



American Association of University Professors

Academic Freedom for a Free Society

February 22, 2022

Senator Dembrow, Chair
Members of the Senate Committee on Education
Oregon State Capitol
Salem, OR 97301

Re: Association of Governing Boards Report to the Senate Education Committee

Chair Dembrow, Vice-Chair Thomsen and members of the Committee,

On behalf of the more than 6300 members of the American Association of University Professors in Oregon, our collective bargaining chapters at the University of Oregon, Portland State University, Oregon State University, and Oregon Institute of Technology, and our faculty members across Oregon, I ask that you please consider our comments on the report produced by AGB Consulting regarding shared governance at our Oregon institutions of higher education.

We are concerned about a number of findings in the AGB report, particularly where the understanding of “shared governance” is concerned. In a 2017 report on shared governance, AGB stated unequivocally that shared governance is essential in higher education, saying, “effective shared governance, focused on open communication, shared responsibility, a commitment to accountability, and alignment of institutional priorities, is broadly seen as advantageous, but it is less commonly achieved.” AAUP Oregon agrees with this assertion whole-heartedly. Also shared in the 2017 report were findings that over two-thirds of board members did not believe that shared governance was very important in decision making processes, and university presidents stated that, “two thirds of board members did not understand the work and responsibilities of faculty.” Sadly, AAUP Oregon also has seen the results of this statement.

It is a worry then that this new AGB report, completed nearly half a decade after the first one, concludes in part that, “shared governance is not well understood by many who participated in the interviews and meetings and it seems to be practiced in different ways across the seven universities.” In fact, it is concerning that this new report, instead of seeing effective shared governance as a vehicle for necessary change, tends to separate communities from within the university. Far from suggesting “open communication” or “a commitment to accountability,” this report seeks to encourage silo-ing of responsibility and separating board members from the faculty and community groups that seek to work collaboratively within the varying systems of shared governance.

It is true that the seven Oregon public Boards of Trustees have legal responsibilities as fiduciaries for the universities, but, as both the 2017 and current AGB reports state, it is also the Boards’ responsibility to set up and develop a culture of meaningful engagement within the university community. By suggesting that faculty unions do not have a role to play beyond

setting working conditions, the AGB undermines their own findings about what would foster better shared governance. AAUP Oregon believes faculty unions serve an important purpose beyond developing good working conditions at the university. Including faculty union voices in substantive discussions on cross-cutting issues will foster the kind of good-faith understanding that will build trust and help support labor peace in higher education. As the 2022 report suggests, robust debate should be seen as a healthy way to surface multiple perspectives which allow for the best possible decisions not just for board members or faculty unions, but for the institution as a whole.

It is for these reasons and more AAUP Oregon supported last year's SB 854, which attempted to ensure the kind of effective communication and accountability that would best serve all the stakeholders. The small steps taken so far, such as making sure Trustees have public email addresses or including more faculty voices on Presidential search committees, have been very welcome changes from even just a few years ago. We also believe that guaranteeing unions that represent faculty, staff, and graduate employees a place on the regular Board agendas for comment would be an excellent place to continue.

The members of our campus unions have institutional memory, professional knowledge, and a passion to protect our state institutions that would enable better university governance and increased trust in Oregon's higher education system. This requires going beyond the public comment period and acknowledging that campus labor unions have a specific and necessary role in governing our university. Hearing their voices each time the Board meets encourages more informed decisions.

We at AAUP Oregon hope that we can continue this conversation between our represented faculty, the various Boards of Trustees, the administrations, and the legislature in the coming sessions. It is clear that there is an opportunity to help encourage the kind of trusting and mutually respectful relationship we all agree is necessary for the continued and future excellence of our Oregon public universities.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments.

Sincerely,

Steve Shay
President, AAUP-Oregon