Service, Governance, and Activism

Wayne Westling Award Acceptance Speech
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Thank you, Senators, for this great honor.

I share this award with my students, colleagues, and fellow Senators for their commitment to what Wayne Westling so valued: “the principles of shared governance, participatory decision-making, and fostering a campus climate of inclusiveness and respect.”

The Westling award is, in part, recognition for "service to the university." But what is service? As university citizens we understand and value the meaning and worth of our service to our university, to our students. All of us take part in communities and institutions that we care about but that aren’t perfect. The fundamental contract of all communities demands we each do our part to help our communities grow and advance.

The word “service” can evoke images of working for others. But we shouldn’t confuse “service” with “subservience.” Truly, the call to service in our communities usually takes the form of our supporting that which serves us well and of our working to change that which doesn’t. In my experience, when I think of those whose contributions I most admire, service can mean activism.

Receiving today's honor helps recall my early days here, when the principle of university service drew me to activities to foster inclusion and equity. One of the most satisfying experiences was in the early 90s, helping create a group of women faculty from around campus. For about two years, we met regularly and advocated for changes to improve the climate for women on campus. Many of those changes continue to bear fruit. Before that even -- in the 80s -- then President Paul Olum responded with understanding when I and others advocated for parental leave and a child care facility for faculty and staff. He provided the founding donation for the Olum Child Care Center – a center that continues to thrive.
It is particularly important to recognize activism as service in the present political climate. As Americans, as scholars, as teachers, we are confronted with issues where service to our communities isn’t necessarily recognized. About five weeks ago we saw “science marches” all over the country that protested in defense of the scientific method. I see these protests as important service. When climate scientists try to warn politicians and business leaders about the dangers of the course we are on that is service, a great service.

Leaders should react positively to this service. They should recognize that activists are bringing them something of great value. Unfortunately, they often don’t. Activism, as service, is often denigrated and attacked. Service to our communities that confronts what is wrong gets shot down. We are told we are out of our lane, that we need to go back to our ivory tower. To go back to “academic matters”.

Push back can at times be hard to handle, but making change can be uplifting for all when a university or community or country can change in positive ways.

This Senate is an amazing venue for service in creating necessary change. It is the primary decision making body of the University because its Faculty are vested by Oregon law, first adopted in 1876, with responsibility for the “immediate government” and “discipline” of the university. Of course that is a shared governance responsibility. True, there is a governing board and a state legislature that serve as an “ultimate government” above us. Still, this Senate has significant authority, responsibility, and expertise that has allowed us to accomplish a lot.

According to the University of Oregon’s Constitution, our governance authority in the Senate is over "academic matters as commonly understood in higher education." There is a school of thought that wants to read “academic matters” narrowly, one that says the Senate should only be handling curriculum and little else. I can’t support such a narrow reading because this isn’t a narrow university. Its academic mission and legacy aren’t narrow. Oregon Law defines the University of Oregon as a “public body” created to carry out “public missions.” Specifically, the statute spells out four goals for public higher education:

1. Creating an educated citizenry
2. Ensuring a high-quality learning environment that allows students to succeed
3. Creating original knowledge and advancing innovation

4. Contributing positively to the economic, civic and cultural life of communities in all regions of Oregon

That is why we are here. We are, in the words of the UO’s own mission statement, a “community of scholars” committed to “exceptional teaching, discovery, and service.” All legitimate activities of the university exist to serve its academic mission to advance learning in the public good.

That doesn't mean we should micro-manage the university’s administration. There is a difference between the governance function we are required to provide and the management function provided by our deans and executives. However, the last few years have showed how invaluable the contributions of this Senate are to the effective running of the university. Part of the transition to an independent governing board was the need to update our policies. That required a lot of work, often thankless work, carried about by the Senate.

There are times that our body has needed to directly intervene. A good example was the medical records privacy case a couple of years ago. We had a situation that ended up having national consequences, exposing an unintended loophole in national privacy law and leading to action by both the federal government and our state legislature. It also led to action here, in this Senate, to enact a strong student privacy policy. We got a lot of push back but we did the right thing.

Perhaps the most vital work of the Senate has been in crafting policy that allows us to live up to our ideal of being a “community of scholars” that, in the words of the mission statement, helps “individuals question critically, think logically, reason effectively, communicate clearly, act creatively, and live ethically.” One example of such policy is the University of Oregon’s Academic Freedom policy, enacted in spring of 2014, which is applicable not only to faculty but to students and all staff. The breadth of the policy also goes beyond even federal free speech law, but that fact and the policy’s special procedures have sometimes been ignored.

Another example of a policy that promotes our commitment to academic freedom and to a campus climate of inclusiveness and respect is the new Student Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment and Violence Complaint and Response Policy.
Despite the Senate’s successes and contributions, living up to our values of academic openness and participatory governance is neither automatic nor always well-received. In all of the cases I have mentioned we have received push back. As we developed the reporting policy, some of those who contributed the most to the process were blocked from serving on the committee. Many of us have been called names and attacked. And now we have the problem of getting policies we have passed to be followed in practice.

And so now, yet again, we Senators face a choice. Will we hold true to our values and assert what is right and is consistent with the mission of a university? Will we continue to take our governance and oversight role seriously, or will we be diminished as our self-governing “community of scholars” is transformed into a corporatized bureaucracy?

I will continue to hope – and believe – that all of us in this great university can work together. Let’s not forget that the roots of many if not most of our administration are as faculty members, as professors. I thank them for taking on additional, important responsibilities. But none of us should take paths that will not be in the best interests of our students and of our historic mission.

As teachers and scholars, we have the authority, and yes, the power to be more than a small box in a university’s organizational chart. We are a vital part of our university’s governance, and through our service and commitment, we contribute to the health of an equitable, inclusive, high-quality learning environment. We have challenging work ahead of us to ensure the health of higher education and the well-being of our students. And we must do it together.

Thank you.