

The UO takes a needed timeout

Delay will give the university a chance to win broader support for higher ed reform that must address systemwide issues of cost, access and financial stability

The game in Salem was getting away from the University of Oregon, and that was a good timeout that UO President Richard Lariviere signaled on Wednesday after meeting with Gov. John Kitzhaber.

This Legislature was not going to approve a plan to give the University of Oregon operational and financial freedom. Lariviere's reform wore only yellow and green, and Oregon's higher education crisis comes in many colors.

The challenge as Lariviere and other UO leaders huddle up and decide how to bring their reform plan back to Salem in 2012 is how to broaden their ideas and their support. It won't be easy, in part because the UO's decision to try to ram its own plan through the Capitol left bruises all over the state's higher education system.

But hard times must trump hard feelings, and ultimately it's not Lariviere's sharp elbows that matter, but a poorly funded higher education system that no longer has the funding, the broad middle-class access or the financial stability to secure Oregon's future.

It makes sense, as Kitzhaber and Lariviere ultimately agreed, for the UO to step back while the Legislature makes wholesale changes in the gov-

ernance of the entire Oregon University System. The Senate Education Committee has approved Senate Bill 242 to free the university system from the strictures of a state agency. Kitzhaber still hopes to win passage of his emerging plan to create an Oregon Education Investment Board, which would replace the state boards of education and higher education and oversee all levels of public education from preschool through graduate school. Those are complicated changes, and they will be difficult for the governor and the Legislature to work through in the next few months even without the distraction of the UO reform plan.

In the meantime, Lariviere and other supporters of the UO plan also have work to do. Their reform plan needs rethinking and a reintroduction before they bring it back to Salem next year. They need better answers to questions about how the establishment of the UO as an independent public university with its own board and public-private endowment would affect the other universities in Oregon's higher ed system. Lariviere's blithe answer — that he's only responsible for the UO — isn't good enough.

Meanwhile, the chancellor and state board

need to get beyond their frustrations with Lariviere and look seriously at whether the UO's ideas hold promise for systemwide financial stability and, at last, some answer to middle-class families whipsawed by rising tuition. Presidents of Oregon's other universities need to break their silence about the UO plan and publicly discuss how they believe it would affect their institutions. Could Oregon State, Portland State and others benefit from independence, local governing boards and state bonds that could encourage desperately needed private donations?

The governor, too, must find time over the next year to get strongly engaged in the debate over the future of Oregon's struggling higher ed system. Kitzhaber's reorganization is important — it will put higher ed in a better position to fight for limited funds — but it won't solve the cost, access and quality issues facing the university system.

At least the UO has taken on those core financial issues. But it's clear now that a plan to save one and only one university will not play well in Salem. After this yearlong timeout, the UO must bring a broader reform plan and a bigger team back on the floor.