

A puzzling agenda

Governor calls on colleges to do more with less.

By [Janese Silvey](#)

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In August, Gov. Jay Nixon ticked off an agenda for Missouri's higher education network that has puzzled faculty members at the University of Missouri.

Educate more students, Nixon instructed, parroting a national goal to increase the number of degree-holding adults from about 37 percent to 60 percent by 2025. In other words, teach hundreds of thousands more students in less than 15 years.

And, Nixon said in the next breath, do so not with the promise of additional state funds but by culling degree programs and sharing services between campuses.

During a meeting with reporters last week, Nixon said he's looking at the big picture. Missouri needs more skilled workers for the jobs of tomorrow, he said, and colleges and universities need to work together to make sure that happens, even in lean budget years.

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The notion of doing more with less isn't exactly new to Missouri's cash-strapped colleges and universities.

MU alone has seen record enrollments for the past several years and continues to accept students despite funding cuts that have left faculty and teaching positions unfilled. Admissions, financial aid, residential life, dining services and other support staff also serve more students every year despite vacancies in their own offices.

The School of Health Professions is a snapshot of what's happening on the MU campus. That program has seen enrollment triple since it separated from the School of Medicine in 2001.

Today, more than 1,700 students are enrolled in the school, which is housed at Lewis Hall. Classroom and office space there is so tight, the school's communication officer, Cheri Ghan, had to start working from home this year to make space for an additional student adviser to serve the growing population.

The School of Health Professions exemplifies collaboration, too. It has agreements with five community colleges to more quickly train therapists to work in rural communities. And the school teams up with the University of Missouri-Kansas City's pharmaceutical program to provide those courses at MU.

The school's success didn't stem from a state mandate, though.

It's the result of administrators, faculty and staff keeping students in mind, said Meichele Foster, development director for the school. Rather than focusing on what they do, she said, the focus is "on why we do it. We do it to provide affordable and accessible education to Missourians and to serve Missourians."

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Nixon's least-popular task to colleges and universities, perhaps, was his call to take a look at programs graduating small numbers of students annually.

Using a metric the Missouri Department of Higher Education established years ago, the state flagged programs that graduate, on average, fewer than 10 bachelor's, five master's and three doctoral students a year. MU has until Dec. 31 to submit to the state a whittled-down list of small degree programs. The Department of Higher Education flagged 75 so-called "low-producing" degree programs at MU and is requesting administrators eliminate them or somehow realign them to be more efficient.

The degree count alone fails to take critical context into account. Statistics, for instance, might not produce a lot of degrees, but students from a range of studies take statistics courses. And some master's programs might not produce a lot of graduates, but they are critical steps to doctoral programs that are flourishing.

Most within MU's small departments have gone into protective mode, trying to convince administrators their degree offerings are justified. Graduate students pursuing careers in art history departments, for instance, can't just obtain some sort of combined degree and expect to get hired in a specialized field, Kristin Schwain, associate professor in the Department of Art History and Archaeology, told MU Provost Brian Foster at a town hall meeting this month.

Foster has told faculty members MU needs to comply with the state's charges so it can be a partner in the discussion.

More likely, said state Rep. Chris Kelly, D-Columbia, the university is trying to avoid a political fight. Participating is "the lesser of two evils," he said.

Nixon is looking at degrees across the state's higher education system. Last year the number of new programs outpaced discontinued programs by a ratio of 5-to-1.

"We simply cannot afford the luxury of supporting programs that are not connected strategically to state needs and priorities," Nixon said in August.

Although MU hasn't turned in its final degree review report to the state, some universities have. So far, public colleges and universities have identified 61 degrees they're willing to drop, Nixon said.

While culling degrees across the state might create more efficiency in Missouri, the notion that the degree

review program is a cost-cutting measure has been confusing on the MU campus. Eliminating most of the “low-producing” degrees identified at MU won’t save anything, administrators have acknowledged.

The point is to keep institutions focused on what they do best, Nixon said.

“Rolla has an outstanding engineering school,” he said, referring to the Missouri University of Science and Technology. “We want to keep the focus on that mission. We wouldn’t want them to creep into philosophy or French.”

But MU is already doing that, too. Foster earlier this year unveiled Mizzou Advantage, which aims to capitalize on the university’s strengths. Rather than picking and choosing programs, though, Mizzou Advantage encourages faculty to collaborate across disciplines to focus on real-world problems. In that model, there’s room for small programs. Food for the Future — one of the five initiatives within Mizzou Advantage — doesn’t just focus on nutrition and agriculture but also welcomes researchers from history and folklore, for instance, to look at the culture of food.

The degree review isn’t just getting criticism from inside campus borders. Kelly also questioned the purpose of the degree review.

“It creates an impression of frugality when it doesn’t add any frugality,” he said. “You cannot continue to chop away at programs. Our faculty are the lowest-paid in the” American Association of Universities. “It’s a stark reality that you don’t fix by doing fictitious reviews.”

Some faculty members have complained in various meetings that Nixon targeted degree programs before asking universities to take a look at their administrative Cabinets and costs first.

The third agenda item he outlined during the higher education summit was, indeed, administrative efficiencies. The call, though, didn’t ask colleges to review their administrative systems. Rather, he called for institutions to provide services “more cheaply” by outsourcing, sharing resources or tying together academic programs.

Sharing services surfaced long before Nixon’s charge. UM System President Gary Forsee has been studying ways to pool staff and services for more than a year. Already, University Bookstore at MU manages the smaller bookstores on the three other UM campuses. Procurement services also have been centralized. Streamlined paper processes in the future also promise some savings.

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Although it was the last among Nixon’s list of priorities, funding is at the heart of the discussion. Lawmakers are looking down the barrel of a 2012 budget that lacks the \$860 million in federal stimulus dollars padding the current budget. The state could see as much as a \$600 million shortfall, and after being protected from significant cuts for two years, colleges and universities could bear the brunt of those budget reductions. Nixon said higher education should expect at least a \$50 million cut.

Eliminating degree programs or coming up with cross-campus collaborations won’t solve the 2012 budget puzzle. Those changes will take years to implement.

Quicker remedies would be to beef up collection of Internet sales taxes or to start charging higher sales taxes on cigarettes, said Rep. Mary Still, D-Columbia.

“There are many things we can do to improve our revenue picture just by modernizing and dealing with the

world we live in today,” she said.

Nixon doesn't seem interested in the discussion. Asked whether he was willing to entertain discussions of a cigarette tax increase, Nixon noted that Missouri voters have twice defeated such a proposal.

“I'm not in the situation or have the luxury of betting on a pot of gold at the end of any rainbow,” he said.

Instead, a task force is studying ways to implement a model that rewards universities with performance-based funding. The task force met for the first time earlier this week. Nixon said he's not sure what will come of the discussions but vowed funding won't be tied to enrollment or degree attainment alone.

At the end of the day, “we want excellence,” Nixon said. “We're taking a much more comprehensive and — in my view — thoughtful view of what we can do to position our institutions to competitively educate more students for years to come.”

Reach Janese Silvey at 573-815-1705 or e-mail jsilvey@columbiatribune.com.

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