December 31, 2007

To: Presidents

From: George Pernsteiner

Subject: Campus Safety

In the wake of the Virginia Tech shooting earlier this year, colleges and universities throughout the United States have reflected on their public safety and disaster response capabilities. This has been set against an emerging public view that college and university students should be protected because of the youth and vulnerability of many of them.

Lessons drawn from Virginia Tech have included the need to assess threats and to review plans, procedures, training of personnel, emergency notification efforts, mutual aid agreements with law enforcement agencies, facilities, and public safety generally. I have heard that each of you has undertaken these assessments during 2007.

As we know, campuses are judged by the public not only on their actual safety and security but also on the perception the public has of that safety and security. In terms of criminal offenses, campuses in Oregon have been safer places than most other Oregon communities. In 2006, OUS campuses were the sites of 25 criminal offenses against persons (sex offenses, assaults, robberies, etc.), a rate of three offenses per 10,000 students. Even when property crimes and nearby parts of cities are considered (as is the case in Cleary Act reporting), the rate stood at 4 offenses per 1,000 students. (These figures are not adjusted for the thousands of faculty and staff who also are on campus.)

However, the perception of safety may be less positive than its reality. In addition, it will be argued that ANY criminal offense on or near a campus is one too many and that the university has an obligation to attempt to eliminate all such behavior. As you are well aware, too, criminal activity is but one aspect of public safety on a campus. Fire safety, environmental health and safety, public and individual physical and mental health, transportation flow, and emergency response all are parts of public safety.

No campus can eliminate all possibility of crime, of antisocial behavior, of fire, of contagious disease, of traffic accident/vehicle breakdown or parking violation, of
chemical spill or other environmental hazard, or of other unforeseen safety difficulty.

The real questions revolve around how prepared the campus is to address emergency situations: whether the plans are in place, the personnel trained, and the systems deployed in ways that help mitigate the negative effects of emergencies and disruptions.

I know that each of you has commissioned assessments of your campus preparedness. I would very much appreciate seeing the results of those efforts so that the System can be prepared to respond to Board, Governor, legislative, and public inquiries.

In addition, I believe it valuable for each of you to engage in campus wide conversations during the first quarter of 2008 about public safety, preparedness, and emergency response. In particular, I would like you to discuss with students, faculty, and staff two important questions that could have implications for state legislation or policy option packages.

The first relates to communications with students, faculty, and staff in the event of an emergency. I know that Oregon State University staff have worked with staff at each of the campuses to look at a variety of emergency communications alternatives (not mutually exclusive) ranging from loudspeakers to cell phone messages to e-mail lists to telephone message broadcasts. The goal is to have messages that are timely, clear, and ubiquitous. Please consider the alternatives already investigated by your technical staff and engage the campus community in a conversation about emergency communications.

The second relates to the matter of the status of public safety officers at the campuses. As you know, each campus may have public safety officers or campus security officers under Oregon statute. The public safety officers have limited police powers and are not police officers under terms of Oregon law. Further, they may not carry firearms in the conduct of their official duties. For many years, some of the public safety officers have sought police officer status, sometimes with the support of the campus administration. The questions I have are whether such status would improve either the reality or perception of safety on campuses and whether, in an emergency situation, police officer status would provide to our campuses better and more effective response capabilities. (After all, Virginia Tech had armed police officers in its employ and on campus at the time of the shooting there.) A related question concerns the best means of providing police services to campuses: through contracts with competent police agencies (e.g., the Oregon State Police, as at OSU), through a Systemwide police department with authority either to direct or to coordinate, through independent and separate campus-based police departments, or through a hybrid system that saw some campuses retain the current campus public safety situation while others had police officers stationed on their campuses. (An
unstated assumption in this paragraph is that police officers would carry firearms in the conduct of their duties.)(The analysis of changing the status should include the real or perceived value of the change in terms of public safety and the costs and risks of making it, including budget increases necessary to make changes in current status and staff levels, and other issues such as tort liability. I think all these matters should be discussed openly at each campus.

It is my hope that each campus can have discussions about these important matters in January and February so that any needed legislation can be prepared prior to the deadline for submitting proposed statutory or constitutional changes to DAS for consideration by the Governor prior to the 2009 legislative session. (Budget proposals/policy option packages are on a somewhat slower timeline but still are needed by March if they are to be considered seriously in the Board of Higher Education’s budget request for 2009-2011.)

Please let me know the timing, method, and results of your campus conversations on public safety by February 15, 2008.

Thank you.