

Oregon's strange stew: There are better ways to organize higher education

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By Richard Gale and Maradel Gale

In trying to sort out the State Board of Higher Education firing of UO President Richard Lariviere, it might be helpful to take a quick look at how state higher education is organized in two of Oregon's neighbors, Washington and California. What one quickly concludes is that Oregon's current system is indeed broken. The mix of the state's eight schools is simply too diverse to function effectively under a single governing board.

California's state higher education system is actually two separate systems; the 10 schools of the University of California (UC) system, and the 23 schools of the California State University (CSU) system. UC includes internationally known schools, such as UC Berkeley and UCLA. CSU includes large schools in Los Angeles, San Diego, and the San Francisco area. Each system is under the authority of a separate governor-appointed board.

Washington has a very different system, one that is dominated by two universities, the University of Washington (UW) in Seattle and Washington State University (WSU) in Pullman. Washington's network includes four additional State Universities – the innovative Evergreen (Olympia), and, as in both Oregon and California, former teacher's colleges, Central Washington (Ellensburg), Western Washington (Bellingham), and Eastern (Cheney) Each of these six report to their own governor-appointed boards. In addition, both major universities have additional regional campuses; UW (Tacoma, Bothell) and WSU (Spokane, Tri-Cities, and Vancouver). Washington's major coordinating body is the governor-appointed Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB). However, unlike both Oregon's Higher Education Board and California's UC and CSU Boards, HECB's responsibilities are very general, perhaps best summarized in the state law directive to represent the "broad public interest in higher education above the interests of the individual colleges and universities." Specifics include strategic planning, policy analysis, administration of state and federal financial aid and other educational services.

There are two important parallels between Washington and California. First, as in many states, both have a major state university in their largest city. UCLA and University of Washington are an important presence in their home cities. In Oregon, Portland State began in 1946 as the Vanport Extension Center, moved to downtown Portland in 1952, and attained full university status in 1969. While billing itself as "Oregon's largest and most diverse public university," OSU and UO are probably more comparable to UW and UCLA than is PSU.

Second, both include major medical schools within their university systems. University of Washington's medical school is a major presence, not only on campus, but also elsewhere in Seattle. UCLA and UC San Francisco occupy similar urban roles. And in Oregon? The Oregon Health Sciences University website provides a convenient summary history. The key date is 1995, when it was finally able to break away from the control of the State Board of Higher Education, and establish its own board.

Eight institutions are listed on the State Board's website (OUS.edu). Included six state universities, Oregon Institute of Technology (Klamath Falls), and the cryptically identified OSUc. (The full name is OSU-Cascades, Oregon's newest higher ed campus, but, in a pattern seen in Washington, it is a branch of one of two major state universities, such as WSU Vancouver, rather than a separate state university.)

Would Oregon schools fit into either the Washington or UC-CS frameworks? Statewide, it appears that neither the UO nor OSU have the campus-building power of either UW or WSU. In California, a clear role model for the UO is UC Berkeley. Like UO, UC Berkeley includes a law school, but, unlike, UO, UC Berkeley also includes a long-established College of Natural Resources. OSU likely sees many parallels with UC-Davis, the UC system's strong "ag school." Thus, in California and Washington, and, OSU and UO would be either independent major players (UW and WSU), or make up a small two school version of California's UC system.

Oregon's six other institutions would fit well into a CSU system. The closest CSU parallel to PSU is CSU San Francisco, with its main campus away from downtown San Francisco in an ocean-close area south of Golden Gate Park. What about Oregon's five other schools? With PSU, they might fit into a remodeled CSU-like State University System, perhaps under some version of the current State Board.

Our neighbors have certainly fired college presidents. But what happened to Lariviere is much less likely to happen in either of our neighbor states. For example, it is very unlikely that the UW Board of Regents would fire the UW President in response to complaints from Western or Central Washington University administrators that the UW President was not a "team player." In California, several miffed CSU Presidents would be unable to convince the governing UC Board to fire their UC Berkeley or UCLA counterparts. The two complementary California systems mesh well with the different clusters of schools under their separate governance. In contrast, Oregon currently throws all state universities into a single governing pot. That strange stew has occasionally boiled over and the firing of UO President Richard Lariviere is the latest messy example.

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