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Oregon audit's push for more professor accountability clashes with university culture

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By **Bill Graves, The Oregonian** Follow

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Bill Graves/The Oregonian

Inlow Hall, Eastern Oregon University's oldest building, opened in 1929, on the eve of the Great Depression, as a teacher education college. Today, the president and other administrators work in the building. Eastern was among four state universities recently studied in detail by state auditors.

Philosophy Professor Jeff Johnson doesn't see how **Eastern Oregon University** administrators could track the hours he works as a state audit recommended Tuesday.

He teaches two to three classes a term. For each hour in class, he spends one to three hours preparing and countless more grading. He advises students, serves on Eastern's faculty senate and as president of the Interinstitutional Faculty Senate, and he annually publishes one peer-reviewed article and presents one to three papers at conferences. He says he puts in at least 60 hours of work a week, often more, and is typical of Eastern's faculty.

A **report** by the **Secretary of State's audits division** last week concludes administrators at the state's seven public universities

have no way of knowing if Johnson is typical or if he and his colleagues should spend their time in different, more efficient ways. Tracking workload is left to department heads, nearly all of whom do not monitor a professor's out-of-class work time.

Gary Blackmer, director of the audits division, says he cannot imagine any other agency head leaving it to middle managers and supervisors to ensure staff is deployed efficiently.

The **Oregon University System** is not just another agency, administrators say. That's one reason they are seeking legislation this session to end the universities' state agency status for more autonomy and control.

Academic freedom

This class of cultures between state leaders and universities is unfolding across the country. Faced with record revenue shortfalls, leaders are putting pressure on universities to show their money is well spent. Universities, rooted in the ancient values of Academe, see these moves as unpractical impositions that threaten academic freedom and undermine quality.

The push by states to make their universities more cost-effective has led to talk about faculty productivity, says Bruce Vandal, higher education policy director for the **Education**

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Commission of the States in Denver. "If you are going to start that conversation about how they spend their time, then you're inevitably going to be walking into the academic freedom argument head-on."

Several states track professor work. The Nevada System of Higher Education produces a **faculty report** every two years that shows not only the average number of courses and credit hours, but also the average number of papers they write, students they advise and other out-of-classroom activities.

Faculty at **Texas A&M University** erupted in outrage last fall when the school tried to put a price on how much each professor produces in profit or loss.

This scrutiny's coming from financial pressure, says Joel Alexander, psychology professor at **Western Oregon University**. "We appear to be the uncorralled, under controlled group of workers within each state whom people don't know from moment to moment what we are doing," he says.

Oregon university officials argue that they should be held accountable by outcomes rather than faculty workloads – by how many students earn degrees, faculty-student ratios or spending per degree. By those measures, they argue, Oregon universities are among the most efficient in the nation.

But state auditors say university administrators can't know how efficiently they use faculty if they don't know how professors work. They can't know, for example, whether too much tuition money is being used to subsidize professor research at the cost of instruction.

Varying expectations

Auditors interviewed provosts at every university, some other administrators and English and chemistry department heads at the **University of Oregon** and **Oregon State**, Eastern Oregon and Western Oregon universities. Professors at the research universities taught as few as two classes a year while those at the regional campuses as many as 12.

Oregon State's English department has 24 tenured or tenured-track professors who typically spend half their time teaching five courses a year, 40 percent on research and 10 percent in service, the audit's working papers show. The 40 tenured professors on the University of Oregon's English staff, however, spend 80 percent of their time teaching five courses a year and the rest to service.

In the OSU chemistry department, the 16 tenured professors are expected to teach three courses a year. They typically spend 45 percent of their time on teaching, 45 percent on research and 10 percent on service.

At the UO, the 28 tenured chemistry faculty spend half their time in research, 30 percent teaching and 20 percent in service.

Work expectations and the frequency and scope of evaluations also varied among departments and campuses. One auditor reports that most of the files she reviewed for UO's non-tenured faculty "did not appear to have either evaluations and/or position descriptions."

The universities are doing "a lot of good things" but they are doing so "piecemeal," Blackmer says. "We didn't see it done systematically and consistently." So leaders lack the information they need to set priorities and efficiency suffers, his report says.

But university officials say it makes sense for universities to organize around their departments and let the chairs monitor faculty work. The chemistry department, for example, might choose to put a talented, engaging professor in a class with 200 students so other professors can work with smaller classes, says Wim Wiewel, president of **Portland State University**. They might cut the size of an organic chemistry class so more students get the help they need to pass. Administrators don't have the frontline knowledge to make those efficiency decisions, he says.

Professors do complex, creative work in teaching, research and service that is interrelated, Wiewel says. "Trying to measure them as if they are separate things, it is simply impossible," he says. "It is an exercise in futility. You would end up with information that wouldn't mean anything."


R. Michael Tanner, vice president for academic affairs at the **Association of Public and Land-grant Universities** in Washington, D.C., agrees. But, he adds, that doesn't mean university departments should not explain how they assess and use their faculty.

"Calling for an understanding of how the faculty effort is being distributed is not unreasonable," he says.


-- **Bill Graves**

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
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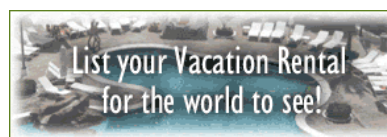
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