

Testimony of Kurt Willcox on HB 3280

Senate Education Committee – April 29, 2019

My name is Kurt Willcox. I am a recently retired classified employee at the University of Oregon. From 2013 to 2017 I served two terms as the non-faculty staff trustee on the UO Board of Trustees.

I am here today to urge you to support HB 3280 and provide full voting rights to all members of the Higher Education Coordinating Commission.

There are fourteen members on the UO Board of Trustees who are appointed by the governor. Three come from campus constituencies and all of them carry full voting rights. This was a point of controversy when the higher education institutional boards were created, but in practice there have been no significant problems – at the UO or at any of the other universities, as far as I am aware.

There are two main reasons for this, in my opinion. The first is that all trustee applicants are carefully reviewed by the governor's office before appointment. And second, all trustees are clearly instructed that while they may come from specific constituencies, they are there to represent the university, not that constituency. In my experience, the campus-based trustees have taken this guideline to heart and have acted in what they felt were the best interests of the university. Here's how this worked out in my case.

I have been an active union member all my life. When I was appointed to the UO Board of Trustees, I had just completed representing UO classified workers in SEIU contract negotiations with the university system. I know the UO administration was concerned I would act as a knee-jerk advocate for employees and not as an open-minded member of the university's governing body. They had a legitimate concern, but that is not how I approached things at all.

I have a long and varied association with the UO, so I am definitely motivated to help the university succeed. I have a graduate degree from the UO which I paid for, in part, by employment as a student worker. My children and spouse have all graduated from the UO. I spent nearly ten years as an adjunct instructor at the UO's Labor Education and Research Center. And I worked as a classified employee for nearly six years before I joined the Board.

When I was appointed, I immediately resigned my position as bargaining representative. I did, however, maintain close connections with my classified co-workers. I also reached out to the officers of administration, those staff members who typically supervise classified workers, because they too are part of the non-faculty staff constituency. And I worked closely with the faculty and student trustees to ensure that the trustees without

daily campus experience understood how the issues we discussed would impact students and employees.

I believe this approach was a successful one. My fellow trustees routinely expressed appreciation for the information and perspectives shared by the campus-based trustees. The Board chair regularly praised us for our thorough preparation before meetings and, on occasion, asked us to act as Board liaisons with our constituencies on specific issues. The disagreements we had on the Board were usually not internal; they most often involved Board members asking the administration to delay action on a subject and come back with further information. We had a few divided votes, primarily over tuition, but we decided the great majority of issues unanimously. And when my first term ended, the university asked the governor to reappoint me and the other campus-based trustees.

I should also mention my experience with the UO's University Senate where I worked the last three years before I retired. This was initially a faculty senate and while the group remains primarily composed of faculty members, it now contains students, officers of administration, and classified employees. As these groups were added to the senate over the years, they initially were granted a voice, but no vote. Eventually, after years of experience with these new representatives, the senate recognized the value of their contributions and decided to make them full participants in academic governance by granting them voting rights.

It appears to me that all HECC commissioners, whether constituency-based or at-large, devote a great deal of personal time and energy to serve in these roles. They certainly have a far more demanding meeting schedule than the UO Board of Trustees, which only meets quarterly. They often travel long distances to attend meetings and hearings and the workload to prepare for meetings is significant. I think it is only reasonable for constituency-based commissioners to have the same voting rights at-large members. I think the HECC will be stronger for it.

Thank you.

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