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Everything Oregon

After playing for a national football title, what Oregon needs now is a great university

Published: Wednesday, January 12, 2011

By **Steve Duin, The Oregonian**

As Jim Bean, the senior vice president and provost at the University of Oregon, signed off Monday morning on his appearance on OPB's "Think Out Loud," he noted that ESPN commentators were suggesting the Ducks would be No. 1 in next year's preseason college football poll "regardless of the outcome today."

That's probably true: Oregon will begin the next academic year No. 1 in football ... and, in all likelihood, still parked at No. 111 in the U.S. News & World Report's rankings of America's best universities, behind UC-Riverside (94), Colorado School of Mines (72) and, yes, Auburn (85).

Thanks to Phil Knight and Chip Kelly, the Ducks stand with the elite in college football. Now comes a far more formidable task, transitioning Oregon from a well-appointed warehouse for athletic programs into a great university. If every Oregonian wasn't cheering the Ducks in Arizona, we are all invested in the future of UO academics.

No one mistakes U.S. News & World Report as the final word on academic excellence, but neither is anyone suggesting that Oregon can play with the likes of Michigan, North Carolina or Virginia in the arena of great public universities.

While the architecture, education, and psychology programs are first-rate, the National Research Council rankings of Ph.D.-granting research programs find UO falling woefully short in such areas as English, computer sciences and political science.

The faculty is underpaid. The research grants are embarrassing. The five "Big Ideas" -- designed, Bean said, to "power the university to the next level" -- are supported to date by only \$250,000 in seed money.

"The university as a whole is thoroughly average," notes Bill Harbaugh, a UO economics professor. "We are no longer at the top tier of research universities in this country."

The formula for changing that isn't rocket science, just rocket-launch expensive.

Oregon must raise its admission standards without losing sight of the fact that the most inventive

students don't always post the best GPAs.

The university must recruit better faculty and pay them what they're worth. "There's no magic to this recipe," Harbaugh argues. "If you want talented people, you give them a lot of resources. Chip Kelly is a great example. They gave him everything he wanted and he did wonders with it."

UO must boost and secure its endowment so that Oregon, like Harvard, is need-blind. University President Richard Lariviere has already proposed the creation of a \$1.6 billion endowment, funded equally by private gifts and state bonds.

And Oregon must broaden and build on its strengths. Given the region's literary community, there's no reason UO can't match the writing program at Iowa or the journalism school at Missouri.

Because the level of state support is pathetic -- less than \$53 million and, Bean said, "I've been told to plan for a 25-percent cut" -- Lariviere is on the right track in seeking more autonomy for UO. As things stand, Larry Lokey's \$132 million in private gifts to the university "crowd out" public support. Harbaugh also laments that Oregon has not yet followed Ohio State's lead in ensuring that the academic and athletic fund-raising programs complement rather than compete with one another.

Given the buzz about football -- and the toll of the recession at the University of California -- applications in Eugene are up 30 percent, Bean said. It's long past time for legislators and university officials to step up the pace in strengthening the college that's waiting for that incoming class. When both athletics and academics are fierce points of pride for every Duck graduate, even U.S. News & World Report might be impressed.

-- Steve Duin

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