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Grant Guidelines Hurt Students

This fall, 103 Lindenwood University students received devastating news. They were notified by the Missouri Department of Higher Education that the Missouri grant they counted on to help pay for college would be denied, even though they qualified for the \$1,500 in aid under the previous year's guidelines.

This scenario is replicated throughout Missouri. Hundreds of college students who expected to receive the grant have failed to qualify under new guidelines established by the Missouri Department of Higher Education.

The Missouri Grant Program has historically been underfunded, serving less than 25 percent of eligible students. This further reduction comes well after the school year is underway, causing students and colleges to scramble to find ways to allow the student to remain in school.

Earlier this year, the Governor and General Assembly committed to the commendable goal of reducing waste in state government. Rather than eliminating the resources that allow citizens to pursue higher education, we believe the target should be the massive bureaucracy that continues to exist in the higher education community. This bureaucracy not only consumes large amounts of tax dollars, but also expands the cost of college operations through nit-picking regulation.

Please! Use available resources to foster a better educated workforce, not to prop up an inefficient and ineffective state bureaucracy.

Less than 25 percent of eligible students are funded in the Missouri Grant Program.

Independent Colleges – The Taxpayer's Friend

Missouri continues to rely heavily on its independent colleges and universities to produce an educated workforce. According to Missouri Department of Higher Education reports, over 44 percent of the full-time equivalent students attended independent institutions in the fall of 2003. This translates to almost 78,000 students annually that are educated in Missouri colleges without any tax appropriations from the General Assembly.

For the 98,000 full-time equivalent students educated in the state's thirteen public four year colleges, the General Assembly appropriated \$697,250,724, an average of \$7,096 per full-time equivalent student.

If Lindenwood did not exist, and its students attended public institutions, the tax burden for Missourians would increase by nearly \$70 million dollars annually.

Independent colleges have been a major provider of teachers in Missouri, producing almost one-third of the beginning teacher degrees and 53 percent of the Masters in Education degrees in the state. Lindenwood University is now the largest provider of Masters degrees and the fourth largest provider of total education degrees in Missouri.

Total Education Degrees		MA-Education Degrees	
Graduate & Undergraduate			
UM-Columbia	760	Lindenwood University	423
Southwest MO State	692	UM-Columbia	417
UM-St. Louis	554	Southwest Baptist	356
Lindenwood University	535	Webster University	320
Central MO State	492	UM-Kansas City	283
		UM-St. Louis	253
		Southwest MO State	242
Total Public	4136	Total Public	1661
Total Independent	2991	Total Independent	1897
Total for State	7127	Total for State	3558

Commission Proposals Disappoint Reformers

Missourians who hoped for a streamlined state higher education system were greatly disappointed by the proposals of the Missouri Government Review Commission. The Commission, appointed by Governor Blunt earlier this year to recommend a reorganization of state government to improve efficiency, has produced a higher education proposal that would make a bad situation worse.

Responding to complaints about the lack of higher education accountability, the Commission is proposing the creation of a cabinet-level Secretary of Higher Education who reports directly to the Governor. It also changes the make-up of the nine-member lay Coordinating Board of Higher Education, replacing it with a majority of public university presidents. This Board has extensive regulatory authority over the operations of higher education institutions in our state. Essentially, the same schools Lindenwood competes against would be regulating Lindenwood...Talk about the fox guarding the henhouse...

While there may be merit in giving the elected Governor greater control and accountability for public higher education, the proposed restructuring of the Coordinating Board defies logic. Since the Board's role is both administrative and regulatory, why not eliminate the Board entirely, and transfer all duties to the new Secretary of Higher Education? The Governor could then create an advisory system that would seek and utilize advice from a broad cross-section of Missourians, including educators, parents, students, and lay citizens, as well as university presidents.

Missouri continues to struggle to find ways to make state government responsive to citizen needs. Replacing one inefficient bureaucracy with another is not progress.

Local Control Continues to Decline

Local control of schools, once a sacred principle in our nation, has largely become an extinct philosophy. The few remaining remnants of local control of education are evaporating each year with new proposals for state and federal mandates on school districts.

A few years ago, trusting Missouri educators stood by while the education bureaucracy created the Missouri Assessment Program. The outcome was the establishment of testing standards that resulted in most Missouri students being classified as below proficient, even though the majority perform at grade level. "Why", asks MSTTA Vice President Gary Rademacher, "doesn't proficient mean the same as grade level?" That's a good question.

Now the Governor's office wants a ballot initiative that would mandate changes in how Missouri school districts decide to spend school tax revenue. The so-called "Our Students First" amendment would require that every district, regardless of local circumstances, spend at least 65 percent of its revenue on a federally defined definition of direct instruction. Currently, 412 of the 524 Missouri school districts do not meet this definition. This definition includes such items as band uniforms and athletic equipment, but does not include school libraries and librarians, guidance counselors, and professional development for teachers. Under this definition, schools get credit for purchasing football helmets, but not library books.

News releases announcing the proposed amendment claim that it will put an extra \$272,000,000 into school districts without a tax increase. What it actually will do is take the exact same amount of funds currently available, and mandate that local Boards of Education spend the funds according to the new federal definition of educational priorities.

We are saddened that state leaders feel they must continue to look for ways to strip locally elected school boards of decision-making authority. We continue to believe that decisions regarding local school operations are best made by local Board members and the administrators they employ to lead the schools.

Here We Go Again

Is there no limit to the appetite for power in the Missouri Department of Higher Education? Created in 1974 for the limited purpose of coordinating the academic policies and programs and state funding requests of the publicly supported colleges in Missouri, MDHE bureaucrats have relentlessly grabbed for a larger regulatory role over Missouri higher education, even though over 60 percent of the 36 four-year colleges and universities are operated as independent institutions and receive no direct tax appropriations from the General Assembly.

The most recent power grab attempted by MDHE relates to its insistence for an expanded regulatory role in the preparation of Missouri's public school teachers. The certification of teachers and the monitoring of teacher preparation programs have historically and legitimately been assigned to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

DESE has far greater expertise and understanding of K-12 school districts than does MDHE. The DESE staff is much more aware of and in tune with the needs of Missouri public school districts. There is no practical reason for MDHE to seek an expanded role in teacher preparation programs.

At a joint meeting of the State Board of Education and the Coordinating Board of Higher Education, MBHE pushed DESE officials to allow the Higher Education Commissioner to appoint members to MoSTEP teacher program approval accreditation teams, to receive and review all reports and recommendations, and to submit comments to DESE regarding the continued accreditation of teacher education programs. This request was made in spite of the fact that MDHE personnel are almost entirely devoid of any K-12 practical experiences.

Some would say that this is the camel's nose in the tent. We view it as the whole front end of the camel. It is a dangerous proposal for three reasons. First, teacher preparation is already the most regulated professional career in our state. To further complicate the process by allowing two state agencies active regulatory involvement makes no sense at all.

Second, the current economic environment in Missouri is causing our elected officials to seek ways to reduce bureaucracy and increase operation efficiency. Instead of creating additional work for staff, MDHE officials could better spend time addressing the unmet critical issues, including accessibility and affordability of higher education for Missouri citizens.

Third (and perhaps most important), over one-third of the new teachers produced annually in Missouri are graduated from independent colleges and universities. Over 50 percent of the advanced degrees awarded to Missouri teachers are granted by independent institutions. Of the 36 state approved teacher preparation programs, 23 are hosted by independent institutions. Since the law specifically prohibits MDHE from dictating the academic programs at independent colleges, involving MDHE in the regulation of their teacher education programs raises serious legal issues.

In summary, this is a bad idea. This is the time for Missouri to reduce bureaucratic red tape and streamline government efficiency. It is not the time to create additional busywork to solve non-existent problems. As Thomas Jefferson said, "Government big enough to supply everything you need is big enough to take everything you have."

Great! Another Commission to Study Education

U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings has created a 19-member commission to "develop a comprehensive national strategy for post-secondary education that will meet the needs of America's diverse population". The Commission on the Future of Higher Education will make its' recommendations to the Secretary by August 1, 2006.

We have lost count of the number of national, regional, and state-sponsored Commissions created to study educational issues during the past ten years. Most reports, following an initial flurry of publicity, die a dignified death on a bookshelf in some bureaucrat's office. The best we can hope for from this commission would be elimination of the Department of Education and appropriation of the money for students.

A Proposal to Improve Student Financial Aid Services

Few Missourians are aware that some of their tax dollars are used to help underwrite the college education of a number of out-of-state students who study at Missouri colleges and universities. Even fewer taxpayers know that less than 25 percent of our own academically qualified, need-eligible Missouri students who apply for a Missouri Student Grant will receive one.

At the same time we assist out-of-state students with our tax dollars, we are turning away almost 80 percent of qualified Missouri students who apply for the Missouri Student Grant, because the program is so poorly funded and because our funding priorities are misplaced. Why would Missouri taxpayers want to fund a New Yorker's education when Missouri students are not being funded?

I do not question the importance of promoting diversity in our colleges and universities. Students from many lands and cultures and students from diverse racial and ethnic groups who study and learn together provide a richer educational environment. But the price of enticing talented students beyond our borders is too high as long as four out of five academically qualified and need-eligible Missouri students are turned away in their quest for Missouri student grant assistance.

The Missouri Student Grant Program has been providing grants for eligible Missouri students since 1973. To receive the grants, students must demonstrate a financial need as determined by the Federal Needs Analysis Formula (a formula which Congress reviews every five years) and attend or plan to attend an approved Missouri public or private post-secondary institution full-time.

Funding for the MSGP comes from state general revenue appropriations, federal appropriations, from the State Student Incentive Grant Program and private sources. Yet, as we have pointed out, existing funding levels from this combination of state, federal and private sources are sufficient to serve only some 25 percent of applicants who are eligible for this need-based grant program. Over 24,000 eligible Missouri applicants remain unfunded annually.

The Missouri Coordinating Board for Higher Education has recently sponsored a series of forums across the state to inform Missourians about its goals for Missouri higher education. A major goal of the Coordinating Board listed was its efforts to "promote access".

Access for whom? Is not our first obligation to promote and enhance access for Missouri students? The best way to achieve the goal for promoting access is to put Missouri students first now and to fully fund the Missouri Student Grant Program.

Following World War II, the G.I. Bill was one of the most successful programs ever in increasing the educational level of our nation. President Harry S. Truman supported that bill, and surely he would support the notion that we should be funding Missouri students, not institutions.

Any increases in funding for higher education in Missouri should be invested in the state's students. Doing this would freeze funding for existing tax-supported institutions at a sizable subsidy level, and any funding increases would be based on increases in the number of Missouri students an institution could attract. Let the dollars follow the students to whatever college or university they choose to attend. Whenever freedom of choice is a viable option, all competitive enterprises, including colleges and universities, have a built-in incentive to provide the highest quality of service possible for the dollars they receive.

Each year, we are pouring more and more tax dollars into institutions, many of which are educating fewer and fewer students. The time has come to put our tax money where it counts the most. The greatest need is for funding the Missouri Student Grant Program. We cannot afford to help educate children from afar until we first take care of our own. Put Missouri students *first*.

By Dennis C. Spellmann,
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