

A battle Oregon should duck

The increasingly rancorous dispute between the board of higher education and UO's Lariviere drowns out a single university voice

After two decades of disinvestment and discouraging national rankings, the last thing the Oregon University System needs is a shooting war between the State Board of Higher Education and the president of the University of Oregon. At the end of a legislative session aiming to produce major restructuring that could begin to address some of the system's problems, the last place the system's leaders should be aiming is at each other.

But it seems an extended feud between UO President Richard Lariviere and the board has escalated into something structural. For too long, higher education has had too small a voice in Oregon planning; at the very least, it's vital that it speaks with a single voice.

The state board's displeasure became palpable this week when it offered Lariviere not the standard two-year renewal of his contract as president but a single-year extension — which also included conditions that he cease avidly promoting his own agenda, dramatically different from the board's. The decision came after months of Lariviere advocating, with the Legislature and the governor, for his proposals of separate boards of trustees for each university and an \$800 million bond issue, to be matched by private donors, to create an endowment that would eventually make the University of Oregon largely independent of the state.

The board not only took exception to Lariviere's positions, but objected that they were complicating the board's own proposals to this legislature, including a measure to give the system more autonomy and change its status as a state agency.

"I guess the message would be," explained state board chairman Paul Kelly on Thursday, "united we stand, divided we confuse the legislature and we run the risk of getting nothing."



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University President Richard Lariviere needs to join the OUS team.

Over the past year, Lariviere has been making his own case to the Legislature, Gov. John Kitzhaber and the public, including a joint announcement in March that the question of separate boards would be taken up at next February's legislative session. Thursday, he said he was in absolute agreement with the governor's goals and policies. As to the rest, "My job is to be president of the University of Oregon. I intend to fulfill all the obligations."

Those obligations must include working with and through the OUS board, not politicking Salem on his own. Earlier, Lariviere speculated

that the restructuring legislation moving through the legislature, which would change the system's governance in ways not entirely certain, might make some of the board's conditions on his contract irrelevant — if he signed it at all.

"It is entirely in Richard's hands to demonstrate that he agrees with us in the process," said Kelly. "We will see over the next year how this plays out."

It's possible that the rancor between the board and the president is already too deep to produce the kind of unified chorus that the system needs. But that would also be a loss. Lariviere, although leaving a trail of broken china in his wake, has also forcefully raised the issue of what quality university system Oregon wants and helped put the question higher on the state agenda. His proposal for the bond issue, although unaffordable by the state and unfair to other institutions, has underlined the need for new ideas on how Oregon will pay for higher education.

Oregon's higher education debate can use Lariviere's excitement, but it can't use a poisonous family argument. It also deeply needs a single message and unified leadership.

The Oregon University System already has an annual Civil War. It doesn't need a permanent one.



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