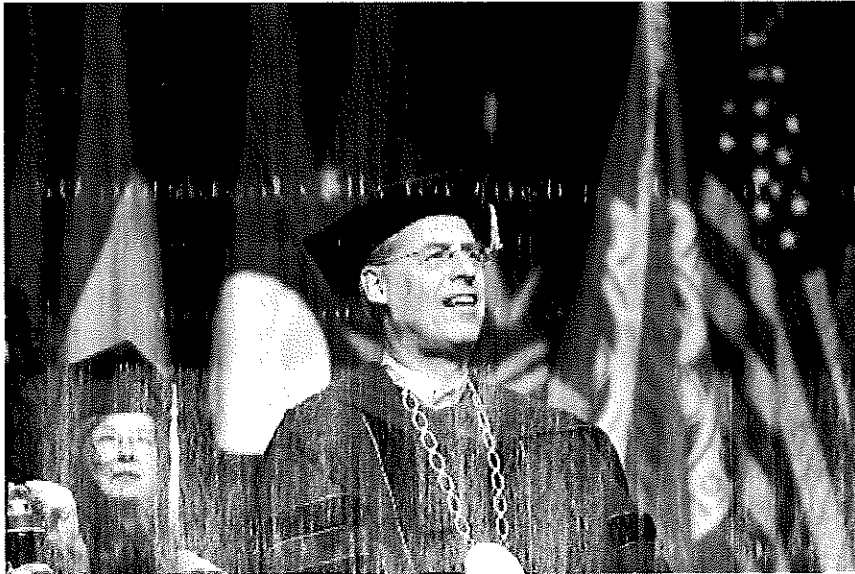


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PSU president calls for changes to university governance system

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By **Suzanne Pardington, The Oregonian**

Olivia Bucks/The Oregonian

Wim Wiewel, president of Portland State University, wants a new governance system for the university. Portland State University has released a **white paper** making a case for a new governance structure that would give the campus more autonomy from the state.

With the report, PSU President Wim Wiewel adds his voice to a growing chorus of higher education leaders – including former UO President Dave Brubaker – pushing for the state to restructure its public universities.

The idea is to allow the universities to break free from many state strictures in exchange for meeting certain performance goals. University leaders say they could do more with the state funding they receive if they have more control over how they raise and spend money.

The PSU report calls for the authority to set tuition rates, issue bonds and ask voters directly for money. On the spending side, PSU wants to manage its own real estate deals, health benefits and other business operations.

Wiewel has formed several committees of students, faculty, staff and members of the PSU Foundation to discuss the proposed changes.

Last week, The Oregonian asked Wiewel about the report. His answers have been edited for brevity and clarity. Questions and comments about the report can be sent to **GovernanceDiscussion@pdx.edu**.

Q: Why did you decide to look into this issue, specifically at PSU?

A: We started on this white paper sometime in July or early August. At that point, I felt quite agnostic on the subject. I really didn't know what kind of change would be good or whether it would be good at all. I asked my staff to put together a white paper to really help me make up my mind and also to help the institution make up its collective mind.

Q: What convinced you that a change is needed?

A: Before I came here, I assumed that Oregon's higher education system would be well funded, because that's what you think about the liberal Northwest. Then before I took the job, I found out, not so much.

In my introductory talks, I always talked about the need to advocate and to convince the state that they ought to fund higher education. As I met with the civic, business and political leadership, I was quite encouraged. They pretty much to a person agreed with me. I thought, "This is pretty good. This is not going to be all that hard."

Over the past six months it has become clear to me that it ain't gonna happen. Regardless of what the leadership says about this, in the end we're not going to get a hugely different state revenue system. And without a hugely different state revenue system, there's not going to be a lot more money for higher education.

So then you have to say, then we need to do something else. One can have endless debates about what exactly you need to do, but waiting for the ship to come in is not it.

Q: What about tuition?

A: Ultimately my model is to have quality education; it's not to have cheap education. Given the conditions we are in, we have no choice but to look at tuition as revenue source. And I think we can be more creative about charging more where the market will bear it and where people have very good earning opportunities in their careers, and then using some of that money to provide financial aid to more low-income students.

Right now we charge the same for everything to everybody, and thereby in some cases we leave money on the table while still excluding others because they can't afford it. If we could have more freedom about how we charge and what we charge, we could do better, have more resources to provide a quality education while still providing more assistance to those who really need it most.

Q: Why did you want to get the campus involved the discussion?

A: Because I think that you can't have changes like this without having faculty, staff and students help to shape the particular alternative that comes to the table. There's a deeply substantive piece to this discussion on the campus. The examples of that are how do you do tuition policy and financial aid policy? There's no one right

answer to that. That's a deep discussion that clearly students deeply care about, as do the administration and the faculty.

Q: How do you see your role developing in this discussion?

A: It's my job to be the instigator of this discussion. I could have chosen to say, you know what guys, "Let's keep our heads down and when we get the letter saying we're now different, we'll deal with it."

I've chosen to get the institution involved because I think the students, faculty and staff have important things to add to this discussion. It will have an effect on their lives, in whatever way. And I've chosen to add my voice to those of others to help make a change happen.

The white paper and all the other discussions have convinced me that if done right, this is a good thing. Does it solve all of our problems? No, not at all, of course not. But right now if I could guarantee that we could keep the state resources we now have, I'd sign on to it right now, because I see more trouble ahead.

Q: What do you see as the next steps?

A: I think it would be great if the Legislature acted in February. Everybody is telling me that it's unlikely to happen. I'm assuming that the governor's reset committee will process a lot of this stuff. Through the reset committee, proposals will come forward that will be dealt with in the next legislative session (in 2011). Clearly, the various gubernatorial candidates are interested in these changes. That makes me optimistic about something actually happening.

-- **Suzanne Pardington**

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