Remarks of Senate President Margie Paris to UO Board of Trustees
March 26, 2014

This is the third and final meeting that we’ll have together; at your next meeting in June, our Senate will have a new president who will meet with you over the coming academic year.

I’d like to introduce him now: Dr. Robert Kyr, Philip H. Knight Professor of Composition and Theory in the School of Music and Dance. Rob has been a faculty member since 1990 and has been deeply involved in shared governance. He served as Vice President of the Senate for over a year and then Senate President for two years. During those terms, the university was undergoing major changes, including the firing of Richard Lariviere, the interim presidency of Bob Berdahl, the process of hiring Mike Gottfredson as our new president, in which both Rob and I were involved as search committee members, the process of hiring a new provost, in which Rob was once again involved as a search committee member, and the unionization of the faculty. From working closely with him over the past year, I can relate that Rob is experienced, committed, endlessly energetic, collaborative, and respected and trusted by all who work with him – faculty and administration alike. I think you’ll enjoy working with him.

In my previous meetings with you, I’ve described the structure of our system of shared governance and given you examples of the important work that takes place within the many Senate committees, as well as a taste of the issues that reach the floor of the Senate in its capacity as a legislative body.

I’d like to use my short time today to do something a bit different, because an item on your agenda has raised some concerns among Senate constituencies and presents a wonderful opportunity to illustrate how shared governance can work.

The item I’m speaking of is the Policy on Board Retention and Delegation of Authority, which appears on your agenda as item 3.0 to be considered at 9 AM. I’d like to ask you to refrain from adopting that policy until you’ve had a chance to consider input from Senate constituencies. That input would be in the form of suggested minor edits that wouldn’t change the fundamental important work of this document – which is to identify the Board’s authority and specify to whom and where it delegates that authority – but that would ensure that that authority and those delegations are more accurately and clearly identified.

Obviously, this is an important foundational document for our new system of governance, and it has direct implications to the shared governance work of the Senate and its constituencies. Yet none of us among those constituencies was aware of or had read this document until the Board’s agenda was made public this Monday. Thus it would be both helpful and a sign of good will if we were to be given some time to collect our input and provide it to you. I’m confident that
the input will make this a better foundational document, and that the process of inviting our input will serve as a very positive first interaction between the Board and the campus community.

I won’t go through edits (suggested by myself or by others) at this time. I’ve shared my own suggestions with one of your members, Susan Gary. Rather, I wanted to use my remaining few minutes to relate how the importance of shared governance is reflected in this moment of potential collaboration.

If we step back a moment and recollect the reasons for shared governance, we might frame them as including these:

1. Two reasons focusing on the academic mission: (a) faculty are in the best position to shape and implement curriculum and research policy, to select academic colleagues and judge their work, and to establish admissions and academic standards to which students must rise; and (b) students learn about participation and conflict management in an environment of shared governance. There are some provisions in the proposed policy that could use a bit of tweaking to better reflect shared governance in these immediate academic matters.

2. Two reasons focusing on the broader health and success of the institution: (a) an institution makes better decisions when it involves all members of the community – faculty, staff, students – in identifying and considering options (in essence, the community can take advantage of its “collective intelligence”); and (b) finally, and perhaps most importantly, shared governance lifts the morale of university employees because it results in information being shared and exchanged. In fact, it’s the sharing and exchanging of information, not the sharing of power, that is the essential feature of shared governance. I’d like to close with words from an article written by Stanley Fish, the brilliant professor literary theorist, legal scholar, and former dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at UIC – words that ring especially true to me with respect to our own university:

   Faculties are not distressed because they have too small a portion of the administrative task, but rather because they only learn about administrative decisions after they have been made. It is the withholding of information, not of responsibility, that leaves faculty members feeling left out, taken for granted, and generally disrespected.

   [Fish continues]: For some reason that has never been clear to me, the hoarding of information is a reflex common to most administrators. They may be thinking that they control the situation by controlling the flow of information. The truth is that in the
absence of information, rumor, conspiracy theories, and ultimately real conspiracies rush in to fill the space that would not even have existed if full disclosure had been the policy.

[So Fish advises]: Tell them everything. Share every piece of information you have the moment you have it, and they will be quite happy to leave the governance to you, especially if you invite them to talk about the issues the information raises. They get to feel that they are a part of what is going on, while you get the benefit of hearing their views without having to promise to act in accordance with them.

What Fish says jives with my experience of over 20 years in this institution – faculty, staff, and students want to be part of the discussion, but they don’t agitate for inappropriate power in decisionmaking.

Consistent with Stanley Fish’s advice, I’d ask you to share with the faculty and staff the policies that you’re considering, to give yourself the benefit of hearing our views, and then to make the decisions that you feel are the best for our university.