



## News

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### Agreement in Oregon (for Now)

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In contrast to some other states (yes, that means you, Wisconsin), Oregon's politicians and the leaders of its public colleges and universities are on the same page about changes the state should make in how it manages higher education. But don't blink, or you might miss the moment.

Governor John Kitzhaber and the president of the University of Oregon, Richard Lariviere, agreed Tuesday that the university would postpone for a year its push for legislation that would give it a new financing stream and an independent governing board separate and apart from the existing State Board of Higher Education.

Under the agreement, which was memorialized in an exchange of letters, Lariviere said the university would throw its support behind the governor's plan to create a single statewide board to oversee pre-K to postsecondary education. While Kitzhaber did not openly state in return that he would fully back the university's autonomy plan, Lariviere said in an interview Thursday that he was heartened by what university officials had heard in their discussions with the governor and his staff. "What we have received is as strong and as clear an endorsement of our ideas as we could reasonably expect at this stage," he said.

Oregon and Wisconsin are among several states in which flagship universities -- watching their states' financial contributions dwindle -- are asking for more flexibility in return, and in several cases arguing that they need autonomy not only from state rules but also from the statewide governing systems to which they belong. This muscle-flexing typically puts them at odds not only with leaders of the public higher education systems, but also with most if not all of their peer institutions, who fear they will suffer if the most visible campuses peel off.

The conflict has been most visible in Wisconsin, with the Madison campus aligning openly with Governor Scott Walker, and most of the University of Wisconsin's other campuses joining system leaders in opposition to the possibility of the flagship "sailing away," as one chancellor put it.

But the situation in Oregon has been quietly heading for a showdown, too, with multiple elements at play. First was the University of Oregon's proposed "New Partnership," in which the university would have its own local governing board and fund itself largely through a voter-approved bond issuance that would create a permanent endowment fund the university would more than match with private fund-raising. Lawmakers introduced two pieces of legislation that would carry out the university's proposal.

The Oregon University System, which opposed the University of Oregon plan, offered its own governance proposal through which the university system, in transitioning away from being a state agency, would gain significant flexibility and the ability to hold on to student tuition dollars in exchange for greater accountability. That proposal is in legislative form as Senate Bill 242, which is moving its way through the Oregon Legislature. Lariviere, the U. of Oregon president, has not opposed the Oregon system plan, but has described it as inadequate to achieve the university's own goals.

And in January, Kitzhaber unveiled his plan to reorganize the state's education infrastructure to funnel funding for K-12 through postsecondary education through one administrative body, replacing existing separate state boards.

In the deal announced this week, Lariviere agreed not to push his own plan in the current 2011 legislative session, and instead to work to make the governor's own Education Investment Board idea a reality. Asked in an interview Thursday if the delay represented

a concession on the university's part, Lariviere called it "a concession to political timing and political processes."

But he said he believed the university's plan for its own governing board "fits nicely" into the governor's proposal to create a statewide board to coordinate education spending and policy, because that plan would leave room for local governing boards like the one the university's approach envisions for itself.

"There is nothing structural about his plan that would be an impediment" to our plan, Lariviere said, and Kitzhaber's proposal would not preclude alternative ways of financing public institutions, though any changes would have to be "carefully vetted and investigated on behalf of the state."

Kitzhaber's letter to Lariviere does not commit the governor to backing the University of Oregon's independence from the system. But in exchange for Oregon's agreeing to put off legislative consideration this year of the university's autonomy proposal, Kitzhaber said that "in the conversations among education stakeholders that will take place over the next year, I am committed to developing recommendations for the 2012 legislative session around governance and funding. I expect that these recommendations will include full consideration of establishing local governing boards and endowment partnerships for our universities."

Officials at the Oregon University System said they were pleased that the University of Oregon and the governor had agreed to delay consideration of the university's own plan, clearing the way for Senate Bill 242, "which is a higher ed reform proposal for all seven campuses and has broad support in the legislature," said Diane Saunders, a spokeswoman for the system.

Saunders acknowledged in an interview, though, that the unity may be short-lived, given the governor's apparent willingness to seriously consider the University of Oregon's New Partnership.

"The UO proposal is great for UO but is not inclusive of any other campus," she said. "It pretty much leaves everybody else behind." Not so, Lariviere said, given that the university's draft legislation has a provision that would allow any institution in Oregon that wants its own governing board to create one. "What we're proposing would not undermine the other institutions," he said. "If I were to read the tea leaves properly, other institutions will avail themselves of some of the permutations of what we're proposing."

This week's agreement may have delayed the debate a bit, but that is all.

— Doug Lederman

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