

Board's autonomy turns arrogant

Analysis by
Mike Drummond

President Paul Olum was right when he said the State Board of Higher Education's decision to retire him raised an entirely new set of issues.

The state board left more questions than it answered in the wake of Wednesday's conference call — deep questions regarding state board procedure, possible age discrimination, and character — and now that Olum's fate is sealed, eyes should scrutinize the workings of this body.

Foremost, the board lacks accountability. The governor appoints all board members (whom may be subject to State Senate review).

The public neither votes nor has any tangible effect on whom may be chosen. And barring any outside pressure from the governor, as in Goldschmidt's case with Olum's retirement decision, the board acts much like a corporate management team, rather than a representative of the public's trust.

The irony is painfully clear. This state board, ostensibly a public institution, does not answer to the public which it serves, nor does it respond to the eight colleges and universities which it represents.

This fact was evidenced by the board's decision to vote on the Olum issue via telephone conference call on Wednesday. The board shielded itself from University and public input using a one-way communications system. By hiding behind phone lines, the board effectively said, "not only do we not want to hear what you have to say, we don't care."

The state board also lost credibility on Wednesday, and state board President James Petersen receives most of the credit for this.

Petersen failed to inform the entire board prior to the meeting that he had spoken with Olum and discussed a compromise retirement date. Board member Arlene Schnitzer raised this issue and similar instances of communication lapse during Wednesday's conference call, and several other members echoed the same sentiment. Suspicious, too, is the fact Petersen told Olum he saw no evidence the board was willing to compromise when he had not consulted every board member about this conversation.

Simple as it may sound, by not giving all board members all relevant information, Petersen presided over a board which was less than fully informed — primarily at his discretion.

Furthermore, Petersen and crew failed to offer the other reasons it has for retiring Olum. On Saturday afternoon I interviewed Petersen and asked him if he agreed with board member Janet Nelson about the alleged

weakness in the University's undergraduate program.

Not only did he agree with her, he expounded on this theme, stating that when it comes to questions of education quality "the buck stops with the president." True, the buck does stop with Olum if the University's undergraduate program lacks quality. However, most University faculty would refute this charge, and evidence doesn't support the claim by Nelson and Petersen.

Petersen, however, failed to recount this reason during the meeting, which could indicate one of three things: either it merely slipped this gentleman's mind, he displayed arrogance by not considering it worthy of mention, or both of the above.

He also was outspoken on Saturday when he predicted the board would vote in favor of retiring Olum regardless of what faculty, students, administration, alumni and the public had said or still had to say. When asked if there was anything that could change the board's mind, Petersen confidently answered no.

Clearly, the conference call was mere formality, an exercise in going through the motions.

In the face of all this, ASUO President and state board member Kasey Brooks did not do enough. Although she alone could not have swayed all board members to delay the vote or rescind the executive committee's decision, and although her vote did count, she nonetheless failed to express accurately the magnitude of student discontent.

Perhaps she was overwhelmed by the insensitivity of the board's deliberations. However, as the University's sole representative to the board, Brooks should have interjected more often and expressed herself with the same tenacity as the opposite forces.

The board's handling of Olum's retirement is indicative of other seedy developments in the higher-education scene. Portland State University President Natale Sicuro's order to terminate PSU's newspaper faculty advisor parallels recent state board actions.

Sicuro, reacting to a series of negative articles published about him in the Vanguard, removed advisor Jerry Penk in an effort to control what is published in the newspaper.

Sicuro, like the state board, has a hidden agenda. Sicuro would like to see PSU become a major university, and for example, has pushed to get PSU's football team into Division I athletics. Sicuro's fantasy mirrors the state board's. It plucked this man from Southern Oregon State College in July 1986 to implement its vision and designs for PSU.

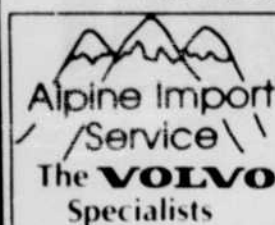
In comes Gov. Neil Goldschmidt. He too has grand designs for PSU, and it appears

the board is following his wishes. Moreover, Goldschmidt's uncharacteristic silence during the Olum proceedings indicate what cozy bedfellows he and the board have become.

This stands as a sad commentary. For not only have the governor and the board treated an esteemed man with utter contempt, they have stamped their seal of approval for mediocrity in higher education.

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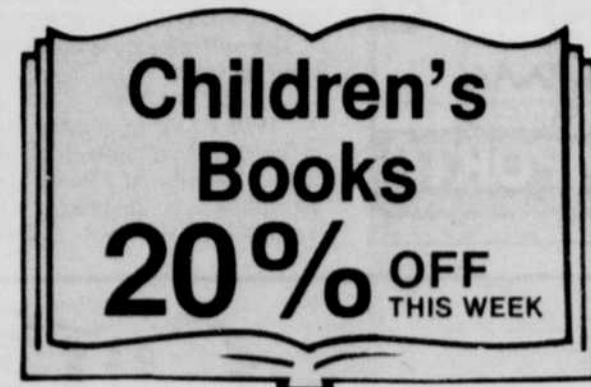
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by J.S. Bock



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