

April 20, 2005

Dr. Philip W. Conn, President  
Western Oregon University  
345 North Monmouth Avenue  
Monmouth, Oregon 97361

Dear President Conn:

Thank you for sharing with me the report of Western Oregon University's Task Force for Consideration of Policies and Practices Regarding Sexual Harassment and Consensual Relationships.

I am encouraged that you will be providing me later this week with your own recommendations about next steps that you believe the campus could and should take to begin to address the findings and recommendations of the Task Force.

First, let me thank you, the Task Force members, and others within the university community who worked so hard over the past several weeks to investigate, assess, and address this important set of matters. The serious nature of the topics was borne out in the seriousness of the efforts taken by the campus community. Thank you again for facilitating such a set of actions.

Because of the importance of this subject matter, I want to make certain that I understand both what the Task Force found and the recommendations they are making. Too, I want to make clear, the commitment I have to ensuring that the complaint process at each campus is clear, fair and confidential. Toward those ends, I thought it appropriate to recount my understanding of the report's key findings and recommendations and discuss more directly my issues regarding the complaint process.

As I understand the report, some of the key findings of the Task Force were:

1. Reported instances of sexual harassment and inappropriate consensual relationships were few in number and not pervasive;
2. The University's recently implemented consensual relationship and sexual harassment policies are clearer and superior to their predecessors although there is room for specific improvement; and
3. A more rigorous survey is needed of campus attitudes, beliefs, and practices related to sexual harassment and consensual relationships. Presumably, this survey, currently under development, would provide more comprehensive answers to the questions raised in my February 8 letter than were possible during the short time available until now. It will be instructive to determine if the attitudes and beliefs disclosed in the survey are similar to

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those described in the Task Force report and if proposed practices conform both to the new policies and to any changes that might be made this spring and summer.

In addition to these findings, it is apparent from the text that the Task Force heard and agreed that improvements were needed with respect to the clarity of the complaint and investigation processes; communication with affected departments about the progress and disposition of investigations; the timeliness of investigations; the independence of investigations; and training and education of everyone in the campus community.

These Task Force findings are not surprising. However, I am interpreting other parts of the report to give support to a posture of no tolerance for sexual harassment and inappropriate consensual relationships. This might be made more clear and prominent in any campus communications on these topics.

The Task Force made several recommendations in addition to calling for the survey. These included the wide dissemination of its report, the establishment of a campus-wide sexual harassment committee, reconsideration and redevelopment of campus sexual harassment and consensual relationship policies based upon the findings of the Task Force, counseling for campus community members who have experienced sexual harassment or inappropriate relationships (I assume this refers to consensual relationships), improved training, and improved communications. I caution that proposed policy changes must also balance the legal requirements of confidentiality and privacy.

Although I recognize the need for careful and collaborative efforts in these areas, as we discussed last week, I am interested, too, in the steps you would propose to take immediately to help address the findings of the Task Force. This would be especially welcome in the areas of improved communications and increased training.

Finally, as I noted in my February 22 message to all OUS presidents, I am particularly interested in the complaint processes and methods with the anticipation that they are well understood, effective, confidential, and fair and responsive in both fact and perception. Enough mention was made in the Task Force report that students and others were unclear about the complaint process that I believe this should be a high and immediate priority. I expect that such a process will be clear, simple, widely disseminated and understood, and safe. Your plans to develop, clarify and disseminate a complaint process would be especially important to me.

Thank you again for sharing with me the Task Force report. It is an important document and I appreciate very much the efforts you and the entire campus community have made toward this excellent start.

Sincerely,

George Pernsteiner  
Acting Chancellor

cc: Board Members  
OUS Presidents  
Ben Rawlins