

An undaunted leader

Olum steers University toward excellence

By Sandy Johnstone
Of the Emerald

As he talks, University Pres. Paul Olum paces around the room, opening books, toying with pencils, looking out the window, picking up stacks of papers and rearranging them, perching on the edge of chairs.

He becomes agitated when he talks about the recent budget cuts the University has faced. And he gets vehement when he tells of how the quality of the University has been retained in the light of those cuts.

Why has the University been able to maintain high quality programs during a time of budget reductions?

Paul Olum is too modest to say that he is responsible. But others are not.

"He rallies to a challenge," says Vivian Olum, his wife and a psychology professor.

"Pres. Olum has provided the kind of leadership to allow the University to survive without losing its spirit," says Dan Williams, vice president for administration.

"He really exercises leadership in the best sense of the word. A lot of people can be in charge but few provide leadership. He won't play it safe. His willingness to take a risk is the main reason we've survived. He communicates a feeling of hope," says Williams.

Olum, 65, is blunt when he talks of the quality of the University, making no attempt to hide the fact that he thinks the University is far superior to Oregon State University, Portland State University or any of the other state system schools.

"He provides uncompromising leadership and advocacy for the University. Olum risked unpopularity by pushing the University's interests. Past presidents have not been vigorous and zealous enough advocates. They try to be polite," says Aaron Novick, chairer of the biology department. "But the University is funded unfairly."

In his speeches to the public, Olum tells about top University programs in the sciences, about its membership in the American Association of Universities, about its top faculty who are staying although some of them could double their salaries at other institutions.

But he does worry about the effect the lack of money will eventually have.

"It's been scary," he admits. "I've worried that we

could not get through the year without serious cutting, but we've resisted."

To take off some of the pressure, Olum talks to people — the vice presidents, his staff, his wife.

"I try to share the burden with others and fight against things that are unfair," says Olum. "When I'm in the middle of the battle and by-god determined, then I've not given up and it lessens the anxiety. The worst is when you feel helpless. I always say we will win or be bloody on the floor."

Perhaps because she has always been involved in academic life as a student or faculty member, Vivian Olum can relate to his problems.

"It helps that he can talk at home — that I understand the problems of his job," she says. "He handles pressure well. He talks about his problems at home and doesn't bottle them up. He's active, not depressed."

Olum uses a team management concept which is common to universities. He meets every Thursday morning with the three vice presidents, but also consults with them daily about day-to-day problems.

"If there is an important issue, two or three heads are better than one," says Olum.

"Some administrators isolate themselves and make decisions independently. A lot of his strength is not that he leans on people, but his

openness to all inputs that are there," says Vivian Olum. "He has a lot of respect for people, for the faculty. He has no false pride about asking people for input. He listens. He has none of the arrogance sometimes associated with a high position in administration."

Olum was named president of the University in 1981, after about six months as acting president after former University Pres. Bill Boyd resigned.

His career in administration started late. Olum was 56 and had been a mathematics professor at Cornell for 25 years before accepting a position as a dean at University of Texas at Austin in 1974. He was provost and vice president for academic affairs at the University for four years before he won the presidency.

Why the shift in career focus?

"I like administration. I enjoy it. I don't perhaps value it as highly as the research I did when I was a professor, but I

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'He is willing to deal now with problems when the typical administrator is willing to put you off'
— Aaron Novick

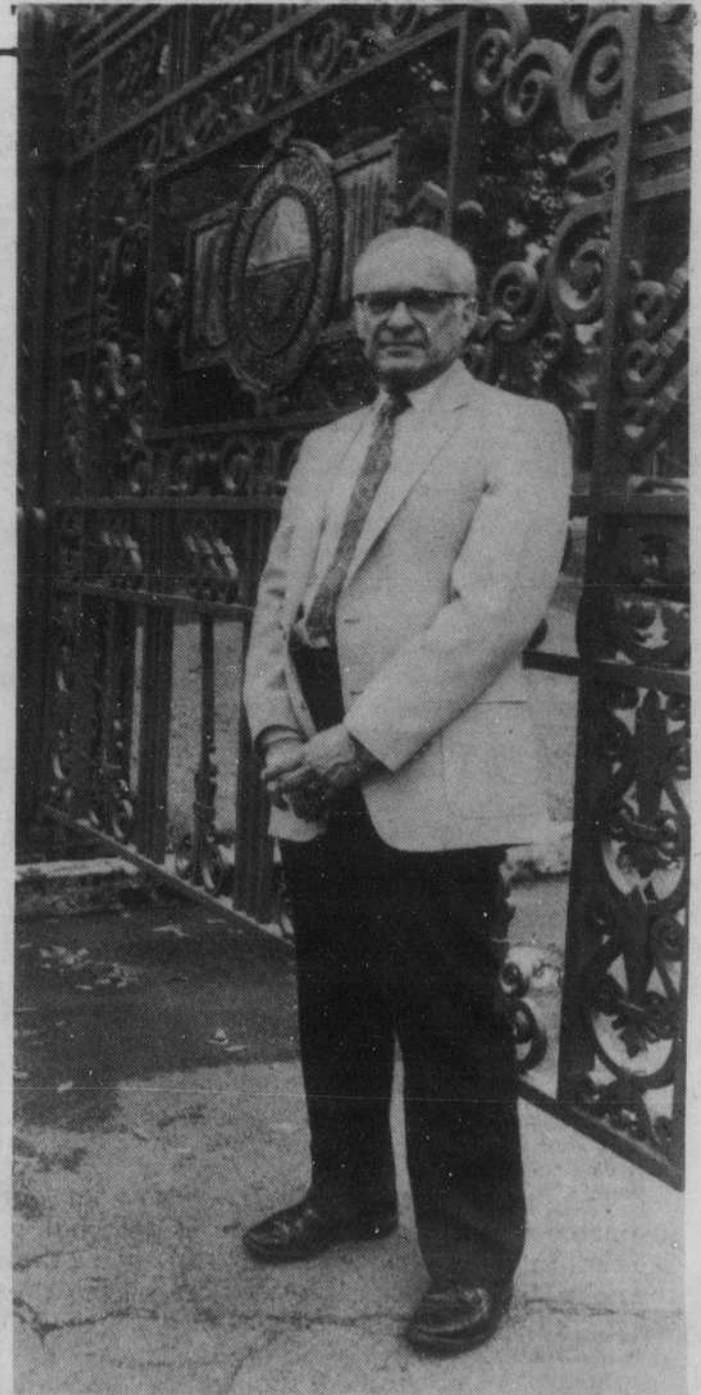


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University Pres. Paul Olum

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