

OUS board votes unanimously to terminate Lariviere

The meeting: Lariviere is told he's not a team player

By Saul Hubbard

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PORTLAND — After a feisty and emotionally charged two-hour public hearing, the state Board of Higher Education voted unanimously Monday to approve Chancellor George Pernsteiner's recommendation to terminate University of Oregon President Richard Lariviere's contract without cause, citing "frayed relationships" and "broken trust."

Lariviere's last day as president will be Dec. 28.

A heavy and stunned silence immediately fell over the crowd of UO faculty, alumni and students who had packed into almost every inch of the board's meeting room at Portland State University and had implored the 12-member board to reverse course.

"This is an absolute disgrace," one Lariviere supporter said under his breath.

The vote capped days of public turbulence after board president Matt Donegan told Lariviere last week that his contract, which is set to expire next June, would not be renewed.

Board members said they were terminating Lariviere because he had bullishly pursued his own agenda for greater autonomy at the UO, while showing little desire to work toward the betterment of the state university system as a whole.

Despite repeated warnings from the board that he needed to be more of a team player — including the highly unusual step of a single-year contract renewal last summer — Donegan said "the deeply dysfunctional dynamics" between Lariviere and the board had not improved.

"This has been brewing for so long," Donegan said. "It's horrific, it's like you're seeing a train wreck coming."

Board members pointed to a series of decisions that Lariviere had made — including, most recently, awarding \$5 million in pay hikes to 1,300 UO faculty and staff in May, reports of which didn't surface publicly until this fall — that had estranged him from others.

Donegan said the way in which Lariviere had sought to bring greater financial autonomy to the UO, through independent lobbying in Salem for his "New Partnership" concept, had given some legislators the impression that the state higher education system was divided and unprepared for more independence.

Added board member James Francesconi: “We need leaders who challenge us to be great, but not at the expense of others.”

The board members’ explanations were met with jeers, continual interruptions and loud sarcastic laughter from some sections of the crowd of about 200.

Earlier, Lariviere’s supporters had defended his record as president, noting improvements the school has made in enrollment, fundraising and teacher and student morale.

“We’re on fire,” said Jan Monti, a UO Foundation trustee. “He has us motivated. We are a team. We don’t want a divorce.”

State Sen. Chris Edwards, a Eugene Democrat, said Lariviere “is the one of the best things that’s happened to my city in the last couple of decades.”

Several speakers expressed bemusement at the timing of the decision and how quickly it had come to pass.

“Why take this precipitous action? It makes no sense,” said Doug Tykeson, an emeritus member of the UO Foundation.

Laura Hinman, a junior at the UO, said she was one of many concerned students: “You need to be transparent about your decision today,” she said. “Because as a student, I don’t understand why this is happening.”

Several UO faculty members criticized the board for not consulting with the university community before making its decision.

Robert Kyr, the University Senate president and a music professor, said there had been no interaction between the UO Senate and higher education board, and that board members had not “been on campus.”

“You make poor decisions when you’re not fully informed,” he said.

Lariviere’s supporters also attacked the board for lacking vision and firing the man who, they said, was trying to pull Oregon’s public university system out of mediocrity.

Lariviere himself said he was “humbled” by the public outcry over his possible termination but added that his job “was a matter of very little consequence.”

Rather, the outcry had more to do with the pent-up frustration among backers of higher education who had seen state funding for Oregon’s public universities dry up over the past 30 years, he said.

The current university governance system “offers no hope” for getting out of a state of poverty, he said.

He added that he “had never understood the argument that strengthening the University of Oregon was bad” for the system as a whole.

Donegan said, contrary to what many in the crowd suggested, the board is not opposed in principle to the New Partnership initiative, which would set up a separate endowment to help fund the UO with a mix of public and private funds.

“It is a provocative document,” he said, adding that it was hard not to get excited about a public-private funding mechanism for higher education like the one the initiative proposes.

Lariviere, who is a tenured professor at the UO, said he didn’t know his exact plans. He said he could become a full-time teacher of Sanskrit at the university. According to his contract as university president, Lariviere will be entitled, as severance pay, to one year of the base salary he receives directly from the state: \$243,700.

Donegan said the search for an interim president will begin immediately.