

Groups battle for state influence

By Sandy Johnstone
Of the Emerald

The Oregon Educational Coordinating Commission and the Oregon State System of Higher Education are squaring off in the battle for influence on the state Legislature.

Both groups are out to protect educational interests from their perspectives. In the past, they both have struggled to gain the ear of the Legislature — the state system to get more money to improve programs and the ECC to maintain equilibrium between the interests of higher education and other educational institutions.

The balance is uneasy at best.

The ECC, established in 1975 as the "watchdog" of state public education, has the authority to review programs and the state board budget and to advise the governor and Legislature about policy implications.

Such watchdog powers don't please state board members who are responsible for setting policy for the eight higher education institutions in Oregon.

"There are some who feel that having a lay board with authority over another lay board is not a good idea," says Bob Ingalls, state board president.

Les Anderson, a former board member and former Eugene mayor, is "very critical" of the ECC. He says

one reason he resigned his state board seat was his frustration with the ECC.

"I think the ECC is overstaffed, overzealous and sand in the gears of the governmental machine," says Anderson. "It stands with a magnifying glass and looks at what the board does."

"I don't know of anyone who likes to have someone looking over the shoulder, whether it is when you are at home with the newspaper or if it's between government agencies," says T.K. Olson, ECC executive director. "The ECC is bound to have a different perspective than the agency which actually provides the educational services."

Anderson says a different perspective may be needed.

"I think it's unnecessary. It places a barrier between the boards responsible for administrative and institutional policy and the Legislature," he says.

In the past the ECC and the State Board of Higher Education have battled it out over budget-related concerns.

"Their review of the budget where there is no intersegmental effect is inappropriate," says board member Edward Harms.

The ECC adopted a critical view toward the OSSHE's 1982-83 budget recommendation, which Olson says is inconsistent with the Legislature's

State system officials responded in a legislative report by saying the ECC was "second-guessing" the system's activities.

"The state system did not appreciate those judgments," says Olson. "We were critical and from point of view of the system I suppose that was second-guessing. But from the commission's view, we were doing what we were told to do."

"If (the ECC) says everything is not all right in 'River City,' the conclusions of (the OSSHE) is that the commission can't understand the real issue or is malevolent, has some hidden agenda to hurt them," says Olson. "It is almost inevitable."

But rather than blaming each other, members from both agencies use the Legislature as a convenient scapegoat.

"You can argue the Legislature should not have told us to (review the budget), but you can't argue the commission is not doing its job," says Olson.

Anderson agrees the Legislature may be at fault and says many legislators depend on the ECC for all their information.

"It's a way of passing the buck from the Legislature to the ECC without getting into a real examination of the issues," says Anderson.

Sen. Vera Katz says she relies more heavily on information from the ECC than from that of the State Board,

because she says it is "more neutral."

"There is some conflict, but it is healthy tension. The ECC is there to keep the State Board honest," Katz says.

Other legislators agree.

The ECC's role may change during, or after, this legislative session.

Although it takes no legislative action to maintain the ECC, a recent senate bill recommends enlargement of the ECC's powers in reviewing state system programs and in recommending a statewide plan to the 1985 Legislature.

Olson says the extension of power is "more in theory than in practice."

He says only seldom would most agencies — such as the OSSHE — be out of alignment with any ECC-proposed long-range plan.

Ingalls had no comment on the bill, but he did say he would like to see ECC member act as budgetary advisers to the Legislative Fiscal Office.

"At this point I'm not too sure how to go about revising the role of the ECC," says Rijken. He says it's important that the Legislature have an independent body oversee the budget to ensure that the educational agencies present a true picture of the monetary needs.

Not so, says Anderson.

"I think the ECC could be abandoned, and no one would know the difference."

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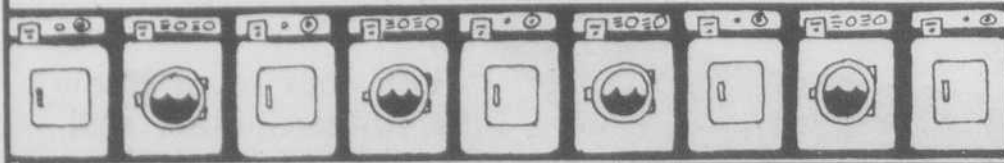
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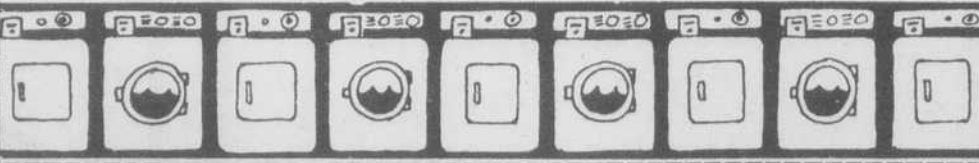
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