

# 'Building a better Oregon'

## University works to enhance image around state

Editor's note: This is the first of a three-part series about the University's public image.

By MIKE LEE  
Of the Emerald

For an institution that's hanging onto financial solvency by the skin of its teeth, the University can ill afford to alienate the public it serves — or the Legislature that feeds it.

Enter Curt Simic.

Simic, the University's public relations vice president, has to convince the public that it doesn't want the University crippled.

"The image that the state is getting something back for its money is really very important," Simic says.

It is Simic's job to maintain that image. Three years ago, then-University Pres. William Boyd created Simic's Office of Public Services to "coordinate" the face the University presents to the public.

For instance, where there's an achievement, a news release can't be far behind. "We hustle the best we can because there's so much good news, important work that goes on," says Barbara Petura of the news bureau. "And we know we aren't coming anywhere near to scratching the surface of all of the good stories."

Fundraiser Doug Wilson uses those achievements to spur private donations. "What I've tried to do is not raise money," Wilson says, but get people to help build a better university.

And those achievements will quickly appear in Old Oregon magazine, which alumni director Vince Bilotta sends to University graduates.

Ask any one of these people what the achievements are, and they'll answer in a word: *research*.

"Oregon's Energy is Mind Power," reads a public relations pamphlet. The University is one of the 50-member elite Association of American

Universities. The University is one of three institutions originally designated as centers of excellence in science by the National Science Foundation. The University employs six of Oregon's seven National Academy of Science members.

Outside the state, people recognize the University's accomplishments. Convincing Oregonians, however, is not so easy.

"What we have to harp on, on the research side, is that we're helping to create new knowledge," Simic says. But that knowledge can be very technical, adds Petura, "and we find it is difficult to interpret that to the general public."

*'What we have to harp on, on the research side, is that we're helping to create new knowledge'— Simic*

Especially with Oregon State University around. As the land-grant college in an agrarian state, OSU has an edge in proving its worth. "It's easier for people to understand more wheat, bigger fish, larger timber yields," Simic says. "It's harder for them to understand molecular biology and solid-state physics."

That's why the University's "Building a Better Oregon" television campaign shied away from the technical accomplishments. "It didn't speak to deep theoretical basic research, but we talked about services," such as the art museum or the Labor Education Research Center, says Simic.

Still, the University has nothing to compare with OSU's string of extension offices throughout the state. "When you talk about cutting off the agricul-

tural extension service, it's like cutting off motherhood, apple pie and the flag all at once," Simic says.

Which brings us to the Legislature and the looming 10-percent budget cut. The alternative to the cuts, which could mean the loss of two professional schools, is increasing taxes to cover increased costs. What legislator is going to do that?

To find out, Olum and Simic travel to Salem weekly to plead the University's case.

"The thing we think they have to see is what the trade-offs are," Simic says. "It has to be put in perspective: Do you want your property taxes reduced at the expense of higher education, basic school support, human resources?"

"The Legislature doesn't listen to what the students say, or what the faculty says, because they have a vested interest in something," he says. "What they want to hear from is the taxpayers."

Among those taxpayers are alumni. "We've got an alumni legislative effort out there in the state," says Bilotta. Using his 55,000-name mailing list, Bilotta makes sure graduates know that the University is in trouble and needs their help.

"The quality of that diploma, the reputation of that degree, depends totally on what the University is like at the present time — whatever that present time is," Bilotta says.

Time may be running out for the University as we know it. If the Legislature's cuts go through, the institution will be forced into exigency, a kind of bankruptcy that forces administrators to fire tenured faculty.

"Once you've gone through financial exigency and have made it clear that you're the kind of place that's in such trouble that you have fired senior faculty, it's going to take a decade before you get back to acceptance in the community of scholars," Olum warns.

That's one image everyone wants to avoid: ivory towers crumbling.

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