

Testimony

From: Congressman Les AuCoin

To: Subcommittee on Labor-HEW Appropriations

Subject: Title VII, Higher Education Act

Mr. Chairman:

I want to go on record in strong support of giving colleges and universities in this country an added tool: Access to federal financing to build academic facilities on their campuses. The time is right to consider this federal program again. The proposed \$50 million appropriation for fiscal 1979 is intended to help colleges and universities make buildings accessible to the handicapped, and to meet other federal mandates. There is no doubt that such an amount is insufficient to accomplish that objective, but it is a start.

Construction associated with handicapped access isn't the only demand colleges and universities are facing. Many presidents in my district are concerned about the need to upgrade or expand physical plants to maintain quality education for students. In fact, it probably is not surprising that my recent survey of 12 public and private colleges and universities in Oregon's First Congressional District indicates unanimous support for renewed construction funding.

These presidents, of course, would welcome another source of funding to ease the pinch on already tight budgets. But their concerns, like my own, go beyond sterile figures in budgets. They are worried about maintaining quality educational programs for students.

Quality is a difficult concept to define, and it's not my purpose to do so here. My point, simply, is that the quality of academic facilities is directly related to the quality of academic programs. Clearly, without adequate facilities, the quality of education diminishes. We are beginning to witness this deterioration on our college and university campuses.

The paramount concern voiced by higher education officials is the impact of federal regulations on budgets which also must absorb demands for increases in equipment, staff salaries, educational materials, and classroom and office space. What has happened over the last few years in higher education is typical of what has happened in many other fields -- the federal government has passed new laws and regulations, but has not seen fit to provide funds to meet them. Local entities -- in this case, colleges and universities -- have had to absorb the shock.

Survey response letters from presidents in my district are worth reading, for they make a case -- and I think a good one -- for academic facility funds from the federal government. Permit me to cite some threads woven through these letters.

1) Handicapped Accessibility: Every institution which responded to my inquiry called attention to the costs of making buildings accessible to the handicapped. The presidents do not quarrel with the concept of equal education for the handicapped, they just wonder how to foot the bill.

2) Building Renovation: Many buildings are old and there has not been enough money in recent years to make needed repairs. At Portland State University, for instance, four professional schools are now housed in buildings between 52 and 79 years old. Officials there even question whether these old buildings can be remodeled to accommodate the sophisticated needs of professional disciplines in the 1970s and 1980s.

3) State Priorities: The State of Oregon has not given a high priority to capital investments in academic facilities for the last few years. I'm sure the situation is the same in other states. A letter from Oregon State University describes the problem this way: "Construction of buildings for higher education in Oregon did not keep pace with the rapid rise in enrollments during the 1960s and has been at a virtual standstill during the 1970s."

4) Changing Student Interests and Populations: Growing numbers of students these days are interested in professional or career-related courses of study. Though institutions are not shifting all their buildings to meet these demands, some accommodations in facilities obviously are necessary.

This problem becomes more acute as enrollments at some institutions -- particularly urban universities -- are continuing to increase. Though it's true that enrollments across the country are holding steady or dropping off after the boom of the 1960s, there are some exceptions. Portland State University is a good example. Its enrollment jumped to an all-time record this fall -- 16,000 students. That may not be much by some standards in the country, but for a young university which some observers thought would never make it, the fall term total was dramatic evidence of the vitality of universities in urban areas. The increase was attributed to a number of factors, including a growing interest in professional subjects, and a growing number of part-time students.

For Portland State University and other universities across the country, this changing mix of students places special demands on facilities -- demands which have not been met adequately for several years.

5) Energy-Related Modifications: Though institutions in my district have tried to conserve heating oil and electricity over the last few years, they could have been more successful in some cases if they had been able to make major energy-related modifications to buildings. One college suggested that it would install a computer to control the central heating and cooling plant. Often, such investments make especially good sense because the initial expenditure can be paid off in a few years of efficient, energy-saving operation.

When I suggest money for construction, some will argue that the amount of federal aid to students has risen constantly over the last few years, thus putting the buying power and prerogatives in the hands of the "customers" of education. And indeed, the Carter Administration is vigorously advancing a proposal to add more dollars to the student aid fund.

However, on the basis of comments from presidents in my district, I think we can lay to rest the notion that this type of federal money ever ends up in capital construction. Consider this comment from the University of Portland, a private institution in my district: ". . . to our knowledge there is not a college or university in the nation whose tuition covers the total direct cost of providing the educational opportunity to the student. All available information indicates that tuition and fees paid by students supply no more than 75 per cent of education and general costs. This means that colleges and universities must find another 25 per cent of their operating costs just to remain solvent. They do not earn enough to provide funds for capital replacement or additions. Yet without an adequate physical plant, it is obvious that they cannot continue to provide quality education to the students who come to them."

A letter from Portland State University makes another crucial point. "In a very real sense," it says, "aid provided directly to the 'customer' should not be committed to capital construction expenditures which are intended to benefit not only the students currently enrolled but future generations of students as well." One-time expenditures for capital construction require, in my opinion, a different funding approach entirely.

Another argument against renewing the academic facility loan source is that there will be a decline in the number of college students in the 1980s. I have dealt with this issue above as it relates to urban universities. But I want to re-emphasize two points: Not all enrollments will decline, and further, many physical plants are not complete -- or perhaps adequate -- to serve existing student populations.

You undoubtedly are facing some difficult decisions in the coming months about where to direct available funds. Unfortunately, some will say the issue boils down to student aid versus construction dollars. However, I think there are good arguments for both. Oregon State University makes the point: "We would most certainly regret having to trade student aid dollars for construction dollars. We believe there are strong arguments for both programs."

Allow me to inject a personal note. In my informal talks with many presidents in my district, I have sensed a growing uneasiness, a growing sense of frustration, as they weigh the competing demands for money. To be sure, the pressures they face are no different than the ones you and I confront every day. But, because much of this frustration stems from the federal government's propensity to impose new and sweeping regulations without providing money to abide by them, I think we have an obligation to consider providing some help.

I believe we are on the threshold of having to make a decision in this area. Whatever we do will have implications for the quality of what to date has been one of this country's most impressive activities -- higher education.