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## University system governance proposal still makes sense

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Legislators are facing a full menu of options to overhaul the way the state governs its university system.

One option is Senate Bill 242, a proposal from the Oregon University System that would end the state's treatment of the seven public universities as a state agency. This is a measure that's won endorsement from all seven university presidents, including Oregon State University President Ed Ray.

But that's not the only option on the table.

Legislators also will be considering the merits of another measure from the University of Oregon. Under this measure, from University of Oregon President Richard Lariviere, much of the authority for setting tuition and managing the university's affairs would shift to a new separate governing board, rather than keeping it with the Legislature and the state Board of Higher Education.

The University of Oregon plan also calls for the Legislature to allocate \$800 million in state-backed bonds matched by an equal amount in donations to be raised by UO to establish a \$1.6 billion endowment. UO would use the proceeds from the endowment to help run the school. The university would forgo its allocation from the state's general fund.

In addition, Gov. John Kitzhaber has expressed his desire to move toward a more unified system that would oversee all facets of education, from pre-kindergarten through the community colleges and universities. It's unclear how that might work, but it will be interesting to see Kitzhaber spell out his proposal.

The problem is that these other options might muddy the waters for Senate Bill 242, a worthwhile proposal that the Legislature should approve.

SB 242 essentially would end the state's treatment of the public universities as a state agency. The upshot is that the system would receive much more autonomy from government regulations.

As a practical result, the measure would give each university much more flexibility in determining how to use its money. The measure would ensure, for example, that money students pay for tuition stays with the universities instead of being swept into service to help solve funding crises that erupt elsewhere in the state's general fund.

In return, the university system would pledge to meet certain performance standards established by the universities, the Legislature and the governor.

We're not prepared yet to pass judgment on the University of Oregon proposal; it seems to us, however, that it raises some deep questions about the relationship between the state's citizenry and its (for now, anyway) public universities that legislators may not be able to answer this session.

Similarly, we look forward to the governor putting some flesh on his proposal.

But it would be a shame if either proposal hijacked Senate Bill 242. It's a common-sense proposal that gives our universities a measure of relief from the death of a thousand cuts that they now endure.