it needs to be soberly appreciated that a strategic approach built around numerical awareness of current outcomes encourages, at best, a kind of magical thinking about how this change will actually take place and the roles of all the educators. Worse perhaps is the more likely outcome of this approach, which is cynicism regarding the whole effort. A number of thoughtful articles and commentaries have appeared recently critical of this over-reliance on completion data (See the Chronicle of Higher Education of March 2 Commentary in the March 9 print edition, for example.). Judith Ramaley (See statement at the end.) makes the point that we need to know what is being done wrong to fix the educational system. This requires more than measurements of completion and persistence. Of course, recognizing this begs the question of how one finds out what is wrong. The answer presented above is that by gaining a good understanding of what is working much better elsewhere and creating a way to adapt it locally, we are implicitly identifying and coming to terms with what is not working.

Another criticism of using institutional persistence and completion data to drive change is that the knowledge of and readiness to adapt and implement improvement varies

greatly across academic disciplines. Thus major improvement can be expected to take place very unevenly. Since institutional persistence and completion is more of a collective effect of a variety of learning environments (not to mention external factors), this completion and persistence data is removed from the actual changes taking place.

Given the real challenges involving complicated, stressed systems, the initial proposed form of Achievement Compacts is a recipe for failure.

This critical look at the initial proposed form for Achievement Compacts suggests a number of questions to ask in evaluating such compacts; and among them are the following:

1. How well do the Compacts identify the goals and ensure the accurate monitoring of progress along a viable path to these completion and quality goals?

2. In general, how well do the Compacts clearly and transparently align educators at all places in the system with the potential for success provided by the increased capacities of a transformed, unified education system in Oregon?

3. In particular, how well do the Compacts mobilize educators throughout the education system and support their initiative to move along a path that has a credible chance of success?

4. How well are the Compacts aligned with a concrete vision of what needs to be done so that educators and the public will support and be part of the human and financial investments necessary for success?

Ingredients for effective Achievement Compacts

The analysis up to this point strongly suggests that compacts that can work are agreements that include the following commitments by educational institutions and agencies in the three components of education in the state and the OEIB:

1. Education institutions and agencies commit to timely reporting of relevant institutional and system-wide data, including student access, persistence, completion, systemic improvements in the learning environment, and other elements of actual progress to a world class educated citizenry and the 40-40-20 goal by 2025. Such data elements would be developed in all parts of the education system, with a commitment to a common language for data and analytical markers that have meaning to the faculties throughout the system. The data would also include documentation of levels of participation specified in the commitments in the rest of the Compact.

2. Metrics defining the quality of education will be based on the learning environments provided by the institutions, and in particular on their closeness to

rigorously validated learning environment best practices, which have been identified by the institutions as worthwhile to establish. In the subject matter areas, where such rigorously validated best practices exist, institutions commit to support discipline faculty to study and identify possible best practices for adaptation and implementation in their institutions and identify appropriate metrics to measure successful implementation.

3. Education institutions and agencies commit to support and engage institution faculties to create comprehensive proposals for submission to the OEIB as best practices to support. Documentation to justify investment in these proposals would include realistic expectations based on and including a summary of existing data, financial analysis including any expected efficiencies and alternative sources of funding, and a statement of commitment by the staff directly involved in implementation.

4. In areas where systematic best practices are not well defined and rigorously validated, another process will be available. Educational institutions and agencies commit to supporting faculties in institutional and inter-institutional task forces to investigate and define existing road blocks to meeting the 40-40-20 world-class education goal and promising approaches. For such approaches, educational institutions and agencies commit to support and engage institution faculties to create comprehensive proposals for submission to the OEIB for its support.

5. The OEIB commits to public accounting of the reasons for decisions made regarding investment proposals brought before it, and the maintenance of a website that provides access to data and proposals brought for consideration.

6. The OEIB and other state agencies commit to undo elements of funding models and distribution formulas that provide perverse incentives that lower education quality; for example, the elements of the Community College distribution formula that reward the creation of excessive part-time positions, and the K-12 funding formula that leads to excessive class size and many students taking too few classes.

Underlying strategic assumptions

The above framework is informed by several assumptions worth repeating:

- The assessment that educational crisis is real and there is a real opportunity for improvement.

- The necessity for mindful application of strategic considerations and analysis that provide a plausible path to reaching the desired goals.

- The usefulness and significant impact of local adaptation of rigorously validated best practices already existing elsewhere.

- The usefulness of defining a world class education system in terms of rigorously validated world-class learning environments globally that can be appropriately adapted in Oregon's education system.

- The necessity of empowering local understanding and expertise and faculty leadership to ensure effective adaptation and adequate institutional commitment when state investments are made.

- The fact that progress can and will be made unevenly by subject matter disciplines and institutions and particular joint efforts. Momentum will be created primarily by these individual parts taking significant steps that, in turn, demonstrate possibility and provide practical guidance to other parts of an institution or other institutions.

- Significant efficiencies can be achieved, but more resources are also needed. More internal resources can be mobilized through empowerment, but more external support will be needed. Public support of education will increase if a practical vision of real systemic improvement and investment in it are provided in a concrete, transparent way.

- The general form of the Achievement Compacts is crucial to seizing the opportunity before us. Getting the general form right is a necessity. The price of not getting it right is likely to be making the situation worse and wasting valuable time and resources.

- It is worth making and taking the time to get the form of the Compacts right.

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* Gilbert is a faculty member at Lane Community College and currently a Co-Chair of the LCC Faculty Council, sits on the LCC College Council, and previously on the LCC Learning Council. He is currently a member of the Committee on Research in Physics Education, a governance group of the American Association of Physics Teachers. During his 20-year employment at LCC, Gilbert's service included Vice-President, President, and Past-President on the LCC faculty union Executive Board; Vice-President, President, and Past-President of the OEA Community College UniServ Council (currently the Oregon Community College Council); OEA Liaison to the Office of Community College Services (precursor to the CCWD); and faculty leader in systemic college innovation efforts including Lane's Strategic Learning Initiative, and its Vanguard Learning Colleges Project Leadership Team. In the late 90s Gilbert participated in the multi-year Oregon Collaborative for Excellence in the Preparation of Teachers. Before coming to Lane, for nine years Gilbert was a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Oregon.

There are numerous articles supporting the line of thought in this testimony above, and such commentary is increasing critical of attempting to drive progress on the basis of completion and persistence data. One short piece in the March 9 Chronicle of Higher Education, copied below, is an example.

March 2, 2012 in March 9 print edition (EMPHASIS ADDED)

Do College-Completion Rates Really Measure Quality?

'First, Figure Out Why We Are Failing'

By Judith Ramaley

In his inaugural speech, President Obama declared that "our schools fail too many." Few would disagree with the fundamental premise that we must promote greater educational attainment for everyone if we are to meet the challenges of today's world. The United States once led the world in the percentage of young adults with college degrees, but in recent years, 15 other nations have surpassed us in that measure. Some nations are already pulling ahead of us in the proportion of their total adult population that holds college degrees.

Concerns about our nation's declining position in the global education race and what that may mean for our competitiveness have led us to a focus on college completion. Policy makers are setting goals for degree attainment, designing ways to measure the progress of students and how quickly they earn a degree, and asking colleges and universities to shorten degree programs and remove barriers to

academic success. Few of these efforts include a discussion about what it means to be educated and why we are failing to serve all of our students well.

A focus on "completion" will not be enough to help us increase our competitiveness, prepare our students to be responsible citizens, and protect and enhance our nation's role in the world. We must first figure out *why* we are failing so many students, and then we must do something about it. Only then will the completion rates go up. We must also talk about what an accumulation of credit hours can actually tell us about our graduates. By focusing on degree completion without considering the quality and outcomes of the experiences that accompany that achievement, we are shortchanging ourselves and our students.

Every thoughtful observer has his or her own favorite explanation about why we are failing so many of our students, as well as a preferred solution. It is tempting to pick a solution that can generate solid data—for example, credit hours or degrees conferred—to be used for accountability. However, our problem is bigger than that.

To meet contemporary needs, our colleges must not only graduate a higher proportion of students but also educate them in new ways. We need to pay attention to the skills they will need to thrive in the 21st century, as individuals and as contributors to a democratic society. Public policy should provide additional financing that promotes both completion and a quality educational experience that prepares graduates for the demands of a new age.

Many institutions that serve a broad range of students have reason to worry that data on degree completion will become dashboard indicators of institutional quality. It is too easy for institutions that serve exceptionally well-prepared students to look good and for institutions that serve a significant proportion of nontraditional and underrepresented students to look bad.

Many colleges welcome students who are simply not fully prepared for college-level work. I have been inspired and encouraged by what I have learned from institutions like Salt Lake Community College and LaGuardia Community College about how to support students like these.

Salt Lake Community College has produced a road map outlining what it must do to prepare its students for academic and career success. The early results are encouraging. LaGuardia Community College has developed a First Year Institute that is yielding exciting results for both new students and continuing students who are having academic difficulties. Both institutions serve a significant proportion of nontraditional and underrepresented students. These colleges have a compelling story to tell about what it takes to help students who are not fully prepared for college-level work. We can

all learn from these stories, regardless of whom we serve. We should be judged on what we know about our students and what we are doing to help them be successful. Improved degree completion will follow.

A heavy focus on degree completion leaves out the realities of life in today's academy and can, unfortunately, lead to unintended consequences. Institutions that enroll extremely well-prepared students from economically secure and well-educated families will naturally have high completion rates. Institutions that serve the underserved can improve their standing in two ways—by raising their admissions standards to weed out students who are unlikely to succeed without special support or by adopting new and promising practices that foster academic and career success for all their students, regardless of how prepared they are when they enter college.

Both approaches will increase completion rates for a particular institution. Only the latter strategy will deal with the serious gaps in academic and career success that are causing us to fall behind other nations in the educational attainment of our citizenry.

Judith Ramaley is president of Winona State University.