

## TRI-BOARDS FORUM A HISTORIC EVENT

Oregon's LEAP Forum on January 7, 2010 was historic. It was the first time ever that the Joint Boards of Education—made up of the Boards of Education and Higher Education—and the Oregon Business Council met as the “Tri-Boards” to discuss improving student learning outcomes, and alignment with the needs of business and industry in Oregon. Business leaders expressed their priorities about expertise needed from college graduates hired for today's realities and capabilities that serve graduates well for advancement in their industries. Panels included voices from business, higher education, and K-12.

The Joint Boards furthered the alignment agenda by approving new policies that make it easier for students to move among education institutions and not lose credits, and to better prepare them for postsecondary education. In the words of Board of Higher Education President Paul Kelly, the Forum was a “...splendid opportunity for leaders in education and business to think together about the present and future of college learning for students from all backgrounds and interests, and how we can further strengthen linkages across the PK-16 spectrum to produce what our economy and society need most from our graduates.”

The Tri-Board Forum was planned as part of the Oregon University System's learning outcomes initiative in which representatives of the Chancellor's office and academic leaders from the seven campuses are tackling the challenge making essential learning outcomes clearer, examining teaching and learning practices most powerful in enabling students from all backgrounds to meet the outcomes, and identifying effective means for assessing outcomes for student learning, program improvement and transparency—all fundamental to thoughtful accountability. In July 2008, Oregon became one of three states forming a new partnership to improve learning outcomes. This *Give Students a Compass* project is sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and supported by the Carnegie, Lumina Foundations, and State Farms. Working with the California State University System and the University of Wisconsin System, OUS central staff and campuses are together strengthening the quality of undergraduate student learning and examining systemic change in doing so. Three institutions representing distinct regions of the state—Eastern Oregon University, Portland State University, and Southern Oregon University—received funding support for projects to expand the use of high impact teaching and learning practices and develop better tools for measuring, interpreting, applying, and reporting evidence of the impact those practices have on different student populations. The other OUS campuses are participating through the learning outcomes task group and as “engaged sister campuses” in the making excellence inclusive study of high impact practices.

The Tri-Board Forum was supported by AAC&U, with grant funding from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), the OUS Chancellor's Office and Joint Boards' Offices. The more than 100 participants included business executives, board directors, university and community college presidents, chief academic officers, faculty senate leaders, school superintendents, independent college sector leaders, public officials, Oregon's student association, AAC&U executives, the media, and others.

Chancellor George Pernsteiner set the stage for the day-long Forum by reviewing progress to date and the purpose of the Forum to focus on the components of student learning and success, and how K-12 and higher education can partner with the business community to determine what students should be learning, and how to evaluate that learning, not just course by course but as the cumulative result of a college experience. Carol Geary Schneider, President of AAC&U, delivered the keynote address. She emphasized the rising demand for more college educated workers and higher expectations for their levels of learning and knowledge, and summarized the national discussion about the quality of learning to prepare students for new realities. She outlined emerging methods for developing evidence that students can apply their learning to new settings and unscripted problems. She concluded with these challenges: (1) Form strong, ongoing partnerships between employers and educators, (2) set 21<sup>st</sup> Century standards for essential learning outcomes and make them an Oregon *point of pride*, (3) address outcomes across school and 2-year and 4-year colleges, (4) focus accountability on what

students actually do, (5) sample student work to determine attainment and capacities yet needed, and (6) make excellence inclusive for all students ( <http://www.aacu.org/leap/forums/oregon2010.cfm>) Following this national perspective, Shawn Smallman (Portland State) and David Douglass (Willamette University) provided overviews of current and emerging developments within the public university sector and independent college sector, respectively.

With this background from higher education, discussion sessions centered on what employers are asking from higher education through national surveys (presented by Debra Humphreys of AAC&U) and what Oregon business leaders consider to be the most important college learning outcomes for industry success. A small sample survey of Oregon Business Council members was conducted before the Forum, with the tentative results reported as a 'kick off' to group discussion during the Forum. Spurred by panel remarks, the participants discussed why particular outcomes are so important in the workplace and in society, and what messages students, parents and taxpayers need to hear about what really matters in college. Apparent was the degree of congruence between Oregon business representatives and the top outcomes identified by the national surveys of employers. Among the many views expressed was that of ESCO CEO and OBC Chairman Steve Pratt, who said: "...my company lives and dies on our ability to innovate and to create the new products and processes that give us an edge in this very competitive global economy. ESCO needs people who have both a command of certain specific skills and robust problem-solving and communication skills."

A very recent survey of employers by AAC&U in cooperation with Hart Research Associates ([http://www.aacu.org/leap/public\\_opinion\\_research.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/leap/public_opinion_research.cfm)) showed that at least seventy percent of employers want colleges to place more emphasis on the following essential learning outcomes: Written and oral communication (89%), critical thinking and analytical reasoning (81%), applied knowledge in real-world settings (79%), complex problem solving (75%), ethical decision making (75%), teamwork skills in diverse groups (71%), intercultural knowledge, global issues (71%), creativity and innovation (70%), and science and technology knowledge (70%).

In a one-hour Joint Boards of Education meeting within the Forum, the Joint Boards approved policies for (1) standardized credits for the International Baccalaureate classes passed by high school students, (2) statewide standards for General Education coursework to ease transferability, and (3) clarification of the coursework included in the Associate of Arts Oregon Transfer degree that a student can apply toward completing a university degree.

Forum panels followed these actions. The first panel discussed what remains on the horizon in aligning the educational continuum in Oregon in order to address new realities in student pathways to the baccalaureate. It was rich with knowledge and experience drawn from leaders in university, community college and K-12, as well as the director of the center for educational policy research at the University of Oregon. The second panel illustrated some of the high impact practices faculty are introducing to engage students actively and to accelerate integrative and applied learning (e.g. in large physics classes) as well as new approaches to assessing student success and strategies to examine fiscal impacts of these initiatives. Especially stimulating was the panelists' use of sample exercises that engaged the audience for a 'taste' of innovative education on Oregon campuses.

At the conclusion, participants considered what it will take by each sector working together to succeed in helping students achieve higher expectations for their college learning. Key partners to engage and steps needed for achieving further progress were suggested. Many participants saw the event as a catalyst for more deliberation and mutual assistance. Duncan Wyse, president of the Oregon Business Council and State Board of Education chair, concluded the day with a challenge to the audience to continue to position Oregon for leadership in educational innovation for the sake of our students, workplaces, communities and state.