

Keep focus on higher education reform

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By Don Tykeson

The state of Oregon was rocked recently by the very public revelation that fractured relationships between leaders of the University of Oregon and the Oregon University System were broken beyond repair, and that respected UO President Richard Lariviere would be out before year's end.

The decision to abruptly terminate Lariviere's contract and the suddenness of the announcement was met with disbelief, followed by a public outcry unlike any in recent memory. Devastated supporters of Lariviere's vision and direction needed to be heard.

The University of Oregon Foundation trustees were among the most vocal critics, and we believe we have been heard. Being heard isn't the same as prevailing. Gov. John Kitzhaber made the decision he believed was in the state's best interest, just as Lariviere made decisions he believed to be in the UO's best interest. Both men were looking out for the organizations for which they are responsible. Unfortunately the interests were not aligned.

While we disagreed with the State Board of Higher Education's decision, there is no doubt that we all agree we want the state of Oregon to have strong, sustainable, successful universities preparing the next generation.

This week Kitzhaber issued a powerful message on education indicating his support for independent boards for Oregon universities, one of the cornerstones of Lariviere's reform plan. We applaud this affirmation that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to higher education has failed, and are eager to support the governor's recommendation.

With others who care about the direction of public education in our state, we stand ready to make something positive come from the events of the past two weeks. Much is at stake. If we are not careful, the great progress we have made under Lariviere's leadership will unravel, along with donor support that is so essential to the UO's survival.

To put donor support in context: The UO gets less than 6 percent of its funding from state government, or about \$46.5 million this year. Contrast that to the \$160 million that the UO raised in philanthropic pledges -- nearly four times more than state support. Private dollars provide the margin of excellence that allows the UO to attract and retain top faculty, who in turn attract more private dollars. The fruit of faculty research creates jobs and contributes mightily to the Oregon economy. The UO would be significantly diminished if not for gifts large and small from

thousands of individuals who believe in the UO's mission. Particularly at this critical juncture, it is absolutely imperative to keep and build on this support.

We urge alumni, donors and friends of the UO -- anyone who believes in higher education -- to commit to moving forward to complete the mission that Lariviere initiated and the governor has embraced. With grace and humility, Lariviere has repeatedly redirected the outcry over his fate and pointed us, rightly, to the future of the UO and higher education. That future remains unwritten, and it is in our hands. The highest tribute we can pay to Lariviere is to do all we can to achieve his goal for the state of Oregon to become an educational powerhouse.

In that spirit, we suggest taking immediate, collective action to get us from this current state of uncertainty to the future we envisioned -- one where each state university can flourish, excel and serve.

To delay is to squander the painful lessons of the past few weeks. To delay risks further disillusioning and discouraging donors and losing the private support that is the lifeblood of our universities. The opportunity before us cries out for bold action by the Legislature, the governor and the board, and requires our full endorsement and engagement.

As Lariviere would be the first to remind us, this has never been about an individual. It has always been about higher education and the future we want for our children and our state. It will take courageous leadership and swift, sure action. If that happens now, supporters will return to the fold and line up to help. If that happens now, this turmoil will not have been in vain.

Don Tykeson wrote this in collaboration with University of Oregon Foundation trustees, emeritus trustees and former trustees.