

On day Lariviere is fired, Oregon higher ed advocates say state system drags down UO

Monday, November 28, 2011

By **Betsy Hammond**

The way Oregon runs its higher education system reins in excellence at the University of Oregon, prominent higher education advocates said Monday.

Unlike in some other states, a powerful board oversees all of Oregon's public universities. That limits the UO's ability to champion initiatives that would help it but not the other, mostly smaller public universities, former University of Oregon President Dave Frohnmayer, former Oregon higher education board member John von Schlegell and former state Labor Commissioner Jack Roberts said.

Other states give their major universities more room to determine their own course, they said. Oregon, by contrast, imposes rigidity and uniformity on a confederation of universities that they say need freedom and innovation to thrive.

The three spoke about their hopes for more nimble university system management in Oregon on the day the state's higher ed board fired much-admired UO President Richard Lariviere for deviating from its wishes and those of Gov. John Kitzhaber to help his own university advance.

Under Oregon's system for running UO, Oregon State, Portland State and four regional universities, "you end up managing to the least common denominator," said von Schlegell. A professional money manager, von Schlegell presided over the search that put Lariviere in the UO presidency but then quit the higher ed board in frustration that the board's hands were tied.

Roberts, a staunch UO supporter and former Republican nominee for governor, said controversial and out-of-the-box advocacy should be rewarded, not quashed.

"If we don't have people speaking up exactly like (Lariviere) did, and even if it seems arrogant and abrasive, which I don't think he was ... we would have a system of higher education in which everybody toes the line, which seems to be antithetical to the purposes of higher education."

Nationally, most major public universities similar to the UO are controlled by boards that run multiple universities or campuses if not all public four-year colleges, as in Oregon, said Aims C. McGuinness Jr., an expert in higher education management in Boulder, Colo. A state system or systems is the only way to balance the needs and responsibilities of different regions, diverse students and many universities, he said.

But, he said, the trend in recent years has been for states to transfer control over hiring, tuition rates and other key decisions from the governor's office, legislature and state agencies to the university system. System leaders, in turn, are allowing member universities more autonomy, he said.

North Carolina, Maryland and Wisconsin are among such states, and more are discussing it, he said. The motive is clear, McGuinness said: to help the universities compete in the global economy.

Declining state funding for higher education has helped drive the trend, said Matthew Smith, policy analyst for higher education at the Denver-based policy think tank Education Commission of the States. But the tensions between state and university control are not new, said Frohnmayer, who led UO from 1994 to 2009.

"The University of Oregon has always chafed against the (state) restrictions that have held it back," said Frohnmayer, who envies the University of Washington's relative independence from a statewide board that coordinates higher education but delegates presidential hiring and other key decisions to each university's governing board.

Monday's vote to fire Lariviere paralleled the decision of another Oregon higher ed board a quarter-century ago to force the retirement of then-UO President Paul Olum. Olum was adored on the Eugene campus for strengthening the university and advocating faculty and staff raises but ousted by the board for not always toeing the university system line.

Since then, Oregon's universities have gained increasing independence, including the right to keep their own tuition, Frohnmayer said. But it hasn't come easily, and more is needed, he said.

Frohnmayer said he has strictly refrained from commenting on his successor's performance. But Roberts and von Schlegell both criticized Lariviere's firing.

In a system like Washington's with a strong local board of trustees for UW, von Schlegell said, "You really increase your chances of hiring and keeping somebody with vision ... I do know that Richard's gone off script with the board a couple times ... so I have some sympathy for the board," he said. "But we get so few bold visionary leaders in our state, I think it's a shame and a travesty that we couldn't find a way to keep him."