Lariviere fine-tunes funding overhaul

Tuition limits and guarantees are added to address student concerns about plan

By GREG BOLZ
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SALEM — The University of Oregon wants to add two tuition security measures to a controversial proposal that would overhaul how the institution is funded and governed.

In the proposal’s first hearing before a legislative committee Tuesday, UO President Richard Lariviere said he is seeking amendments that include a tuition cap and a tuition guarantee.

The cap would limit tuition increases to no more than 5 percent a year unless larger increases are approved by the legislature and governor, and the guarantee would set a total tuition price for four years when students enroll as freshmen.

"This amendment ensures that elected officials remain involved in the decision-making process regarding tuition at the University of Oregon," Lariviere said of the tuition cap.

The changes appear to be a response to student concerns that Lariviere’s groundbreaking proposal, which calls for the New Partnership, would eliminate some of the traditional checks and balances in the current system for financing and managing higher education. Some student groups oppose Lariviere’s plan, as does the state Board of Higher Education, which has its own plan for restructuring higher education that doesn’t include the major features in the UO plan.

Lariviere’s plan would set up a 15-member appointed board to direct policy and manage the UO, including setting tuition. It would include a student and a faculty representative as well as someone from the state Board of Higher Education.

The university also would be required to meet certain benchmarks in areas such as enrollment, degrees awarded, research and college completion.

But the plan also has many opponents among the faculty, the business community and other students.

In the state higher education board, which oversees the seven-campus Oregon University System, there are widespread changes first.

Board member Jill Eblen testified against the bill, saying they are a one-school approach to problems that affect all of the state’s public universities.

The board wants the Legislature to approve its restructuring plan before considering the UO plan.

Lariviere’s proposed tuition amendments didn’t immediately win over some students. Representatives of the UO student government and the statewide Oregon Student Association testified against the plan.

"Without checks and balances from the OSAA and Legislature, we cannot protect the UO as a whole, but rather the few fortunate enough to receive a scholarship," said Emma Killaway, legislative director for the student association and a past UO student body president.

But the plan also has many opponents among the faculty, the business community and other students.

UO finance professor John Chalmers, a member of the UO Senate budget committee, said that group supports the plan because it would provide for more predictable funding, the likelihood of future funding increases and excellent opportunities for academic fundraising.

"We believe the New Partnership takes a leap forward," Chalmers said. "It’s a plan that can improve the quality and access to the University of Oregon."

The plan also has the approval of the UO Senate Academic Council and Paul Weinhold, president of the UO Foundation, said the endowment idea has support among the public. He said that in a poll commissioned by the foundation, 71 percent said they like the idea of a public-private endowment fund and 67 percent said they would support a ballot measure to enact it.

Details of how the poll was conducted were not immediately available Tuesday.

Lariviere’s plan would put up a $2 million apportioned board to direct policy and manage the UO, including setting tuition. It would include a student and a faculty representative as well as someone from the state Board of Higher Education.

They also worry that the plan’s opponents will interfere with how the UO is managed.

"Anything we’re accepting private money, there’s usually strings attached for how that money should be spent," said UO student body President Amelie Roseman. "In response to questions by state Sen. Larry George, R-Sherwood. "We’re asking kind of a shift in priorities from academics to other things we have a lot of concerns about, and we don’t want that trend to continue."

But George, a Republican from Sherwood, said he didn’t understand the objections given that the plan would bring private investment to the university that would be used to keep tuition down.

The committee plans to hold additional hearings on the two bills before it votes. It also will hold a hearing Thursday on Senate Bill 292, the separate plan by the OSAA to reorganize higher education that does not include the separate UO board or the endowment.