

# A university situation the Legislature can't Duck

SALEM—

University of Oregon Day at the Legislature was once a moment of cheerleaders and mascots, a Capitol-wide explosion of green and yellow.

This year it was all about the state's higher education system being in the red, and the UO's sizable legislative agenda to do something about it.

And President Richard Lariviere was handling the cheerleading duties himself.

Tuesday morning, in a room off in a corner of the Capitol, Lariviere was exhorting University of Oregon students, staffers and foundation board members

to sweep into legislators' offices to lobby for the UO's two-part proposal upending the current system. The president is leading the effort to pass bills creating both an \$800 million state bond issue, to be matched by private fund-raising, to set up a UO endowment, and separate institutional board of trustees for the UO and any other state university that wants one.

"We're trying to preserve the public status of one of America's great public universities," Lariviere told

his troops, sounding a Rockne-like tone unusual in the gray-flannel suits of university presidents.

"Oregon is ready for this, and Oregon is with this," he declared, citing a recent poll. "... This is a time to be bold. This is no time to be timid. We need to act to preserve not only the University of Oregon, but the entire state."



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The situation facing Lariviere and his university, and the state's entire system, clearly seems to call for something dramatic. As Lariviere also noted, "Oregon is in the forefront of disinvestment in higher education," as the state's investment, never high, has dwindled in direct contradiction to the rising international importance of the knowledge

economy.

The UO plan would exchange the Legislature's declining annual support for 30 years of fixed payments on the bonds, aiming to make the university solidly endowed and financially independent of Salem. The process would be bolstered by the university's own board making its budget decisions, which should also fire up private fund-raising.

Critics object that the UO plan would take up a huge chunk of the state's limited borrowing ca-

capacity and do little for the other state universities. The state's higher education leadership, Chancellor George Pernsteiner and the state board, are in opposition, promoting their own plan to switch authority from the state Legislature to the state board—which Lariviere supports, but says doesn't go far enough.

Of their opposition to his plan, he says, "It's disappointing. I really don't understand it very well."

Tuesday afternoon, after a day of canvassing the Capitol, Lariviere said the legislators' response was "very encouraging. I think it has to do with the fact that everyone believes something has to be done, and that something has to do with finance, not just governance."

Oregon being Oregon, the university may have another advantage besides boldness. "Nike has indicated support for the program," said lobbyist Dave Barrows, "and has indicated to its lobbyists in this building that they are to assist in every way they can."

Which is actually better than having cheerleaders.

The UO's plan, which gets its first legislative hearing in two weeks, may well not fly in its current form;

there is indeed a question of where it leaves the state's other universities, especially the regionals. But like Lariviere himself, it captures an urgency that's been for too long hard to find in the state's considerations of its higher education system.

It may also capture the current moment. Typically, the state's universities have been an afterthought in the Capitol, but this session is awash in higher education bills: the University of Oregon's proposals, the higher education board's proposals, and similar but slightly different bills coming from a legislative task force on the subject. Representatives of a state with a median income steadily plunging further below the national average—with an official state goal of 40 percent of Oregonians holding four-year degrees, a level almost 50 higher than current reality—seem to be awakening to the need to talk about higher education, and maybe even do something about it.

If it actually happens, the Capitol would have something better than cheerleaders:

Something to cheer about.

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