

Investiture remarks: President Michael H. Schill

June 1, 2016

I am incredibly honored and humbled to stand here before members of my family, my mentors, friends, advisors, colleagues, and students—to formally accept the responsibility of leading this great institution—the University of Oregon.

I would not be here without the confidence and clear vision of the Board of Trustees and its chair, Chuck Lillis. I thank all of you; welcome you, and I am honored you selected me to lead the University of Oregon at this pivotal time in the institution's history.

I am sure the irony of this setting—center court in a basketball arena—is not lost on the many people who tried to educate me this last year, with varying degrees of success, on all matters of sports. I think I've finally figured out the pick and roll, although the overtime rules in football still make no sense to me.

I welcome with pleasure our many faculty members, staff, and students; our community leaders, lawmakers, and legislators who we have with us today, including here on the platform with me, Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum and Congressman Peter DeFazio, both University of Oregon graduates with advanced degrees.

I am humbled by my friends and colleagues who have travelled to be here from such far-flung locations as Chicago, New York, Houston, Minneapolis, and Seattle. As Scott mentioned, my dear friend, former boss and Oregon alumnus Gene Block had to leave this morning to return to UCLA. My heart goes out to my all my former colleagues and our thoughts and prayers are with everyone at UCLA. Thank you to all the many Bruins for coming today, including Ralph and Shirley Shapiro, who are like second parents to me.

As for my family, I am thrilled to have my sister, Margo, and my cousins Martha and Miya here. Family means the world to me. Without Margo's support and love I would not be here today.

I also want to say hello to my parents who could not travel to be here but are watching the streaming video at the University of Chicago along with some of my friends. Mom and Dad—it was you who taught me the importance of education; a gift that will last all of my life. I love you.

As I look out across this sea of faces, I am keenly aware that this may feel a bit like déjà vu for some of you. This university community has been here before, welcoming a new president, more than once over the past few years. Indeed, one of the reasons I waited almost a year to be formally invested in the office was to demonstrate to all of you that the third time is the charm.

In the last year, I've grown to love Oregon. I've been inspired by the university's past, grappled with the current challenges, and come to the clear conclusion that the future is very bright for the University of Oregon. I am energized and excited by the road ahead. I don't plan on going anywhere.

This year, the University of Oregon marks its 140th year as an institution of higher learning. We rose from humble beginnings, financed by the people of Eugene with proceeds from strawberry festivals and grain sales. We started on 18 acres of muddy land—a former wheat field where cattle continued to graze while our first students attended class.

From that beginning, we overcame adversity. We relied on donors to pay our land debts and construct our first buildings. We resisted attempts to combine with Oregon State University in the early 20th century.

One-hundred-forty years, hundreds of thousands of graduates, tens of thousands of books, articles, and discoveries later—the University of Oregon has grown from a scrappy, fledgling institution into the renowned flagship research university it is today.

We are, however, once again at a crossroads, a pivotal point where we will choose to chart our legacy for the next 140 years and beyond.

After many tumultuous years, we now possess all the ingredients for success and have before us a world of opportunities. Our excellent and committed faculty and staff are hungry for us to get better. Our amazing students from every part of the world are eager to learn and grow. Our new independent Board of Trustees and governance system is the envy of our public university peers.

We will welcome three world-class deans and a new vice president for research and innovation to campus this summer, who will join our extraordinary permanent leadership team. We also have a remarkably accomplished alumni community. They bleed green and yellow, and virtually quack with enthusiasm at the mention of our name.

We will build upon these strengths as we march toward excellence, but we must also be clear-eyed about the hurdles before us. The University of Oregon, like all public research universities and some private institutions, faces substantial challenges to our ability to meet our mission of education, research, and service to our state, nation, and world.

Today, perhaps more than at any time in recent years, higher education is in the crosshairs as our nation sorts out its priorities. A 20-plus year decline in public support for higher education has run parallel to a climb in the demand for college-educated workers. The public financial pie has been sliced and diced into crumbs, creating an environment where better-resourced universities get richer and the most financially constrained become poorer.

The widening gulf between the wealth of private and public universities mimics the increasing economic polarization of our society outside the walls of the academy. The pressures created by the Great Recession, state disinvestment in higher education, and general cynicism born out of divisive politics have given rise to a set of myths that threaten to undermine the goals and aspirations held by a vast majority of us in this room.

These myths about higher education, six that I will address today, aren't just false—they can be downright dangerous because of their power to influence public opinion.

These myths prevent our students from opening the doors to a lifetime of opportunity.

These myths distract policymakers and divert resources.

These myths curb creative exploration and choke discovery.

These myths discourage our faculty and frustrate our alumni.

If we buy into these myths, we shortchange our students, our state, and our nation, and, if left unchecked, one day we will wake up and these myths will have become reality.

This is not acceptable.

We must challenge these misconceptions—head on—for the sake of our institution and for the future of higher education. The University of Oregon cannot be truly great unless it unshackles itself from these burdens.

The first myth I want to debunk is the notion that a college education is not a good investment.

Each graduation season, we hear skeptics question the value of earning a bachelor's degree. Yet research consistently shows that graduating from a four-year university remains the single best path in the pursuit of a lifetime of success and happiness.

College graduates on average earn far more than their non-college-going peers—66 percent more, or a million dollars over the course of their lifetimes. Research also consistently demonstrates that college graduates are in general happier, healthier, have greater job satisfaction and are more engaged in their communities than those who did not graduate from college.

These individual benefits also extend to our society as a whole, creating lower unemployment, greater volunteerism and civic involvement, as well as jobs and innovation from research, discovery, and knowledge creation.

The next myth that must be challenged is that higher education is unaffordable.

While the benefits of a four-year degree have never been more apparent, the refrain that a college education is no longer affordable is growing louder. It is true, tuition rates have outpaced inflation since the 1980s, driven up—in part—by increased demand, our reliance on labor, competition for the best students, and rapidly growing state and federal regulatory mandates.

Of course, for public universities, higher tuition costs are also directly attributable to the withdrawal of state funding. Since the year 2000, state support for public higher education fell about 30 percent. In Oregon, the per-student contribution declined 51 percent.

But is higher education really unaffordable? Of course, this is a question laden with subjectivity. The average in-state sticker price for a public university is about \$9,000, nearly a quarter of the cost of a private university. After Federal Pell Grants, scholarships, and other aid, the actual cost of tuition and books for public universities drops to less than half, or about \$4,000 annually.

At the University of Oregon, high-achieving Pell-eligible Oregonians like Stefani, who just spoke, pay no tuition or fees under the PathwayOregon program. That constitutes 20 percent of our resident students.

The existence of financial aid—even generous financial aid—does not eliminate the fact that for some of our students the cost of attending college is more than they currently have available. Yet in increasing numbers, students have become allergic to student loans, perhaps learning too well the lessons of the real estate borrowing bust in 2008.

I say “learned too well,” because while excessive debt is a problem, prudent borrowing makes enormous sense. One of the reasons why loans exist is to bridge two time periods—when one is investing in the future and when one is reaping the investments rewards.

About 50 percent of our students graduate with debt. Of those, the average amount is less than \$25,000—about the cost of a new Honda Accord, which has one of the best resale values in the automotive industry. But unlike even a Honda Accord, the value of a college degree does not decrease. For most Americans, a college education is the best investment they will make in their lifetime.

While scholarships and loans help increase access, we can and must do more. Most important, we can reduce the time it takes for our students to graduate. Only half of our students graduate in four years. While this is the best rate in the state and above the national average, it is simply not good enough. Our in-state students who take two additional years to graduate spend, on average, \$15 thousand more in tuition, fees and

books. Extending college increases costs, limits income generation, and—research shows—decreases a student’s chance of graduating at all.

That is why we have set a goal to increase our graduation rates by 10 percentage points by 2020. Through a series of investments including increased financial aid for both incoming students and upperclassmen who need a bit of help to cross the finish line, improved advising coordination, and careful student tracking, we are removing barriers to graduation. We call this set of initiatives the Oregon Commitment. This is my commitment to our students and state.

The third myth I’d like to discuss is this idea that increasing reliance on private philanthropy means public universities are abandoning their public mission.

As the states have slashed funding for public higher education, the role of private philanthropy has grown. Public universities have gradually come to the realization that what used to be the icing on the cake today is a significant layer of the cake itself. For example—in 1995, philanthropy equaled just a dime for every state dollar the UO received. Today, total dollars from gifts and endowment income is greater than our total state funding.

Many have bemoaned the increasing reliance on private support as inevitably leading to a loss of our public mission. But what does this mean? I am confident that every dean or president in a public university has pondered what intrinsically makes a “public” university public. After serving as a dean of both public and private law schools for a total of 11 years, I have never stopped wondering about that question.

Transparency and collaboration are clearly values that are more ubiquitous in public universities. I often joke that if I sneeze, it will find its way into a newspaper or on the Internet. When I moved here, I was shocked to be stopped on the street—not by students, employees, or alumni, but by passionate community members eager to discuss what was happening on campus. That level of informed engagement and public scrutiny can be challenging and rewarding. It also gives rise to participation from a much wider group of stakeholders than occurs in a private university.

A second aspect of being public is our identification with our state. Although the University of Oregon is proud to play on a national stage as the state’s flagship university, every decision we make takes into account our impact on Oregon. Whether we are discussing student enrollment, hiring, graduation rates, or research, we are always focused on generating public good. This doesn’t typically occur to the same extent in private universities. One might say the reason is that the state is paying our bills, but with a contribution of 7 percent to our budget that is hardly the case anymore.

The university is also focused on its role as a generator of economic development. Professor Tim Duy regularly computes the UO’s impact on the state from our employment, tourism, business creation, and spending. For 2015, Tim estimates this

economic footprint to be \$2.3 billion. And, as I will talk about in a moment, I expect it this benefit to increase as we ramp up our research enterprise.

A third and perhaps the most important way that public universities embody their public mission distinctively is through their role in providing access to students of diverse and modest backgrounds.

For all of the reasons I discussed earlier, there is no more important objective for our nation than making sure that we extend the opportunities of higher education to all Americans—poor and rich; Black, White, Native American, Latino, and Asian.

Public universities educate three times more students than their private peers. We also educate a much larger portion of low-income students, first-generation collegegoers, and students of color.

In recent years, some private universities have expanded their financial aid programs. These programs are wonderful—I benefited from them when I went to college. My sister and I are first-generation college students. While our parents' resources were limited, they never left any doubt in our minds that we would go to college. I was fortunate that Princeton provided the sort of financial assistance that made the school's tuition competitive with the State University of New York.

But private school scholarships and financial aid will only reach the tip of the iceberg, because their admissions standards are within the reach of only a very small number of students in need.

Our commitment to access, affordability, and diversity will remain distinctive. It is what makes us public, despite how our balance sheets read. The UO and its public mission are as inseparable as Oregon's Pioneer Mother and Father.

The fourth myth that must be addressed is that college students should only focus on studying "marketable" skills.

Since the Great Recession, the drumbeat has grown louder that college students should focus on obtaining "job skills" like those taught in engineering or business. This message has been adopted by some politicians and even finds itself embodied in the funding formulae of the State of Oregon. Students are not immune to this media message—and have increasingly fled the liberal arts for other fields.

The argument that the social sciences and humanities are irrelevant and no longer valuable is not just a myth; it is blasphemy. Even on its own terms it is wrong. Entrepreneurs like our own Phil Knight stress that courses that focus on creativity, expression, and analytical thinking are the key to innovation.

Steve Jobs famously said, “Technology alone is not enough. It is technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities that yields the results that make our hearts sing.”

Material on tests quickly grows stale, but what our humanists and social scientists teach—how to learn and how to question—will never go out of date. As the pace of change continues to accelerate, it becomes more important than ever for our graduates to become lifelong learners.

The University of Oregon is and will remain deeply committed to the liberal arts. That becomes apparent even from a cursory look at my bookshelves, now filled with manuscripts authored by members of our faculty. We will keep a commitment to the humanities even as we invest in a more prominent footprint in the sciences.

The fifth myth that needs to be refuted is the idea that research should be less important than teaching for a public university.

Many Americans systematically undervalue or simply misunderstand the benefits of research. One can see evidence of this in declining or stagnant federal research budgets and in the state funding models of many of public universities.

One hears, not infrequently, the concern that a commitment to research isn’t compatible with great teaching; that professors who are deeply engaged in research will care less about teaching undergraduates.

My own view, based upon 29 years in higher education, is that with rare exceptions, a faculty member who is invested in research can bring something special to the classroom—a curiosity and knowledge at the cutting-edge of the field as well as the insights and passion of someone deeply enmeshed in the search for answers. They offer their students unparalleled opportunities to work on projects that will stimulate their desire to learn.

The University of Oregon has not kept up with its peers in research. As federal research funding remained flat or declined and the state reduced funding, the university increased enrollments and relied more and more on nonresearch faculty. We are deeply grateful to these professionals for their wonderful teaching and contributions, but we need to right the faculty balance if we are to achieve our ambition of taking our place as the great research university that Oregon requires.

At another time, I hope to talk about the intrinsic importance of research; how the creation of knowledge is itself the highest priority of any civilization. But, I will focus on something a bit more modest today—the importance of research to the state’s economy. The majority of America’s basic research—the kind that led to the creation of smart phones, ATM machines, whooping cough vaccines, and lung cancer treatments—happens in universities. Studies show that proximity to a research university is related to greater levels of innovation and economic development. Think of Silicon Valley and

Stanford, the Innovation Crescent and Georgia Tech, the Research Triangle and UNC and Duke.

At the University of Oregon, our top priority is to build our impact by cultivating our research profile. Not only will we continue to support our faculty working in the humanities, social sciences, basic sciences, and professional schools, but we will also expand our capacity in the applied sciences. The University of Oregon has neither a medical school nor an engineering school, typical drivers of university research. Yet our faculty members wish to transform their insights and discoveries into new treatments and technologies that help solve society's most pressing problems. Unburdened by an existing infrastructure designed for a different era, we will create our own; one uniquely suited to the interests of our faculty and the needs of our state.

I would like to conclude with something I hope is a myth. Just over a year ago, when I was considering whether I wanted to come here to lead this university, I was warned that it was unclear whether the people of the state of Oregon wanted a nationally prominent flagship university. I was told, "Oregonians want a university better than Idaho, but not much better" or "Watch out about sticking your head up too high; there will be people anxious to knock it off." Certainly a lack of commitment to quality is reflected in our public finance decisions. Oregon ranks 47th out of 50 among states in dollars spent per student for higher education.

I ignored these warnings and arrived here in July. I am pleased to report that—at least among our faculty and staff, our alumni and friends, our students and community leaders, and many legislators—the vast majority want and expect the University of Oregon to compete at the highest level. They want us to attract and retain the very best faculty members and students. They want us to develop world-class programs, rich student experiences, and high-impact research opportunities.

The myth that we don't want excellence should raise the ire of all who love this beautiful university and this exceptional state.

Oregon deserves a world-class university like the University of Oregon. Our families, businesses, and communities need a university that produces artists and poets, inventors and entrepreneurs, philosophers and teachers, scientists and journalists. We require critical thinkers and leaders who are committed to making our state and world a better place.

Pursuing excellence is how the University of Oregon will crush these myths that hamper student access, stunt teaching and creativity, and limit our capacity for discovery and economic impact.

If chemistry professor Geri Richmond hadn't wondered why the smoke she collected in jars turned to ash, or had given up when she was rejected for a research position because she was a woman, she might not have received the Medal of Science from President Obama last month or changed how the world thinks about science.

If Bill Bowerman had been satisfied with the running shoes of the late 1950s, the world might not have Nike and an obsession with jogging, the UO might not have a world-class track program, and Eugene might not be known throughout the world as Track Town, USA.

If Oregon junior Kyla Martichuski had given up on her biology research or not believed she could earn a Fulbright, she might not be on her way to conducting cancer research at the University of Auckland nor aiming to study at the OHSU Knight Cancer Institute.

This insatiable curiosity and need for more and better—for excellence—is what drives us, propels us, and what will define our next 140 years and beyond.

My favorite Oregon quote comes from an alumnus who personifies the pursuit of excellence—Steve Prefontaine. He said, “To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the gift.”

The University of Oregon needs all of us to give nothing less than our best. This is how we will fulfill the ambitions of those who have come before us. Dave Frohnmayer spoke at his own investiture two decades ago about the worth of the great modern research university in great teaching, invaluable research, and outstanding public service.

He said, “We do not need a different university. But we must constantly dedicate ourselves to the development of a better one.”

Because each of us has a role to play in building our university and in enhancing its national impact.

We must invest in faculty and research. We must fulfill our public mission of accessibility, diversity, and economic mobility. We must fuel the economy of the state, and contribute to our world through our discoveries and the students we enlighten.

We must reject the myths of public higher education’s demise and make our bright future a reality. Oregon deserves a great university. I am committed to working with each of you to make the University of Oregon a great university, a better university, and the very best university it can be.

Thank you. I am proud to be your president.