

employees, things like that,” Hunt says. “That seemed like a very worthwhile story to tell.”

Hunt said his research convinced him that the UO was being run, at least in part, by its massive public relations department. “These people, it seemed, were preventing a close look at a lot of things that people in the campus community, whether they were professors or students or activists, were curious to learn about — because they suspected there was something wrong.”

The UO, he notes, has one public relations person for every 295 students.

That, he says in the book, totals “more than the combined faculty in Oregon’s departments of history, economics and philosophy.”

As Hunt worked on the basketball story, he says, he realized that the UO public relations staffers were often working with their corporate counterparts at Nike. “The focus was clearly on obfuscating the details of a violent crime until after the accused were finished competing in a basketball tournament,” he writes.

And so *University of Nike* was born.

“It began with that — a single issue — and a sense that there was a real lack of transparency. And a sense that the whole institution could benefit from a deeper look into what’s going on.”

THE FINANCIAL ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM

Hunt’s nearly 300-page book offers a detailed account of how the UO has, over decades of financial turmoil, gradually ceded control of a public institution to the boardroom at Nike.

The story begins with the taxpayer revolt of the 1980s that led Oregonians to pass Measure 5 in 1990. Still a problem for state and local government today, the new law drastically cut property taxes and, in the process, slashed public support for education across the state.

With state coffers drained by the need to replace school funding devastated by the measure, state funding for the UO plummeted from 50 percent of the university’s budget in 1989 to just 5 percent in 2013.

When he took over as president of the university in 1994, Frohnmayer knew he had to do something about the financial crisis.

At this point, in Hunt’s telling, nothing especially nefarious was happening.

“It was confluence, not conspiracy, that Knight went looking to invest in a university just as Oregon’s oldest and most prestigious institution of higher learning found itself in need of a wealthy benefactor,” he writes in the book.

But some evil seeds were being planted. The same political arch-conservatives who were busily cutting public education in Oregon were also giving Nike and other large corporations here a buffet of tax breaks. As tax support for the UO plummeted, Nike’s profits soared.

Perhaps because he’s a career journalist, Hunt has focused much of his attention in the book on the secrecy behind which the university operates — secrecy that he believes may violate Oregon public records law.

“There is a chapter that describes some potentially illegal practices — certainly bad faith practices, dishonest practices — by the public records department at the University of Oregon,” Hunt says of his book.

He’s talking about the university’s handling of the rape accusations against the basketball players. Lawyers for *The New York Times* argued in legal papers that the UO had, as he writes in the book, “demonstrated a willingness to ‘use privacy as both a sword and a shield’ in order to prevent public scrutiny of its handling of sexual assault on campus.”

“It’s one part of the book I’m very proud of,” Hunt says. “It’s helpful for journalists to know these things, because we often suspect them.”

COMING SOON: THE KNIGHT CAMPUS

The most important point Hunt has to make, he says, is that this isn’t just about sports. Phil and Penny Knight are

currently funding much of the cost of the new Knight Campus for Accelerating Scientific Impact, a \$1-billion project toward which the Knights have pledged \$500 million.

“It’s much more than another fancy building with Knight’s name on it,” Hunt says. [The university already has the Knight Library, Matthew Knight Arena and William W. Knight Law Center, as well as a number of buildings not named for the family.] “It’s a serious opportunity for the further corruption of a once-great institution. There is no other way to look at it.”

In the book, Hunt argues that corporate corruption of American education began after World War II with government-funded secret research conducted for the Central Intelligence Agency. “America’s universities,” he writes, “proved themselves willing to do virtually anything for money, especially when they were allowed to operate in the shadows.”

Very quickly, he argues, the work turned into such abhorrent projects as MK-Ultra, which explored torture techniques on human subjects and resulted in the CIA’s manual for interrogation and torture. Moving ahead into the 1960s, federal money paid for secret research on everything from biological weapons to the effects of radioactivity.

In the late 1960s tobacco companies entered the picture. Faced with growing evidence of the harm caused by cigarette smoking, the tobacco industry began buying university research on the effects of smoking in an effort to muddy the public picture. According to one scholar, industry-funded research on the effects of second-hand smoke, for example, was 90 percent more likely to find no harm than independent research. Funding channels were muddled as well to conceal the corporate sources of the money.

The Knights’ funding of the Knight Campus is a major red flag for Hunt, who fears that much research done there — for pharmaceutical companies, for example — will be hidden from public view.

“This is, once again, a very dangerous thing — perhaps the *most* dangerous thing,” he says. “There is at least a certain amount of skepticism about big-money athletics at colleges. To the extent that people look at the Knight Campus, though, they say ‘Look, here’s a billionaire giving money to academics for once!’ No. This is a great big loophole for transparency and accountability. We may never hear a thing about what goes on inside that Knight Campus.”

WHAT’S TO BE DONE?

Hunt says the problems he encountered at the UO are common at public universities around the country. He hopes his book, to be released by Melville House on Oct. 25, provokes a national conversation about stopping corporate corruption of education.

“I don’t think we can expect corporations to change,” he says. “We have to change them.”

The problems at the UO, he says, represent “the confluence of deeply conservative Republican ideology with neoliberal ideology and market worship.”

Solutions are most likely to come not from within the system but from what he calls “real activism.”

“We’ve seen that on the national stage with Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movement. It’s hard to combat problems like this under the framework we have now, which suggests that the market solves everything and capitalism is always good.”

More broadly, he is calling for a change in the way people see their role as citizens.

“In my lifetime, Oregonians have become much less accountable as citizens,” he says. “Too many Oregonians have come to think of themselves merely as taxpayers, not as citizens. We need to start thinking of ourselves as deeply connected to our public institutions, and we need to start thinking of our public institutions — especially public universities — as deeply connected to our prospects for success.” ■

Joshua Hunt will talk at a book-launch event for University of Nike (Melville House, \$27.99) from 7 to 9 pm Tuesday, Oct. 23, at Tsunami Books. Free.

UO Mum on *University of Nike*

BUT PUBLIC RELATIONS
STAFFER GUSHES ABOUT
PHIL KNIGHT’S
GENEROSITY

Eugene Weekly sent University of Oregon President Michael Schill — who regularly pledges transparency from his administration — a few specific questions about Joshua Hunt’s book *University of Nike*.

The list included questions such as these:

- In what ways does the generosity of Phil Knight and Nike give them influence over the University of Oregon?
- How would you describe the nature of that influence?
- What can be done to restore public confidence that the UO is fully accountable to the citizens of Oregon?
- What can be done to restore public funding to education in Oregon?
- Will there be any limitations on secret research done at the Knight Campus?

Schill declined to answer any of the questions we sent.

Instead, the UO made its official response to the book in a brief statement emailed by Kyle Henley, the university’s vice president for communications: “Given our focus on the university’s future, we will not engage in debate over Mr. Hunt’s book, which largely speculates about and rehashes historical events that have been covered elsewhere.”

Old news, in other words.

Henley’s statement did go on at some length about Nike’s “generous support” of the university.

“The University of Oregon is the birthplace of Nike, and we are extremely grateful to both Nike as a company and to Phil and Penny Knight individually for their generous support of this university over many decades, as well as their support of other academic institutions and vital causes in Oregon and beyond,” the statement said.

“The Knights care deeply about education, health care, sports and so much more, and they are unquestionably the most generous philanthropists in our state’s history. Their support for both academic and athletic programs at University of Oregon comes without strings attached and has transformed this campus in profoundly positive ways. The state of Oregon, our citizenry and this institution are all better for it.” — *Bob Keefer*