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Statement of University of Oregon President Richard W. Lariviere to the Oregon State Board of Higher Education

November 28, 2011

President Donegan and Members of the Board:

This past week has been extraordinary. I have been humbled and am grateful for the support from the faculty, students, and friends of the University of Oregon over the last week, indeed over the last two and half years. The purpose of today's meeting is to resolve the question of my employment, but ultimately that matter is of little consequence. I want to use this opportunity to talk about Oregon's higher education future.

Over the past thirty years, public higher education in Oregon has experienced a continual decline in state funding and a continual increase in costs to students. For thirty years, the University of Oregon has lost many of its fine faculty members to other institutions and has found it increasingly difficult to recruit talented new faculty. The recent salary increases strengthened our fragile hold on our best faculty but more such efforts are necessary if the university is to avoid becoming mired in mediocrity.

Oregonians deserve better than struggling to avoid mediocrity. If we hope to find a way out of this march to mediocrity in public higher education, Oregonians deserve our best thinking about new approaches. They deserve our willingness to engage in uncomfortable conversations that may challenge long-standing practices.

It should not surprise us—nor should it dismay us—that we disagree about how best to achieve these goals for higher education in Oregon. It is a daunting task. The governor's call for education reform and innovation is a good first step. But this effort will not be measured by good intentions—it will be measured by outcomes. Clinging to old structures and ways of doing business will not deliver the outcomes we all want.

The demand for fresh thinking and new models has never been more urgent. It is this sense of urgency that has fueled my efforts over the past two and a half years. And I expect that that sense of urgency will continue to fuel debate going forward.



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The changes we advocate are not for the University of Oregon. They are for the people of Oregon. Thirty years of disinvestment in higher education have left the university and all of its sister institutions impoverished. The structures now in place for financing and governing our universities offer no hope for moving us out of this poverty. If we cannot rise from our current predicament, we will never achieve the goals for educational attainment, knowledge creation, and innovation that are critical for Oregon's future. If we fail to take every action possible to lift ourselves up, we fail Oregon and we betray the future of our children.

I strongly believe that the proposals advanced by the University of Oregon—for a strong, independent institutional governing board and a new approach to stabilizing our funding—provide our best chance of securing an affordable, high-quality university education for Oregonians. This is not an attempt to “privatize” one of the state's public universities. Rather, it is an attempt to preserve the public mission of a great university. That public mission is a sacred trust.

I recognize that the board faces an extremely difficult—maybe even impossible—task trying to govern such a diverse set of institutions with widely varying needs and capacities. I am confident there are good solutions yet to be developed that could help each public university. Pursuing solutions is what we must do.

The response of the University of Oregon community to the news that I am to be terminated is unlike anything I have seen. As much as I would like to think that this response is about me, I know better. It is an expression of disappointment and long-standing frustration over hindrances to the University of Oregon's future. These people who so love the university, who have such confidence in its potential, who know what it must do for future generations had hoped that there was change in the air. They see today's board move as a denial of that change.

I hope that you will prove them wrong. I hope that you will understand their passion, their frustration, their pent-up need as the hopeful signs they are. These are people who want a university that will flourish, a university that will stand with the world's best, a university that will bring the wealth of discovery to Oregon.

We desperately need to rebuild our broken system of governance and funding in Oregon higher education. Oregonians deserve no less than our deepest commitment to this. Now is the time for all those who care about the future of higher education—and I count this board in that number—to ensure that outcomes make for progress and positive change. You have had my commitment to this goal for the past two and a half years. If I am not to continue as president of the University of Oregon, I know that others will carry the effort forward. I hope they will have your support.

