

Albany Democrat Herald

Editorial: A big mistake in higher ed

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The ouster of Richard Lariviere as president of the University of Oregon has laid bare a huge flaw in the way Oregon governs the public universities: The system is upside down.

It's supposed to be governed by the board of higher education, which employs a chancellor as its administrative chief. Together they are supposed to oversee the universities and their presidents.

But the reality is the opposite of the formal structure. It's the university presidents who drive the bus, to the extent that anyone does, in regard to what happens on campus.

At OSU, President Ed Ray gets the blame for anything that goes wrong and the plaudits for the many successes, such as better outreach to the community. The same is true in Eugene, where Lariviere has been putting the hammer down in different ways.

Compared to the university presidents, the chancellor is nowhere in the public mind where the universities are concerned. Even more in the background are the members of the board of higher education, completely unknown to most. But now, it's that no-name board that has, with the support of Governor Kitzhaber, cashiered the UO president. This is nuts.

The universities are virtually on their own now in figuring out how to support themselves. It is they who have to compete for research grants and scarp for donations from well-heeled alumni.

The universities are doing all this work. So it's no wonder that the University of Oregon was looking to get out from under the stifling oversight of the state. Oregon State was making the same point, looking for administrative autonomy in order to become more efficient while also getting more done. Western Oregon University, the same thing.

Lariviere's initiatives had a bunch of noses bent out of shape. But to get rid of him is a huge mistake. A man with such energy and nerve, that's exactly what the state campuses need.

Not just higher education, either. Like the rest of America, Oregon has been slowly suffocating in an ever-tightening system of bad laws and timid politicians. We now see why. When a leader sticks his neck out, the system snaps it off. (hh)