

Legislator fails students on evaluations

Today brings the final public hearing by the House Education Committee considering a bill that provides public access to college course evaluations, and once again University students are getting short-changed by their District 40 Rep. David Frohnmayer.

Frohnmayer, a Republican member of the Education committee, continues to peddle a selection of sterile legalisms and tired sophistries in response to HB-2831, given the highest priority for passage by both the ASUO and Oregon Student Lobby.

His objections, generally representing the main arguments of opponents to public access, include: disaffection for legislative/educational policy-making, a purported violation of professors' privacy, alleged invalidity of evaluation forms and the lack of student advocacy on local campuses for public access.

Frohnmayer's recent tour of duty as the University's legal counsel appears to have frozen his conceptual gears as far as education issues are concerned. His policy positions usually reflect the viewpoints of providers of pedagogical services (administrators, faculty) rather than the consumers (students).

Last session, Frohnmayer voted against a similar public-access bill in committee, spoke against it in floor debate and then voted for the bill, a well-worn political maneuver that allows him to solicit election-day support from both sides of the fence. This session Frohnmayer has resurfaced as an ardent leader of the anti-access forces.

The argument that public access

represents a "local issue" in which "lay" legislators shouldn't dabble follows the line established by Oregon's "professional educators." Currently, a State Board of Higher Education ruling allows each college or university president to determine whether his institution's course evaluations will be made public. As one might expect, none has so ordained.

This political device allows administrators to duck accountability by passing the buck until it finally disappears into bureaucratic limbo.

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In effect, the state board and college presidents have accommodated their professional colleagues, many of whom fear the possible impact of public scrutiny of their teaching skills.

The assertion that the Legislature shouldn't make "local" educational policy comes off as inconsistent in light of the legislative relationship to the state's public, post-secondary schools. Besides financing the bulk of the latter's educational costs, the Legislature has traditionally mandated a wide range of specific educational policies, including the consideration of students' course evaluations as part of the promotion-and-tenure process for faculty members. Mandating the disclosure of course evaluations thus seems congruent with the proper exercise of legislative powers.

And course evaluations can hardly be cast into the category of "local" issues. Students at state colleges in La Grande and Ashland need and

deserve access to this critical information on courses the same as their counterparts in Eugene or Corvallis.

As for the so-called "privacy" issue, the aggregate of students' opinions about their professors should be no more private than the results of public elections, which course evaluations — as they now are formally obtained — most closely resemble.

The facile arguments of academic elitists notwithstanding, course evaluations come not as a collection of personal vendettas by disgruntled students, but instead reveal the collective judgment of consumers regarding the efficacy of publicly supported, pedagogical "producers."

Recently, a University Senate study committee, composed of faculty and students, spent a year developing a "model" course-evaluation form that could be applied throughout most departments of a school while allowing adaptation to the specific needs of some faculties. A general evaluation form of this type — whether the committee's version or another — would replace the motley forms of widely varying utility now circulated independently by each department. Rather than representing an "invalid" evaluation methodology as access opponents suggest, a uniform design would make course evaluations truly useful for a change.

Finally, the charge that students at individual schools have failed to "earn" access to evaluations by not lobbying effectively at their respective institutions probably represents the most disreputable argument

against HB-2831. A favorite ploy of both Pres. Boyd and Frohnmayer, this objection employs specious reasoning; a begging of the germane question by diverting attention to another, irrelevant issue.

HB-2831 deals with the question of whether public access to course evaluations addresses a compelling need and does so effectively. Students, academicians and legislators alike should keep those questions in mind and forget about placing blame for poorly fought battles now past.

Public access to course evaluations generated by students cries out for affirmation. We need that access not for pointing fingers and comparing popularity but for creating the best possible academic schedules for ourselves. (After all, under HB-2831 only a compilation of quantitative data, not individual written comments, would be made public.)

Most in need of this information are entering undergraduates and transfers who haven't access to the informal — and often questionable — student grapevines. Those categories of students represent the one for which drop-out rates remain highest.

The administration, which knows that academic counseling remains this school's weakest service, and Frohnmayer, who retains his post in large part through student votes, should turn their rhetorical skills toward supporting, not opposing, a bill that many of their constituents need.

theirs

Good distinction

The Incidental Fee Committee has performed responsibly by endorsing and funding the recruitment efforts of ethnic minority student unions and rejecting those of fraternities and sororities.

Their distinction recognizes the special needs of minority students and endorses the goal of achieving an ethnically diverse and enriching educational environment. It also recognizes the historic failure of the University to adopt programs and policies that encourage or meet the needs of Oregon's non-white populations.

Minority students still enroll at the University in relatively fewer numbers than demographics would predict and drop out at a higher rate than their white counterparts.

Because traditional counseling and advising programs serve stereotypical students with stereotypical problems, minority students have often criticized those programs as lacking sensitivity.

Minority student unions gear their efforts to counter that situation: They offer recruiting in minority communities, orientation programs, peer counseling and support groups. In addition they promote cultural activities and plan speakers and programs that might otherwise go unscheduled.

The University provides none of these services, but instead concentrates on channeling the squadrons of traditional students (who are already college bound) to Eugene rather than Corvallis, Portland or California.

Student fees to fund recruitment through sororities and fraternities might increase the membership and prosperity of those not-so-needy groups, but they would also duplicate University recruitment and provide no particular benefit to students generally.

We endorse the IFC's well-reasoned discrimination between recruitment budgets and hope their precedent endures until the University starts doing a better job attracting and accommodating minority students on its own.

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YOURS

A Latin lover

On the Latin teacher's agenda are some mutanda and corrigenda,

such as applying the goad to impress on the ODE the simple, incontrovertible, irrefutable fact that there's no such *?'&X()*, cotton-pickin'

word as "notenda."

C. Bennett Pascal
professor, classics
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