

# Firing opens new chapter at UO

## Lariviere's dismissal has forged a unity and resolve that might achieve his aims

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Unified by the controversial and heavily criticized firing of University of Oregon President Richard Lariviere, campus leaders, university boosters and area legislators are aggressively pushing potentially major changes in how the UO is managed, an effort that would tack an ironic epilogue on Lariviere's short tenure.

The new UO coalition is seeking a separate board to take over most of the management authority exercised by the state Board of Higher Education, which opened a huge rift with the Eugene campus when the state panel dismissed Lariviere. If they succeed, they will end up enacting one of the main features of the plan Lariviere himself pushed with such blunt determination it ended up being one of the reasons he was let go.

It remains to be seen whether the newly solidified UO coalition will succeed in convincing the state's

political leaders to act swiftly on the measure. But the strength and influence of that group was clearly demonstrated Friday, when the state board appointed Lariviere adviser Robert Berdahl as the UO's interim president.

That appointment came despite a blistering critique of the board and Oregon University System Chancellor George Pernsteiner that Berdahl wrote in a Nov. 30 opinion piece in The Register--Guard after Lariviere's firing. But in recent meetings with state higher education leaders and Gov. John Kitzhaber, the UO coalition made it clear that Berdahl was their choice and that appointing anyone else would only widen the rift created by Lariviere's sudden dismissal.

Some of those meetings were almost unprecedented. In an effort to clear the air with UO backers, Kitzhaber spent much of last Tuesday meeting with faculty, students, donors and area legislators in a series of closed-door meetings aimed at moving beyond the firing and finding common ground for the future. Kitzhaber even hosted a reception for the group at the governor's residence in Salem.

In those meetings, Kitzhaber indicated he will go along with some form of the local board concept, which state board members actually began discussing even before they fired Lariviere.

## Firing unites old foes at UO

The UO always has been a more or less fractious institution, with different camps jousting over athletic spending, administrative hiring, budget decisions, construction priorities, academic needs and a host of other issues. But the sudden dismissal of a popular president has changed that.

History professor Ian McNeely, a member of the UO Senate's executive committee, said it has been inspiring to see how people have put aside differences to work together to advance new management ideas for the university.

"The good that has come out of it is that no matter what happens in the Legislature, the University of Oregon is united," he said. "It's been incredible to see people who were enemies yesterday singing 'Kumbaya' together today. There are people who have been very vocal critics of the athletic program, for example, talking with very high profile donors to athletics and agreeing that on this day we can begin to move forward together."

Music professor Robert Kyr, president of the UO Senate, went even further. He said the university community already is moving past Lariviere's firing, which he said has opened new lines of dialogue with state leaders that are leading to a new and better relationship.

"Whatever happened between the state board, the chancellor, the governor and President Lariviere is in the past," Kyr said. "We're in a new era now. We want to go forward, and we want to collaborate and have consultation at all levels of the decision-making process. We're very positive, and we're very excited about this new relationship."

## Local control is the goal

Where the UO wants to move forward to is the local governing board. That was one feature of Lariviere's New Partnership, although it often was overshadowed by Lariviere's bold financial plan: to create a \$1.6 billion endowment funded half by state bonds and half by new private donations to generate revenue to fuel growth and excellence.

The complex and controversial financial plan is on the back burner.

Instead, the UO community is rallying behind the idea of a separate board. In part that's because the board is seen as more doable, and supporters want a local panel with power to hire and fire the university president so the school will avoid another episode in which a distant state board makes that decision without input from campus.

Supporters of a local board say that's crucial to getting a highly qualified permanent replacement for Lariviere. Without local control, they fear that good candidates will shun the university over fear of heavy-handed management by the state board and governor.

"We're not going to get a good permanent president if that person is walking into a political minefield," McNeely said.

Separate university boards are common in many other states but have never been embraced in Oregon. Supporters say they work better because they are focused on one institution, have more intimate knowledge of how things work and are more involved, as opposed to state boards that have little time to spend at individual schools or with individual presidents.

Dave Frohnmayer, the UO's previous president, said he advocated for separate university boards. He noted that other university presidents with local boards told him they meet with board members weekly, much more often than he ever had with the state board.

"I had 20 minutes alone with the board a year, and that was for my performance evaluation," Frohnmayer said, adding that while his contact with the board may in reality not have been precisely that brief, it was nonetheless very limited.

Frohnmayer declined to weigh in on current issues involving UO leadership. But he said events such as this often rouse people to action people and can end up making the university stronger.

"These internal unifying events can also be the source of strength and transformation," he said. "Whatever was going to happen before this will happen more quickly and decisively now, and I think it will happen with gubernatorial leadership."

Many big challenges await

But even with all the UO's newfound unity, securing a separate board will present challenges, even if Kitzhaber favors it.

State legislation would be needed to enact any changes.

A big issue will be the scope of authority given to local boards; the UO will seek broad authority, but Kitzhaber and state board members have signaled they are likely to support a narrower mandate.

UO representatives who met with Kitzhaber recently said he supports the idea of a local board having the power to hire and fire the university president. But beyond that it's not clear how far the governor is willing to go. The UO wants the board to have full budgetary authority, including the power to set tuition, although with some oversight by the state to ensure statewide needs are being met and student voices are heard.

"We want it to be more than a board that gets to decide when to mow the lawn and how to raise the flag," McNeely said.

Tuition is now controlled by the Legislature and the state Board of Higher Education.

Timing will be another issue. In meetings last week, Kitzhaber made it clear that he doesn't believe legislation can be ready in time for the interim session in February and wants the issue brought before the 2013 Legislature. State leaders want the February session to focus on state government's budget problems and not be distracted by local issues or policy disputes.

But UO supporters and the county's legislators at the least want to see enough progress in the February session to send a message that a local board will be established.

Rep. Phil Barnhart, a Eugene Democrat, has stated publicly that he will introduce a bill in the February session allowing separate university boards, which so far only the UO and Portland State University have said they are interested in. While there may not be enough time for Barnhart's bill to pass both chambers, he said he wants to see a clear path forward to ultimate approval.

"I am pushing for this to be dealt with in the short term," Barnhart said. "I would like the university to go out on a search for a new president with an assurance that the governance issue is going to be dealt with in the best way possible."

State Sen. Floyd Prozanski, another Eugene Democrat, said he understands that the governor believes more groundwork needs to be laid before pushing a university boards bill in the Legislature. But he still thinks that work needs to start in February.

"I don't think that closes the door for steps to be taken in 2012," Prozanski said. "As far as I'm concerned, we want to see something in place at the end of the 2012 session to give more guidance for 2013."

### Resentments linger

With legislative battles clearly brewing, the UO will need all the unity it can muster. Campus supporters face an uphill challenge getting whatever changes they settle on through a sometimes skeptical Legislature. Lawmakers outside Lane County have at times viewed the state university system in general and the UO in particular as aloof or condescending.

Lariviere's push earlier this year in the Legislature for a new UO financing plan that melds hundreds of millions of dollars in state bonds with private donations to create an endowment was seen by many in Salem as a go-it-alone approach that would help the UO at the expense of other state schools and agencies.

The plan's supporters never saw it that way, and some were taken aback when Kitzhaber spoke frankly in the recent closed-door meetings about the resentment such approaches have created. Such approaches probably bolster the fears of critics who suspect — wrongly, campus leaders insist — that the UO wants to become a private university or at least separate itself from the state system so it can pursue advancement regardless of how that affects the state's other universities.

Professor Bruce Blonigen, head of the economics department and a member of the Senate executive committee, said he was surprised to learn about such attitudes.

"As faculty, we're kind of shocked by that," he said. "We didn't even realize that there's this perception out there, and it's coming as a real surprise."

"Our gain is not their loss"

Blonigen said he doesn't know of anyone who wants to privatize the UO. On the contrary, he said, the entire university community strongly supports its public mission and has no interest in pursuing changes that would hurt other schools or the state. Just the opposite is true, he said, while acknowledging that more needs to be done to get that message out.

"We all need to step back and really make the case to the rest of the state and the other universities that this is not a zero-sum game. Our gain is not their loss," Blonigen said. "We haven't got the message out to enough folks about how we help the state. That's something we feel like we've been doing, but clearly we need to do more."

Kyr said he's been impressed with the willingness of the governor and board to work with the university to mend fences and move forward. And he said there's no question that whatever is done will be for the benefit of the entire state and not just the UO.

"We're going to go forward and work together to create the best situation for the University of Oregon and for the entire Oregon system," he said. "We want a system that works the best for all Oregonians."