

EDITORIAL: Cutting Lariviere loose

Chancellor and board will face backlash for the decision

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The State Board of Higher Education's decision not to extend University of Oregon President Richard Lariviere's contract has deprived the state's flagship university and its students of a passionate, fearless and unconventional champion.

State board President Matthew Donegan characterized the decision as a personnel matter that had nothing to do with Lariviere's bold ideas, the most notable of which would have supported UO operations with a huge, bond-funded endowment and established an independent governing body for the university.

In a sense, that may be true. It wasn't so much Lariviere's out-of-the box ideas that aggravated and alienated the board and Chancellor George Pernsteiner as much as it was the UO president's go-it-alone pursuit of those ideas.

From his first day on the job, Lariviere was never a team player, and his refusal "to go along to get along" made him powerful enemies on the board — and in the governor's office. Make no mistake, if Gov. John Kitzhaber had wanted Lariviere's contract to be renewed, all it would have taken was a "Lariviere stays" phone call from the governor to Pernsteiner.

But Kitzhaber didn't make that call, and Lariviere's fate was sealed.

In reality, the UO president's fate was sealed when he chose to sidestep the higher education board and the chancellor's office and go to Salem to personally shop his proposal to have the state sell nearly a billion dollars in bonds, and for the UO to then match that amount with private fundraising. Pernsteiner and members of the higher education board clearly were incensed by Lariviere's public policy freelancing.

Lariviere wasn't being a team player — or, as then-Board President Paul Kelly put it, "working within the tent." Not long afterward, the board issued a humiliating rebuke to the UO president, voting to extend his contract for only one year instead of the normal two, and requiring him to attend meetings of the higher education board. The board also ordered Lariviere stop advocating for his "New Partnership" proposal.

The board's concerns were understandable in a way. Board members saw Lariviere's independent advocacy as undermining the Oregon University System's push for proposals to grant greater independence to the state's universities. They also believed the UO president was seeking advantages for his university to the detriment of the other six universities in the state's higher education system.

But Lariviere understood that the UO — indeed, the entire state higher education system — was in crisis. With state funding for universities in steep and lasting decline and no realistic prospects for reversing that trend, Lariviere grasped that the UO's future depended on freeing it from regular state appropriations and central control.

What the board members and chancellor saw as Lariviere's failure to be a team player was, in fact, the UO president assuming an entrepreneurial and innovative role that he rightly understood was essential to his school's future.

The revelation in September that Lariviere had given more than 1,100 professors and administrators pay raises that collectively cost more than \$5 million further alienated the chancellor and board. More importantly, it angered the governor who, along with the board, had asked for austerity in the midst of the state's economic crisis.

Again, Lariviere was not being a team player. But his decision to grant the raises was not an act of defiance — rather he believed they were necessary to achieve pay equity with comparable schools so the university could retain a quality faculty and administration. The raises were politically unwise, but his motive was the pursuit of excellence at the UO.

The decision not to renew Lariviere's contract will have negative, lasting consequences for the state board and chancellor's office. A number of key state lawmakers already have made their displeasure clear and are expressing misgivings about their support in the 2011 legislative session for bills that provide greater autonomy to the university system.

Lariviere was popular with UO faculty, administrators, students and alumni — and the decision to let him go when his contract expires next June could galvanize support for separating the university from the authority of the chancellor and the board.

At least 36 department and program heads of the UO College of Arts and Sciences sent a letter to the board to “express their unequivocal support” for Lariviere's leadership and to ask that he be retained. That's unlikely to happen, but the response indicates that the outrage on campus over the board's decision will be deep and lasting.

Meanwhile, the move could put at risk continued support from major donors. Nike co-founder — and UO mega-donor — Phil Knight reacted to the board's decision by saying, “It deeply saddens me that some people in power in our state continue to drive Oregon into a death spiral with their embrace of mediocrity.

“It's yet another application of Oregon's assisted suicide law,” Knight added. “For the chancellor and the state Board of Higher Education, a ‘team player’ is someone who falls in line with their acceptance of mediocrity, and the one who strives for excellence does not fit in.”

The state board, chancellor and governor have decided to rid themselves of a UO president who was not a team player and who fearlessly challenged the system. But there are many who believe that's exactly what the university — and state — need.

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