

Seeking to silence Lariviere

George Murdock | Tuesday, June 28, 2011

Oregon is a state that has prided itself for its pioneer spirit, independence, free spirit and independence of thought.

With that in mind, it's a little difficult to understand why Gov. John Kitzhaber and the Board of Higher Education are trying to muzzle University of Oregon President Richard Lariviere.

The very idea of scuttling the precepts of academic freedom to bring the new president "under the tent" ought to send more than a few tremors through the community of educators who ought to be fighting tooth and nail for any ideas that might augment Oregon's notoriously inadequate attempts to fund higher education.

A relative newcomer to Oregon, Lariviere quickly recognized the Oregon Legislature was in no position to fund a higher education system that can appropriately fund the kind of system that would prepare this state's students to be competitive in a global economy.

The fact Kitzhaber has set his sights on an Education Investment Board designed to control education from birth to death might have some merit except the plan makes no contribution to actually investing in the system, only controlling it.

Lariviere perhaps understands that.

With a vast majority of his university's funding already coming from somewhere other than the Legislature, the president simply wants to complete the circle and take the University of Oregon offline in terms of depending upon a source of funding that is historically unreliable.

Sadly, the shackles that have been put on the distinguished president of one of America's major universities are reflective of a changing tone in Salem that has taken representative government from being responsive to those it serves to a body so focused on internal dynamics that it has sidelined both the Senate and much of the rest of the state.

The governor, who has been long on ideas that centralize power and short on actual solutions that help resolve Oregon's economic issues, doesn't welcome out-of-the-box thinking from state employees — even those whose academic experience and intellectual talent overshadow the think tank in Salem.

In what seems like a rare move, the state Board of Higher Education has approved a one-year contract extension for the UO president with conditions dictating he become more of a team player.

Paul Kelly, the board president, said he wants Lariviere to be more a member of the team. That translates into being willing to march more in lockstep with the board and the other institution of higher education in Oregon rather than thinking for himself.

In turn, as part of securing another year of employment in Eugene, Lariviere said he has made a commitment to support the governor's Education Investment Board. The conditions of his extended employment state Lariviere must attend board meetings and the university presidents' council, and participate in the Oregon University System's discussions about governance changes. He also must refrain from advocating independently for a separate University of Oregon governance board and for authority to use \$800 million in state bond money to help run the school.

Kelly said the board isn't trying to muzzle Lariviere and the contract language is meant only to ensure he follows board procedures for proposing changes. "It's about having everybody work within the tent instead of wandering outside the tent," Kelly said.

Hopefully there are still a number of Oregon residents who can see through such rhetoric.

As Oregon seeks to make a case for creating an investment board designed to centralize control of education, this demonstration of how those in Salem accept divergent thoughts and ideas from anyone outside of the inner circle ought to suggest perhaps the system of more localized control might still have considerable merit.

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