Classified Staff Leadership Award – Kurt Willcox

Thanks very much for this award; it means a great deal to me.

I want to tell you a little about my connections to the UO and offer some thoughts about our classified staff, but first I need to say a few “Thank You’s”.

Thank You

First and foremost, I want to thank my family – my spouse, Phyllis Wagoner, our daughter, Kate Wagoner, and our son, Sean Willcox. My family has certainly been my greatest source of encouragement and support. I am quite pleased they were all able to be here today. We have all attended the UO and when Sean finishes up next week, we will each have a masters’ degree from the university.

I also want to thank my UO co-workers and the many people I’ve met through my work here. That includes several friends from intoCareers where I spent 6 years as a researcher, Lynn Feekin and other faculty and staff from LERC, the Labor Education and Research Center, and quite a few of you who are here today.

Finally, I owe many thanks to all the UO classified staff and union activists I have had the privilege to represent, work with, and learn from over the years. That certainly includes Dorothy Atneave and those involved in nominating and selecting me for this award, as well as numerous other local SEIU leaders, especially Theodora Ko Thompson, Lisa Sieracki, Johnny Earl, and Lois Yoshishige.

My UO Connections: Why I Feel So Invested in This School

I came to the UO from New Jersey in 1971 as a graduate history student. I never finished that degree, but I did eventually earn one in Industrial and Labor Relations from the College of Business. Along the way, I met many wonderful faculty members, some of whom became lasting friends - Margaret Hallock, Steven Deutsch, Daniel Pope, Jack Maddex, Ed Bingham, and several others.

I got my first taste of labor activism through the university in the mid-1970s in support of the lettuce and grape boycotts conducted by the United Farm Workers union. The UO had a “freedom of choice” policy then that required the EMU cafeteria to serve both union and non-union lettuce, so many of us organized a “boycott restaurant” that served only farm worker lettuce. For 15 months we made sandwiches every morning and sold them to fellow students on the EMU Terrace. We took quite a bite out of EMU food sales and sent hundreds of dollars to the farm workers. When the weather turned wet and nasty, members of our group took over what's now a vending machine room by the Fishbowl and moved our “boycott restaurant” inside. The university put several of us on trial in student conduct court for doing that. We were found guilty and nearly kicked off campus, but we had a smart third-year law student representing us and he got us off on appeal. Good thing or my UO connection might have ended right there.
After getting my degree in 1981, I spent nearly 30 years working for unions or labor education programs helping a wide variety of workers organize and represent themselves. In the mid-1980s, this included representing the classified employees here at the UO – handling grievances, supporting bargaining campaigns, and dealing with Human Resources.

Starting in the late-1990s, I worked for nearly 10 years as an adjunct instructor at LERC teaching in their labor extension program. I even took a leave from my union job and spent a year working at LERC full-time to replace a faculty member who was on sabbatical.

In 2009, after failing in my attempt to retire from my union career, I began working here as a part-time classified employee. I’m hoping, by the way, to be a bit more successful in that regard in the not-too-distant future. Over the past 8 years I have been active in our local SEIU union, serving in a variety of leadership positions including representing the UO classified staff in statewide higher education negotiations four years ago.

Shortly after those negotiations concluded, the UO Board of Trustees was created and I have spent the past 3½ years serving on it as a voice for classified employees and Officers of Administration - and for students, too. It is absolutely essential that Board members hear these campus voices if we want them to make decisions that will strengthen our community as well as improve the institution’s academic status.

I think my varied experiences here have helped me contribute effectively as both a Board member and a union leader. I know they have contributed to the deep affection I feel for this university.

**Classified Staff Need to Be Viewed as Important to the UO Mission**

There are about 1700 classified employees at the UO in a wide range of positions from Nurse Practitioner and Analyst Programmer to Custodian and Office Assistant. All of these people perform functions that are important - and even critical - to the operation of this university.

In my experience, most classified staff, regardless of the job they perform, express two basic perspectives about their work lives at the UO:

1) The thing they value most highly about their jobs is their connection to the students. They take great pride in providing students with an environment where they can learn and grow, navigate the bureaucracy, eat well, and feel safe.

2) At the same time, they routinely feel that their work is not valued by the university. The individual reasons vary - from efforts to take away benefits in contract negotiations or the way they’re treated by a supervisor or HR staff to dealing with increased workloads or difficulties in advancing their careers, but the resulting unease is the same.
UO classified employees want to feel a greater sense of respect from the university and a stronger commitment to helping them maintain a decent standard of living. Here are two suggestions on how to begin moving in that direction:

1) Ensure that workers are treated respectfully by those who supervise them. This will require better training of managers, but it will also mean creating conditions where classified staff feel safe raising concerns, where those concerns are taken seriously, and where there are consequences for poor supervision.

2) Take concrete steps to improve the economic security of the lowest-paid university workers. This could involve developing a plan to raise the lowest starting wage from the current $12 an hour up to a more livable $15 an hour. It could also include refraining from taking harmful actions, such as the current effort to eliminate the shift meal benefit that Food Service Workers have enjoyed for many years.

Conclusion

There is certainly much more I could say about how to honor classified employees, but let me conclude by again expressing my appreciation to the Senate for this award, to the university for all the wonderful experiences I have had here, and to my fellow classified employees for the privilege of representing and working with you. I am a proud union member and I am proud to be part of the University of Oregon.