

Opinion

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EDITORIALS

Yanking Lariviere's leash

Board shouldn't punish the UO president's advocacy

The state Board of Higher Education has told University of Oregon President Richard Lariviere to go stand in the corner and repent for his public policy freelancing. Board President Paul Kelly said Lariviere needs to "work within the tent" — a reasonable expectation, presuming the tent isn't collapsing for lack of pegs and poles. But Lariviere deserves sympathy for his go-it-alone efforts on the UO's behalf, because no one else — not the board, not the governor, not the Legislature — has succeeded in charting a course leading to a secure future for the university.

By voting Wednesday to extend the president's contract for only one year instead of the customary two, the board has reminded Lariviere who's boss. Lariviere also was ordered to attend meetings of the higher education board and the council of state university presidents. Above all, Lariviere is to refrain from advocating for his proposal to support UO operations with a bond-funded endowment and to establish an independent governing body for the university.

If Lariviere were so inclined, he could take the board's actions as a humiliating rebuke and let the headhunters know that he's ready to consider job offers elsewhere. But Lariviere shouldn't take the board's actions personally. The board acted to protect authority that is eroding and soon could vanish if Gov. John Kitzhaber achieves his goal of uniting all levels of public education under a single Oregon Education Investment Board.

Higher ed board members felt that Lariviere's plan for the UO, dubbed the New Partnership, muddied the waters in Salem, where the Oregon University System has been pushing proposals to grant greater indepen-

dence to the state's seven universities. There's an irony here: Lariviere's quest for autonomy was perceived as obstructing a quest for autonomy. Despite the fact that legislators are capable of keeping two different proposals straight, Lariviere agreed in March to shelve his New Partnership plan and get behind the state board's agenda.

The board's displeasure with Lariviere's independent advocacy is in keeping with the manner in which higher education has been structured for three-quarters of a century. Under that structure, the seven universities are supposed to be components of a system coordinated by the chancellor of higher education. Seeking advantages for one campus was considered tantamount to weakening the others.

But that structure, created in a time when state funds were the largest single source of support for higher education, is crumbling. Universities now depend on current students' tuition and former students' donations — revenue each campus must generate for itself, and revenue that depends on being able to succeed in the marketplace. University administrators are expected to be entrepreneurial and innovative, while the size and influence of the chancellor's office has diminished steadily.

Lariviere took the entrepreneurial imperative seriously by proposing a means of freeing the UO from regular state appropriations and central control. He did so because there's no prospect of a return to the days of heavy reliance on state funds.

Lariviere ran some distance ahead, but others, including the higher education board, are moving in the same general direction. The board has exercised its power to rein him in. Any further punishment, however, would be undeserved and unproductive.