

EDITORIALS

Higher ed plans congruent

UO's proposal needn't conflict with the state board's

Disputes between the state Board of Higher Education and the universities it governs seldom break into the open; the higher education establishment prefers to project an image of harmonious unity of purpose.

There's a dispute now, though, with the board telling the University of Oregon to shelve its proposal for greater independence. The board is concerned that the Legislature would be so distracted by the UO's proposal that it would overlook the board's own plan for greater institutional autonomy. But lawmakers can handle two proposals on the same subject, particularly when they are congruent on many points.

Actually, there are likely to be three proposals dealing with university independence and governance. A legislative task force is preparing a plan that includes a coordinating commission to oversee both universities and community colleges. The higher education board's hopes of concentrating the Legislature's attention on a single plan already have been thwarted.

The UO can bring its proposal to Salem against the wishes of the state board because it's being moved forward by the UO Foundation, which, unlike the university administration, is not subject to the board's authority. The UO's plan includes President Richard Lariviere's idea of freezing state appropriations at their current amount and committing future appropriations at that level to repay bonds for a university endowment.

The \$800 million endowment would be matched by private donations of an equal amount, giving the

UO a more reliable income stream than it currently enjoys.

Lariviere's concept is a bracing contribution to Oregon's stale discussions of how to improve funding for higher education. Gov.-elect John Kitzhaber, legislative leaders and the state board all have responded coolly to the idea. Just watch: Some other state will create a bond-funded endowment before Oregon does.

But the endowment isn't all there is in the UO's proposal. Other elements are similar to items on the state board's agenda, or at least they aim to achieve the same goal. Even with two proposals, higher education would be of one voice in asking the Legislature to give universities greater control over their own tuition funds, budgets and capital plans. In general, both the UO and the state board are asking for more latitude in managing their own affairs, with appropriate assurances of public accountability.

It might even be beneficial for the Legislature to hear proposals for greater autonomy coming from both the institutional and the state-wide level. The messages could reinforce each other, rather than being in conflict. The board could make it clear that more independence would advance the interests of all seven state universities, while the UO would offer proof of an eagerness to take on more responsibilities at the campus level.

The Legislature is aware of the state board's and the UO's policy preferences, and it will not be surprised to hear from both. There cannot be too many voices urging changes that would allow Oregon's universities to survive on the starvation diet likely to be served up by the state.