

[The Columbia Daily Tribune](#)

[The Tribune's View](#)

Micromanaging?

The governor on higher ed

By [Henry J. Waters III](#)

[Monday, November 22, 2010](#)

Faced with a red-ink flood of biblical proportion, the governor of Missouri looks for savings in public higher education by asking campuses to list programs granting fewer than 10 bachelor's degrees, five master's degrees or three doctoral degrees per year, implying these programs should be eliminated.

Nixon denies he is micromanaging, but University of Missouri faculty disagree, asking why he did not target "top-heavy" administrative budgets as well. They explain why programs granting few degrees are important and eliminating them will not save significant money.

In this debate, I side with the pointy-heads on campus.

Gov. Jay Nixon does face an arriving deficit. Higher education is among the largest discretionary state spending options. Nixon and the state legislature have been relatively kind to higher education in recent budgets, but the squeeze is getting tighter and higher ed clearly will suffer reductions in the fiscal 2012 budget now under construction.

But Nixon's approach is, indeed, micromanaging. If he decides money must be saved in this area of the budget, it would be better simply to announce the lower figure and let higher ed officials and their constituents decide where to cut. They might focus on degree programs with small populations, but the priority setting would come from within the education apparatus, not from the governor's office. (The strangely peripheral role of the Missouri Department of Higher Education is a subject for another treatise.)

The academics are right to question administrative costs, where quite a few fancy salaries reside. This is not to say I'm ready to identify certain jobs or salaries that should be cut, but it is logical to ask the governor not to pick only on such a small part of higher ed activity.

Of course, the institution, including its academic side, bears its share of the blame for a spending problem. Like all large bureaucracies, universities will spend all the money they can get. When money was steadily increasing, spending in all segments grew apace. Now that tight times inevitably are upon us, the scramble is on to stop the train.

In public bureaucracies, including governments, these squeeze moments are about the only effect capable of causing significant spending control. Priorities will be set with more diligence. Systems might be streamlined. And, yes, programs on university campuses will undergo some fair-enough criticism. Gov. Nixon must address this situation, but picking particularly on degree programs with few graduates is not the right approach.

I was particularly worried by his targeting of the Rolla campus, where he said technology courses should be the sole focus without trying to expand into the humanities. Engineers and other assorted geeks can benefit from exposure to well-defined studies in the humanities. Indeed, the campus should be criticized if it conscientiously avoids such courses, as Nixon seems to suggest.

After going through a little exercise collecting names, let him say thank you and simply cut the total UM System budget as little as possible, leaving the fight over priorities to the system's officers and constituents.

HJW III

This article was published on page A4 of the Monday, November 22, 2010 edition of The Columbia Daily Tribune. [Click here to Subscribe.](#)

Recommend

One recommendation. [Sign Up](#) to see what your friends recommend.



ATTN: MOMS... Get your \$10,000!
Register for your \$10K scholarship. Use it for anything:
rent, bills, debt, your child's future, etc. Never repay!
scholarships-for-mom.com

