Oklahoma Higher Education: Challenges Ahead

Chancellor Glen D. Johnson

Following a cumulative budget reduction exceeding $112.2 million in FY16, the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education approved $810 million in state appropriations for the state system of higher education for FY17. This represents a $153.4 million cut — 15.92 percent — from the FY16 appropriation.

While we recognize the challenges in this extremely difficult budget year, we are disappointed in the FY17 budget allocation for higher education. Budget cuts made during FY16 have already significantly negatively impacted higher education’s academic mission and students. Despite numerous cost-saving measures across the system, campuses are unable to maintain essential academic and student support services without a reasonable increase in tuition and fees.

Tuition at our public colleges and universities remains well below the average among comparable institutions. In fact, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation ranks Oklahoma’s state system of higher education as the fifth most affordable system in the nation. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that the average student cost at a four-year public institution in Oklahoma is third lowest in the nation, and the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) reports that Oklahoma has the lowest public four-year tuition among the 16 SREB states.

In stark contrast to double-digit increases in many other states, tuition and mandatory fee increases at our public colleges and universities have averaged only 4.9 percent since 2009. For this coming academic year, on average, a full-time Oklahoma college student will pay $417 more for tuition and mandatory fees. For many institutions, projected revenue from tuition increases will only offset approximately one-third of the funding that has been cut from operational budgets.

The State Regents work tirelessly to keep higher education affordable for our citizens. We understand the investment students make to pursue higher education, and managing the cost is a responsibility the State Regents take very seriously. Tuition waivers and scholarships provided by public institutions will increase 10.4 percent from FY16, and an estimated 18,000 students will receive Oklahoma’s Promise scholarships this fall. More than $31.4 million of the money appropriated by the Legislature for FY17 will fund additional financial aid programs.

As our campuses work to balance these historic funding cuts with academic priorities and increased mandatory costs, the deadline to meet Oklahoma’s workforce needs through increased degree and certificate attainment is looming. By 2020, 67 percent of all Oklahoma job vacancies will require additional postsecondary education and training, and 37 percent will require either an associate degree, bachelor’s degree or higher.

The lack of adequate resources is hindering our ability to produce the additional graduates required to keep our state competitive in a dynamic, global economy. The challenge moving forward will be for the State Regents and our 25 public colleges and universities to continue our efforts to provide Oklahoma students a quality higher education product at an affordable cost. We remain completely committed to that goal.
Guest Commentary: Oklahoma’s Student Debt Story

Regent Michael C. Turpen • Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education

The Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education recognize that a student loan is many borrowers’ first experience managing consumer credit. Keeping borrowers informed of their options and teaching them to effectively manage student loans remains a priority. Through the Oklahoma College Assistance Program (OCAP), an operating division of OSRHE, the State Regents provide extensive financial aid awareness, financial literacy and student loan management programs and services. Formerly known as the Oklahoma Guaranteed Student Loan Program, OCAP has served as the state’s designated Federal Family Education Loan Program guarantor for more than 50 years.

OCAP’s student loan default prevention initiative, Ready Set Repay, empowers students to make smart borrowing decisions and navigate student loan repayment. The centerpiece of this initiative is a website dedicated solely to informing the public about student debt management, ReadySetRepay.org, which allows borrowers to access helpful information and tools based on where they are in the student loan process. Whether they’re in school, repaying their loans, behind on payments or in loan default, users find resources they need to repay successfully or get back on track. Financial aid personnel also benefit from a dedicated section of the site, which offers OCAP’s broad selection of publications and operational resources to enhance campus default prevention efforts.

Oklahoma Money Matters (OKMM), the State Regents’ and OCAP’s financial literacy initiative, empowers campuses and community service organizations to educate students and parents about personal finance, student loan management and financial aid. OKMM’s wide array of programs and services includes free personal finance workshops and financial education training opportunities for campus and community partners, as well as free instructional materials for families, educators and service providers. The OKMM website, OklahomaMoneyMatters.org, features an interactive budgeting tool, self-paced learning modules, podcasts, and a resource clearinghouse of personal finance publications, calculators and tools.

Oklahoma’s student debt story differs significantly from the national landscape. Oklahoma has the seventh-lowest student debt level in the nation. Loan debt for students at our public campuses is 30 percent below the national average, and nearly half of all Oklahoma state system students leave college with no loan debt.

Quick Fact

Student loan debt at Oklahoma’s state system colleges and universities is 30 percent below the national average.
Lester Sworn In as New State Regent

Edmond resident Andy Lester was sworn in as a member of the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education in May.

Following Regent Lester’s appointment, Governor Mary Fallin stated that Lester has proven himself to be a champion for education, which our state needs as we work to close the skills gap that has left nearly 80,000 jobs unfilled in Oklahoma due to a lack of qualified candidates.

Chancellor Glen D. Johnson welcomed Lester to the State Regents, noting that as the focus remains on providing a top-quality higher education opportunity at an affordable cost, Lester’s previous professional experience and service on the Board of Regents for the Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical Colleges will be invaluable to the State Regents and to Oklahoma’s state system institutions.

Lester is a partner in the Edmond law firm Spencer Fane. His areas of emphasis include constitutional, employment, local government, civil rights and general business litigation. He has taught at the Oklahoma City University College of Law as an adjunct professor since 1988.

“Virtually nothing we do as a society is more important than higher education,” said Lester. “Public access to higher education has been central to the success of our nation since the time of President Lincoln and beyond. I look forward to working with Governor Fallin, the State Legislature, Chancellor Johnson and my new colleagues, the State Regents, to continue to fulfill the promise of higher education for the citizens of Oklahoma.”

Lester earned his law degree and a master’s degree in foreign service from Georgetown University in 1981. He graduated from Duke University in 1977 with a bachelor’s degree in history.

Georgetown University in 1981. He graduated from Duke University in 1977 with a bachelor’s degree in history.

Chancellor Hans Brisch Scholars Selected

Two Oklahoma high school seniors were recently named Chancellor Hans Brisch Scholars for outstanding leadership, civic involvement and academic talent.

Cy Tennessen Calhoun, Granite High School, and Evan Tyler George, Cheyenne High School, will each receive a $2,000 award through the Chancellor Hans Brisch Scholarship program.

The Chancellor’s Scholars Program was created in 1990 with private funds and was renamed in 2006 to honor Brisch, who served as chancellor of the Oklahoma state system for 15 years. Brisch retired in 2003 and passed away in February 2006.

The 2016 Chancellor Hans Brisch Scholars were selected from nominations made by high school principals statewide.

Both recipients have been heavily involved in their communities, initiating and participating in several service projects. Calhoun will graduate with a 4.05 GPA and plans to attend Western Oklahoma State College in the fall. George will graduate with a 4.0 GPA and plans to attend Oklahoma State University in the fall.

Brisch Scholars are academically talented high school seniors with outstanding leadership ability and a commitment to the enhancement of their communities as demonstrated through their involvement in high school and/or community programs or projects that have resulted in an improvement of the learning environment of the school or the social betterment of the community.

In the more than 25 years since its inception, the Chancellor’s Scholars program has provided scholarships for 95 deserving students. Private gifts, including professional honoraria from the current and past chancellors, support the program, which honors not only Brisch but the office of the chancellor and all individuals who serve Oklahoma in that position.
Reach Higher Helps Students Turn the Page and Start a New Chapter

Reach Higher, Oklahoma’s degree completion program, began in 2007 as an initiative to help working adults complete their degrees. The program offers a Bachelor of Science degree program in organizational leadership, with 10 core courses and courses developed by institutions in an area of focus specific to business needs within the local community.

Reach Higher was so successful that an associate degree program was added in spring 2011, leading to an Associate in Arts and Associate in Science in enterprise development with options in business administration and general studies.

Currently, eight regional public universities and 14 community colleges and technical branches participate in the Reach Higher program.

The bachelor’s program is for students who have earned at least 72 hours of college credit, and the associate degree option is for students with at least 18 hours of college credit.

Since the program’s inception, more than 3,100 students have earned degrees through Reach Higher.

“Students tell me that this is the only way they could have gone back to school after being away for some time, and that the support they received from faculty and staff in the program made the difference in helping them get back on track to achieve their goal of finishing a degree,” said Dr. Debbie Blanke, interim vice chancellor for academic affairs.

“Another thing I hear is that this program not only helped them go back to school to finish their degree, but also to be a role model for their children to go to college.”

A recent survey of Reach Higher graduates shows that 90 percent say their faculty care about them and their success. Ninety-five percent say they received an excellent education, and 97 percent say they would recommend Reach Higher to a colleague, friend or family member.

Each spring, a recognition ceremony is held at a location where educational opportunities are available, such as the Oklahoma City Memorial Museum and the Harn Homestead. Reach Higher students and their families are invited to take advantage of the opportunity to tour the museum. “Students at the reception appreciate being recognized for the dedication it takes for an adult to fit in college with a full-time job and family. Their families appreciate being recognized for their support and commitment while their parent, aunt, uncle or significant other is going back to school,” Blanke said.

For more information about Reach Higher, please visit ReachHigherOklahoma.org.
Research Day at the Capitol: Spotlighting the State’s Top Undergraduate Researchers

The 21st annual Research Day at the Capitol was held March 29, 2016. Research Day at the Capitol, an annual event sponsored by the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, the Oklahoma Experimental Program to stimulate Competitive Research (OK EPSCoR) and the National Science Foundation, is a showcase of the outstanding research conducted by undergraduate students enrolled at Oklahoma’s colleges and universities.

This year, participants included 24 students representing 18 colleges and universities, who were nominated by the state’s university presidents.

The OK EPSCoR program was established by the National Science Foundation in 1985 to strengthen Oklahoma’s exploration and growth in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. OK EPSCoR’s central goal is to increase the state’s research competitiveness through strategic support of research instruments and facilities, research collaborations and integrated education and research programs.

During this year’s Research Day at the Capitol, members of the State Legislature and Capitol guests reviewed students’ research projects, which covered topics including the mitigation of seismic hazards, water quality and cancer research. Research posters and oral presentations were competitively judged by an independent panel that selected one overall winner, three regional university and community college winners and three research-intensive institution winners.

Awards included a grand-prize summer research internship at an Oklahoma college or university of the winner’s choice.

2016 award winners:

- **Grand Prize**  
  Christian Ley, Oklahoma State University

- **First Place, Regional University and Community College Category**  
  Mary Katherine Maraschick Randolph, Oklahoma City Community College

- **First Place, Research-Intensive Institution Category**  
  Rosemary Pope, University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center

- **Second Place, Regional University and Community College Category**  
  Jared Stokes, Cameron University

- **Second Place, Research-Intensive Institution Category**  
  Carol Abraham, Oklahoma State University

- **Third Place, Regional University and Community College Category**  
  Megan Knight, Southeastern Oklahoma State University

- **Third Place, Research-Intensive Institution Category**  
  Angela Gibbons, University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center

FAFSA Process Changes

Beginning this year, the new Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) will be available to students Oct. 1. Students will be able to use last year’s tax information to complete and submit the FAFSA.

How has the FAFSA process improved? Before this year, students had to wait until Jan. 1 for the new FAFSA to become available. The FAFSA will now be available two months earlier, allowing students more time to submit the FAFSA before other financial aid deadlines expire. Additionally, students no longer have to complete tax forms to submit the FAFSA, because they will use information from previously completed tax returns.

Consistent with the new release date, the Oklahoma College Assistance Program’s (OCAP) FAFSA awareness campaign will begin earlier in the year. Join OCAP’s mailing list to receive the most important FAFSA updates and visit OCAP’s FAFSA blog at StartWithFAFSA.org.
OneNet Supports Oklahoma Research, Big Data Movement

In the last decade, research on the human genome has produced exponential growth in understanding DNA, genetics and disease. The increase in research data creates an equal demand for technology that can maintain and move it.

At Oklahoma State University (OSU), scientists are using supercomputers to analyze large amounts of data to draw large-scale conclusions. This practice of using technology to process scientific data is called bioinformatics.

Bioinformatics allows scientists to make assumptions about datasets without individually tracking each data point. This saves significant time and has enormous possibilities for the future. In addition to tracking datasets, supercomputers allow researchers to collaborate with scientists thousands of miles away.

“Datasets must often be moved across the country for analysis or sent to collaborate so that further specialized examination can take place,” said Brian Couger, a researcher at OSU.

Sending high-volume data across conventional networks is not easy. Typical Internet connections are not capable of handling the capacity bioinformatic experiments require. This is why OneNet’s 100 gigabit-per-second (Gbps) network is essential for innovation at Oklahoma’s research institutions.

OneNet’s 100Gbps network connects OSU in Stillwater and Tulsa, the University of Oklahoma (OU) in Norman, and OneNet in Oklahoma City. This ring connects to Internet2’s 100Gbps nationwide network, which supports research and education.

The 100Gbps ring allows these universities to perform groundbreaking studies and move big data around the country without burdening the university’s Internet connection.

“Without the use of a high-speed network, these tasks would range from highly impractical to outright impossible,” Couger said.

OneNet deployed the 100Gbps network to support Oklahoma’s research initiatives.

“Technology is one of the best tools we can put in the hands of our brightest minds,” said Von Royal, OneNet’s executive director. “At OneNet, we are committed to empowering Oklahoma’s researchers with the technology they need to succeed.”

OneNet has a long history of supporting research in Oklahoma. OneNet’s high-speed network has helped scientists bring more than $20 million in research grants to Oklahoma since 2009. Today, the 100Gbps network is expanding possibilities for Oklahoma researchers by increasing the capacity for big data movement.

Another organization that relies on the 100Gbps connection is the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). In partnering with OU’s Cooperative Institute for Mesoscale Meteorological Studies (CIMMS), NOAA utilizes OneNet’s 100Gbps ring to improve severe weather forecasting through their Warn-on-Forecast research.

“We hope to design a system reliable enough to actually provide warnings based on a probabilistic forecasting system,” said Gerry Creager, CIMMS research associate. “This information will enable us to issue the warning more in advance.”

These research efforts span several states. Data is frequently passed from the University of Texas to OU and NOAA’s offices in Boulder, Colorado and Fairmont, West Virginia. OneNet’s 100Gbps network makes this data transfer possible.

Royal believes Oklahoma’s research institutions will continue to make significant advancements with the 100Gbps network.

“The purpose of the 100Gbps network is to foster innovation, and OneNet is proud to play a part in it.”
NASFAA Core Training: Professional Judgement

Karli Greenfield, training specialist at the Oklahoma College Assistance Program (OCAP), offered training at the OCAP offices on June 9 for financial aid professionals in Oklahoma. The training explored Professional Judgement, an area that is subjective in financial aid because a professional judgement decision cannot be questioned in an audit or be appealed to the Department of Education.

Section 479A of the Higher Education Act of 1965 provides authority for the individual treatment of a student with special circumstances that are not sufficiently addressed by the standardized federal student aid formulas and delivery methods. Since the FAFSA will now use income from two years prior instead of the prior year beginning in October, financial aid administrators will see an increase in professional judgement situations. OCAP utilizes the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) Credential Training Material in periodic workshops to meet the training needs of Oklahoma’s financial aid community. Attendees have the opportunity to take an exam to earn a professional credential from NASFAA.

2016-17 College Planning Publications

This fall, the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education will distribute thousands of publications to help Oklahoma students plan and prepare for a college education. Counselors will also receive publications to assist with students’ college planning.

What’s Your Plan for College?
These brochures for eighth- through 10th-grade and 11th- through 12th-grade students outline the courses they must take in high school to be admitted to an Oklahoma public college or university, as well as financial aid information, estimated college costs, salary expectations for various jobs, and information about campus comparison and selection.

Counselors’ Resource Book: Oklahoma’s Colleges and Universities
This online publication for high school counselors provides a profile of each college and university in Oklahoma and includes information about preparing for college, college costs and financial aid.

High School Counselor Toolkit
UCanGo2, a college access initiative of the Oklahoma College Assistance Program, produces these kits to support educators’ outreach to students and parents. Each kit includes an Instructor’s Guide, a High School Student Workbook, a Plan of Action to help counselors make the most of UCanGo2 tools throughout the year, student handouts and FAFSA education resources.
The Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, in compliance with Titles VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 11246 as amended, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and other federal laws and regulations, do not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, religion, handicap or status as a veteran in any of its policies, practices or procedures. This includes, but is not limited to, admissions, employment, financial aid and educational services. This publication, printed by OSRHE Central Services, is issued by the State Regents as authorized by 70 O.S. 2001, Section 3206. 100 copies have been printed at a cost of approximately $39. Copies have been deposited with the Publications Clearinghouse of the Oklahoma Department of Libraries. This publication was produced in July 2016.