

2013

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Recommended Citation

Hein, Clarence, "Judith Ramaley: A Pivotal Presidency for Portland State University" (2013). *Looking Back: Essays on Portland State*. Paper 3.
http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/rememberpsu_essays/3

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A Pivotal Presidency for Portland State University

Clarence Hein

From 1978 to 2001 I served in news and community relations positions at Portland State, working directly with five different presidents. During those years, as would be expected, this still relatively young University experienced significant growth and change. No succeeding year found the campus precisely the same as the preceding year. However, I believe the period of 1990 through 1996, the Presidency of Judith Ramaley, marked a significant period in the institution's development, second only, perhaps, to the initial struggle for a permanent home and degree-granting status.

The following paper is drawn from my personal recollections, interviews with contemporaries, and reviews of news articles and internal university documents collected in the Millar Library Archives as well as my personal files. The documents include papers from the offices of the president and provost as well as from my office, the State Board of Higher Education, the Portland State University Faculty Senate and public and private study committees.

The Background

I believe that to fully appreciate the importance of Judith Ramaley's appointment as Portland State University President we have to consider the milieu in which it occurred. Founded in 1946 as an extension center for returning WWII GIs, PSU survived nine years of struggle, including a devastating flood, three campus relocations and continuous opposition from older, existing institutions to finally achieve degree-granting status. It took another 15 years to achieve the title, "university."

Progress came slowly but surely to the downtown campus until the mid-1980s and the appointment of the fifth PSU President, Natale Sicuro. His was an administration marked by controversy resulting from an arrogant administrative style, allegations of misuse of funds, and a growing alienation of the president from the University faculty. Within two years Sicuro was forced to resign and the campus put under the interim presidency of its former Vice President for Finance, Roger Edgington, who offered capable administration but not academic leadership.

It would be nearly 18 months until the appointment of Portland State's sixth permanent president.

The formal search for a new PSU President began in the fall of 1989 and in April, 1990, two finalists were announced, both women. One, Emita Hill, was a Vice Chancellor of Advancement in the City University of New York system. The other, Judith Ramaley, was Executive Vice Chancellor of the University of Kansas. As news reports pointed out, if either were appointed she would be the first woman to lead a public university in Oregon.

Reviewed now, with more than two decades of hindsight, Ramaley's public remarks seem remarkably prescient. The PSU Presidency, she said in an interview, "captured my imagination because Portland has a chance to create in its midst a comprehensive urban university that could be a model of its kind for the country." She added, "The value of appointing a president now is to have another voice to help shape Portland State." Asked about the relationship with University of Oregon and Oregon State University, Ramaley said, "PSU will emerge as an equal partner but with an urban mission which expresses itself in its research, its teaching, and its public service." According to news reports, she was the board's unanimous choice. Her academic background also was a plus with faculty. (TITLE) Nohad Toulon says, "Judith was such a formidable candidate that I believe anyone else would not have been welcome at that moment."

The appointment was greeted positively around the state with even the *Eugene Register Guard*, while calling PSU, "a troubled school," suggesting she would be, "the strong leader the university needs." There was optimism on campus as reflected in an editorial in *The Vanguard* which concluded, "In choosing Ramaley, the (state) board has endorsed a major and creative role for Portland State in Oregon higher education."

Two Challenges

Portland State's new president arrived on campus in August, 1990, and immediately faced two major challenges to the young university's continued development. These two challenges, occurred almost simultaneously, requiring immediate and thoughtful responses by President Ramaley. They also presented her with an opportunity to forge a new path for Portland State, a path on which it largely remains to this day.

The first challenge came in a report by the Governor's Commission on Higher Education in the Portland Metropolitan Area. The commission was appointed in the spring of 1989 by Governor Neil Goldschmidt, to assess higher education needs in the metro area and then to suggest a strategy for meeting them. It was chaired by Portland businessman Don Frisbee and its Executive Director was Robert Wise who later was instrumental in developing a campus development plan for PSU.

The Commission outlined four broad recommendations:

- 1 - Create a formal coalition of key Portland area academic institutions under a Council of Presidents.
- 2 - Shape PSU into an urban grant university.
- 3 - Launch collaborative projects such as a regional research library, more graduate programs, regional services centers, etc.

4 - Create the Greater Portland Trust in Higher Education to encourage collaboration and funding.

The second challenge came four months later with passage of a state-wide property tax limitation measure, called “Measure 5.” This measure held the possibility of major economic consequences for the state’s colleges and universities. On campus less than half a year, the new president faced immediate budget reductions of \$1 million and the potential for far deeper cuts at the beginning of the next budget cycle in July.

In a recent interview, Ramaley said, “At the time I was a candidate I was told about the Governor’s Commission but it wasn’t until later that the whole thing came down on me. At the same time, I had been assured that Measure 5 would not be a problem,” presumably because it was thought that it would not be approved by the state’s voters. “We (university presidents) were given something like eight weeks to come up with budgets reflecting 20-plus percent cuts,” she says.

Judith Ramaley found in these two challenges – a state commission suggesting a path of future development for the university and a tax measure forcing dramatic budget cuts – the potential for dramatic institutional change but also the chance to involve both the campus and the wider community in planning and executing that change.

Interviewed today, she recalls, “The opportunity I saw here was to turn ideas into reality. (What) intrigued me at that time was, how do universities and communities actually connect with each other and how does that inform the lives of each.” Handed the commission report in her first weeks on the job, Ramaley turned to a strategy she would use many times during her tenure to develop a campus response. She sought out key faculty and administrators with a keen interest in the topic, brainstormed ideas, and developed a conclusion with broad campus support. In this case, it was taking advantage of federal higher education legislation (Title XI) which included funding for “urban grant” universities. This proposal, perhaps more than any future action that followed, set Portland State on the course to become a nationally recognized urban institution.

The Urban University

One of the first things Ramaley did as PSU President was to commission a new seal for the University to replace the State of Oregon seal as its official identification on documents and signage. Gone were the covered wagon and ox team, the wheat, plow and pick-ax of the state seal. In their place was a representation of a classic rose window (a reference to Portland, City of Roses) and a banner bearing a Latin inscription meaning, “Let Knowledge Serve the City.” The new seal was cast into a Presidential Medallion which she wore at her official inauguration in August. It was the first step in what marketing professionals might term the “rebranding” of Portland State.

She told Portland's *Business Journal* shortly after her appointment, "My job is to clarify the mission of PSU and the role it will play in the Portland area ... (We) will take our direction from the needs of the community." She spoke of her "deep commitment to cooperation and teamwork," and said, "My basic orientation is to work with this community to create a model of a modern urban university. It will be complicated, but PSU has the potential to be the best of its kind. This is a good time to remember that Portland always has been ahead of the times."

As Bob Wise of the Governor's Commission put it recently, "She picked up the urban mission ball and made it her own." And in the process, he says, "she added value."

In January, 1991, Ramaley spoke to the City Club of Portland, a highly regarded civic action organization which had, in the past, advocated for increased support for PSU. In that speech she provided the basic outline of where she wanted to take the institution and how she was going to do it. "There are many kinds of colleges and universities," she said. "They differ in their missions, their locations and in size, scope and purpose. Portland State shares a common core with these institutions....The difference is in emphasis."

That difference in emphasis, she said, is the essence of the urban university. "Questions in the (urban) community do not come in simple terms," she said. "They aren't organized the way our academic departments are or the way that the body of knowledge we profess is organized. New academic organizations are required, new ways for faculty to relate to one another and to students, not only across departmental lines but across institutional lines, across the lines between the public and private sectors....At a first-class urban university the old boundaries between university and community, between study and service, between research and teaching, between theory and application, gradually will disappear."

She added, "For us, the payoff is that we can achieve a national and international reputation as an urban university if we first and foremost serve the greater Portland metropolitan area."

Then, she turned to the question of Measure 5. "So, here we are: an emerging urban university, singled out for a critical special mission by the Governor's Commission, in the midst of a major strategic planning effort to literally re-define ourselves....Then, WHAM, up jumps a wild card: Measure 5. When (it) passed, my spirits sagged at first. But then, I thought about it and I said to myself, 'Judith, you can look at this two ways: as a disaster, or an opportunity'....I've told my colleagues, we are faced with a situation which will require us to reduce budgets, but what we really are going to do is reshape the University..."

Reshaping the University

The first major step in that process came in April, 1991, with the initiation of a comprehensive review and analysis of the University's administrative structure, "In order to determine," Ramaley said, "how we could utilize our administrative resources more effectively to support our urban mission while, at the same time, preparing for painful budget cuts." Initially, the

combination of reviewing administrative structures and planning budget cuts aroused suspicions on campus. “Many people,” she said, “assumed that we were conducting the review only to identify what positions and functions to cut.”

The planning process itself helped allay those fears. On the administrative side, for example, personnel directly affected by the processes under review also were directly involved in designing improvements and efficiencies. The same was true with academic program planning. Ramaley and Provost Michael Reardon both were interested in reforming the university curriculum, particularly in the area of general education. They identified a small amount of money to provide grants for individual faculty members with ideas for improvement. This strategy led eventually to the complete re-design of the general education curriculum, culminating in the current University Studies program. Ramaley describes her philosophy this way: “You set up a frame or pose a question, you find someone to serve as a coordinator, you put some money on the table and leave it to those people to deploy the resources and, before you know it, you’ve got something magical.”

She was the first PSU President to appoint an active faculty member as the president’s “faculty advisor.” Rod Diman, (TITLE), was the first in that position. “(We) came in for one or two years and brought faculty concerns to her. That was very important and it was part of her idea of ‘community’ which extends through everything she does.” The faculty advisor position has continued under subsequent university presidents. Her understanding and belief in the academic process, her inclusive style of management, and her willingness to encourage and support new and creative program ideas led to a strong base of support among the University faculty, staff and supporters. She encouraged broad participation in university planning and curriculum development and always demonstrated a keen interest in new ideas, particularly those involving university and community interaction.

This support was to prove valuable in two important initiatives. One, the re-design of the university’s undergraduate curriculum and the development of University studies, continued over nearly the entire term of Ramaley’s presidency. The other, an attempt by the State System of Higher Education to transfer Engineering and other academic programs from PSU to the University of Oregon and Oregon State University, would embroil the university and the community in an intense struggle for recognition during the final months of her tenure here.

Redefining the Curriculum

As part of the overall planning effort to “reshape the university, Ramaley and Provost Michael Reardon developed two faculty task groups, one to focus on interdisciplinary studies and the other to examine the current status of the general education requirement. Redesigning the undergraduate curriculum had long been an interest of the Provost’s and, with Ramaley’s strong support and Reardon’s careful guidance, the general education group developed one of the most important academic initiatives in the University’s history. Political Science Professor Charles

White, who says he had “zero interest” in the topic of general education at the time, was named chair of that initiative. “Michael was very clever in designing this group,” White says. “He kept close track of what was happening,” but gave them freedom to do research and to fully explore the topic. White says, “I turned the group into a research seminar.”

They put together the best thinking available about general education but, in this case, in direct reference to the “non-traditional” nature of Portland State’s students. Then the group re-defined the term, “general education,” which usually referred to a specific set of introductory courses from various academic departments. White says the group’s fundamental premise was to shift the purpose of general education from, “transmitting specific substantive content to assisting students in making the critical transition from being receptors of ‘facts’ to becoming lifelong learners.”

This was the foundation for Portland State’s University Studies Program, sets of courses that are designed and taught by interdisciplinary teams of faculty. The program was developed over the next four years during which PSU became nationally recognized for its innovative and comprehensive approach to creating a new idea of general education. With President Ramaley’s support, Professor White and his team carried the University Studies story to regional and national higher education conferences, winning substantial financial support from organizations such as the Kellogg Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trust.

“It was pretty clear to me that this was a very smart strategy,” White says, “because as soon as we started getting those awards people started to notice. When you go to a conference now and say you’re from Portland State, people actually know us and have a positive image.”

The innovations in undergraduate education which encouraged interdisciplinary studies and university-community collaboration, as well as other academic changes such as new rules for faculty tenure, were designed and implemented by teams of dedicated faculty and staff, not by a single chief executive. However, as Nohad Toulan, Dean Emeritus of Urban Studies and Planning, says, “The new undergraduate curriculum was an idea that had existed for some time. But, it was Judith who understood how to make it happen and who could rally the support to make it happen.” This was a sentiment echoed even in the public media such as this from a December, 1996, editorial in *The Oregonian*. “It’s important to note that Ramaley has not done these and other things alone. Her approach has been collaborative and cooperative....It falls to us to point out, though, that Ramaley created the atmosphere of trust, openness and the pursuit of quality that has transformed PSU.”

The refocusing of PSU’s academic, research and service mission provides lasting evidence of Judith Ramaley’s influence on the very character of the University and led to a growing national reputation as a leading innovator among urban universities. At the same time, local and regional support for Portland State also was growing. The real extent of that support came as an unwelcome surprise to the State Board of Higher Education and the Chancellor’s Office when

they attempted to limit the University's academic reach through the removal of engineering and other programs in 1995-96.

Next, Surprisingly Strong Public Support for PSU

The first public inkling that a major restructuring of Oregon higher education was in the offing appeared in a front page article in *The Oregonian* on Tuesday, Oct. 3, 1995. The story discussed Chancellor Joe Cox's desire to establish a "strategic planning process" to achieve a potentially "revolutionary" change in Oregon higher education. The story, with extensive quotes from Cox, apparently grew out of a reporter's interpretation of a memo he had sent to the campus presidents a few days earlier. In it the chancellor proposed various planning teams which, over a period of months, would prepare proposals for the 1997 legislature. The day prior to the news story, at a PSU Faculty Senate meeting, Ramaley reacted to the Chancellor's memo, saying it was "a grab bag" of ideas which further discussion might improve. However, she added, "Looking forward to new letterhead? I hope not."

In an 11-page letter to Chancellor Cox, Ramaley said, "We both agree, I believe, that the document must be revised substantially before it is released to the public." To add emphasis, she underlined that statement. She said the talk of restructuring was based on a misperception that, "PSU will never amount to anything," when, in fact, the university had evolved into a national model for urban universities. "(My) most serious criticism," she said, "is that it is not clear why such far-reaching restructuring is necessary." She added that there was no evidence that restructuring, by itself, would solve any problems.

The very next day the newspaper story appeared. It was essentially a review of the chancellor's proposals and included in its fifth paragraph these two sentences: "The seven-school system would be divided between the University of Oregon and Oregon State University. Portland State University, for example, could become OSU at Portland." For President Ramaley, and PSU's supporters those two sentences essentially were a declaration of war. The assertion that "informal discussions" had been going on for about a year, "mainly behind the scenes," according to the article, further fueled the ire of President Ramaley who claimed no knowledge of them.

Her concerns about behind the scenes plotting by the Chancellor, Board President and others are evident in an October 9th letter to her friend Lindsay Desrochers. Desrochers had been Ramaley's Vice President for Finance and Administration at PSU before moving the University System of Georgia. Ramaley tells Desrochers, "Basically, we have uncovered three, (separate) but related, clandestine efforts to float variations on restructuring and have early, but very sketchy indications that there may be another entirely independent process going on that even Les (Swanson) and Joe (Cox) don't know about. The third process she referred to apparently involved UO President Dave Frohnmayer who wanted, "to make all of PSU the UO Portland." She adds that each of the three – Cox, Swanson and Frohnmayer – had been having private conversations with people in Portland for at least two months.

She says that there was some good news -- state and local leaders seem ready to do something positive for Oregon higher education but that the bad news lay in the number of “secret conversations” going on that “were way out in front of most OSSHE members and most of the presidents, including me.” Ramaley concludes her letter to Desrochers this way: “However, it is no longer easy to mess with either PSU or its President, as some folks are finding out.”

She was referring to the influence of a growing body of PSU alumni and others that was both knowledgeable and politically savvy. Chief among them was a group called “PSU Advocates” whose creation and activities were facilitated through the office of PSU’s Alumni Director, Pat Squire. The Advocates included a number of people active and experienced in political and social action. Their work over the next year proved critical in the eventual outcome of the OSSHE planning process. The Advocates continue today as an important support group, particularly in legislative lobbying efforts.

The struggle over the proposed higher education “restructuring” played out over the next year in both public meetings and private negotiations (For a fuller discussion see, “The Best Laid Schemes,” Clarence Hein). There were several news articles regarding the reorganization plans during the winter and spring, 1995-96, as well as numerous letters to editors and op-ed pieces, most of which opposed the plans and nearly all of which were prompted by PSU’s community supporters. The PSU Advocates leadership at that time was Joan Johnson, a long-time University supporter. “We decided,” she said, “we would run a political campaign and try to beat those people we felt were trying to beat down Portland State. We were very careful never to discuss this on PSU phones and never on University time.”

The Advocates did not want to be seen as an “official” University opposition and took pains not to include President Ramaley in their plans. However, it seems likely that the central higher education administration believed the president and the university were more directly involved and Ramaley’s relationship to the board and chancellor became increasingly strained.

In July, 1996, with the reorganization debate becoming even more heated, President Ramaley was interviewed by the editorial board of *The Oregonian*, a regular practice by newspapers seeking background on major public issues. Following the interview the newspaper devoted a lead editorial to the OSSHE planning process reminding Chancellor Cox that sound strategic planning should not start, “with a preordained conclusion,” and calling for PSU to be a full participant in all discussions. On that same day the paper ran a story drawn from the editorial board meeting under the headline, “PSU’s Ramaley seeks openness in reform.” The story included the startling revelation that Ramaley had told the editorial board that, if the process was not “fair and honest” and did not boost PSU, she would look for work elsewhere. “If the answer,” she said, “is that we are not going to invest in an urban university then there is nothing for me here.” The story indicated that she already had been considered for the leadership of university systems in Maine and Nevada but had withdrawn from the searches before the selection process was completed. “At some point,” she told the editorial board, “it becomes too

difficult to make innovations when you are being distracted by continued questions about the validity of your enterprise.”

Eventually, the controversy was resolved with adoption of a plan proposed by PSU which gave the Portland campus the main responsibility for public higher education in the metropolitan region, basically the structure which exists today. Both Chancellor Cox and members of the board acknowledged that it was the organized and aggressive opposition from the Portland area that turned the tide. “You have folks who just aren’t prepared to go with (the merger),” Cox said. Board member Diane Christopher said, “It’s no secret that this entire board has been inundated by the Portland community about what we should do.” Another board member, Tom Imeson, said the PSU opposition, “was a signal that the transaction cost of a merger would not be insignificant.”

In *The Oregonian* of November 16, 1996, the headline read: “Engineering turf war ends, and PSU wins.” A few days later, the campus gathered in Smith Center to honor President Ramaley for her leadership and dedication. Later, she wrote a note of thanks to the campus community: “The event on Friday was like nothing else I have ever seen. It was a lovely party and people said lovely things. It’s hard to find words to say how much this has meant to me and how much I truly love this place, these people, our spirit, and our dream. Whatever happens I now have been able to feel deep down where truth lies – that we are a real community – and that I am a part of this amazing place, now and always. With affection and thanks, Judith.”

Seven weeks later, January 16, 1997, Judith Ramaley was appointed president of the University of Vermont, effective the next June. The campus had “won” the engineering battle but in the struggle it had lost a popular and effective president. She returned to the campus in the fall of 2012 as a member of the faculty.

The Legacy

The campus said goodbye to Judith Ramaley in the spring of 1997. The Spring issue of *PSU Magazine* summed up her legacy this way:

“The true legacy of Judith Ramaley’s leadership is a strong and confident University with an exciting vision for the future and the institutional courage to pursue it. With her leadership, PSU has overcome severe fiscal and organizational challenges to become a national model for higher education. She has done this by encouraging the opening of the institution to intellectual challenge, to new partnerships, to new levels of faculty-staff-student accomplishment, and by creating a campus climate that fosters academic entrepreneurship. Today ... Portland State is an institution with a clear sense of direction, one that strikes a balance between the scholarly integrity of a traditional university and the new imperative for higher education to become fully engaged with its communities.”

Fifteen years on, that statement still rings true.