

EDITORIALS

THE OPINION OF THE OREGONIAN EDITORIAL BOARD

Oregon must free its university system

In a public finance crisis, talk must give way to action on higher ed reforms, including autonomy, local boards and a search for funding alternatives

It's time to peel the Legislature's fingers from Oregon's higher education budget.

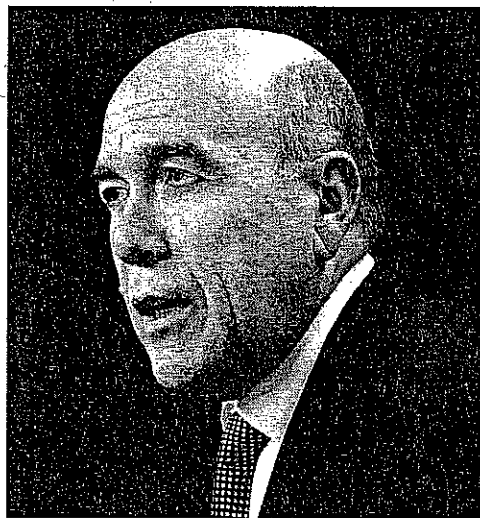
This state cannot go on choking the life out of its universities, sweeping away tuition revenue in tough times, diverting interest earned on tuition to other services and smothering institutions with thousands of line-item demands.

Let go. That ought to be the guiding principle for the Legislature on higher education in a session when many groups will descend on Salem with plans for reform. The State Board of Higher Education, a task force of legislators, business groups and the University of Oregon Foundation all have offered serious proposals. Gov.-elect John Kitzhaber has his own ideas.

Nothing should be off the table. The state budget shortfall threatens the university system, its 98,000 students and our economic future. Oregon must not repeat its mistakes of the 1990s, when it jacked up tuition, priced thousands of students out of higher education and led to the first generation of Oregonians with lower college attainment than their parents.

Lawmakers ought to act quickly on the most obvious reform, freeing the seven public universities from state-agency status, which would at least give them the kind of independence that community colleges enjoy. Giving the universities flexibility and control over tuition, personnel, health benefits and purchasing could save millions every year.

That alone would be a significant reform in a state that has clung far too long to the status quo, even when it was clearly damaging to its higher education system. But it's not enough.



Lariviere
Does anyone have a better idea?

Not when Oregon's universities are buckling under the demands of historic enrollment while state support steadily dwindles. By next year, state-allocated funding for the University of Oregon will cover only about 7 percent of the UO's costs. Some of the smaller regional state universities are barely hanging on. This state is on a path to disinvestment from higher education.

That ought to be seen clearly for what it is: a calamity, a crisis that demands a response. We'd like to see a greater sense of urgency among those responsible for finding a stable, adequate source of public funding for higher education.

On that score, about all we've heard so far is University of Oregon President Richard Lariviere's proposal to establish a local board and a large public-private endowment to finance the university into the future.

For now, it's hard to find anyone not dressed in green and yellow who supports his plan. The higher ed board opposes it. None of the other university presidents back it. Gov.-elect Kitzhaber is noncommittal.

We're not prepared to endorse it, either. The UO's proposal would require amending the state constitution to allow the state to extend its bond authority and rating to a public university endowment fund. More careful analysis is needed to understand how the UO plan, which could eat up as much as \$800 million of the state's bonding authority, would affect other universities.

But at least the UO is offering a serious plan to meet the moment that faces the higher education system. The plan by the legislative task force doesn't do that. Neither does the State Board of Higher Education, which promises to take up the question of local boards over the next two years. Both are moving too slowly.

If the UO is willing to agree to be accountable to a state-level board on educational goals and standards, why not let it form a board with only one task—helping the university succeed? It might very well show the way for other Oregon universities.

As for the UO financing proposal, we'd like to see it fully debated in the Legislature. Maybe there's a way to alter or expand the idea in a way that would help the entire Oregon University System.

As drafted, it is an every-man-for-himself, look-out-for-No.-1 plan. And if all was well in Oregon's university system, we'd be happy to join those eager to shoot it down without so much as a hearing.

All is not well. And as Lariviere is fond of asking, do you, does anyone, have a better idea? If so, it's time to bring it to Salem.