

# Challenging the status quo in Oregon's universities

As someone with personal experience serving a number of excellent Oregon public and private institutions — Oregon Health & Sciences University, the Port of Portland, the University of Oregon and Intel Corp. — I have a unique perspective on the ongoing debate about reforming Oregon's higher education system, from governance to funding.

The idea of moving our universities away from state agency status, providing them with greater decision-making autonomy and ensuring they are publicly accountable through local governing boards isn't new. In fact, this model has worked well at the Port of Portland for decades and at OHSU since 1995. Both the Port and OHSU play critical roles in the economy and health of our state. The design and accountability of their governing structure is one reason why. Now it's time to do the same for Oregon's entire

system of higher education. Moving toward more decentralized governance is needed to give our university leaders more flexibility to maximize the limited state funds they receive and the philanthropic funds that are steadily increasing each year to operate our schools.



KEITH L. THOMSON

IN MY  
OPINION

Gov. John Kitzhaber recently announced his plan to replace the current system of education governance with a new model. His concept of a single, unified K-20 policy and investment board makes sense. It's also consistent with the idea of publicly appointed governing boards for each university. The state should set goals and policies and then each school should be empowered and held accountable to achieve those goals.

I know from my experience with the Port and OHSU that those institutions benefit greatly from having publicly appointed boards that are in touch with the special demands and unique circum-

stances of their organizations. These boards also increase legislative and public transparency and accountability because they are appointed by the governor, approved by the state Senate and hold their meetings in accordance with public meeting laws. Anyone can — and regularly does — raise issues of concern. Local governing boards will not only help our universities, they will result in more opportunities for students, faculty, taxpayers and legislators to make their voices heard and hold the university leaders accountable for their decisions and performance.

Moving in this direction isn't a panacea, of course. The universities will continue to face the ups and downs of their marketplace and have to deal with issues that private organizations deal with every day in a changing world. But they would do so, like the Port and OHSU, with the management flexibility and board leadership to make timely and wise decisions.

Improving Oregon's higher education system is critically important for Oregon's future, and it

won't be easy. Legislators need to give our university leaders every tool they can to challenge the status quo and succeed. There should be full and open consideration of the various bills under consideration in Salem, including Kitzhaber's K-20 policy council, the UO's ideas for local boards and public endowments and the Oregon University System's initiative for greater management autonomy.

None of these reforms alone will bring the dramatic change that Oregonians want and need but consolidating the best of each of them will allow Oregon's system of higher education to maintain the excellence we have and continue to improve.

*Keith L. Thomson is chairman of the board of the OHSU Foundation and a trustee of the University of Oregon Foundation. He is a former vice president at Intel Corp., and formerly served as a Port of Portland commissioner, chairman of the OHSU governing board, and chairman of the board of the University of Oregon Foundation.*

**WHERE TO SUBMIT A COLUMN OR ESSAY:** Guest columns, up to 500 words, may be sent by e-mail to [commentary@oregonian.com](mailto:commentary@oregonian.com), by fax to 503-294-4193, or by mail to "In My Opinion," Op-Ed Page, The Oregonian, 1320 S.W. Broadway, Portland, OR 97201. All submissions become the property of The Oregonian and will not be returned; they may be edited and may be published or otherwise used in any medium. You can reach Commentary page editor **Galen Barnett** at 503-221-8389 or by e-mail at [gbarnett@oregonian.com](mailto:gbarnett@oregonian.com)