

St. Louis Business Journal
March 21, 2008

Editorial **Legislative homework**

When the Missouri Legislature returns from its spring break this coming week, its workload will intensify.

Early indications confirm the governor's lame duck status and, unfortunately, do not support any bold initiatives. The promises to restore higher education funding, as well as health coverage for some of those who lost it in 2005, seem to fall prey to partisan politics and posturing.

For example, HB 2003, the higher education appropriations for fiscal year 2009, has been adopted by the House budget committee \$700,000 shy of the governor's recommendation for the University of Missouri's core budget. The committee passed a 4 percent increase to the core budget; the governor recommended 4.2 percent.

More insulting to the future of the state and the welfare of its citizens, the bill did not include "Preparing to Care," an initiative also supported by the governor that was a collaboration between all the state's two-year and four-year public institutions to allocate \$13.4 million to educate health-care professionals. This measure could reduce unemployment, improve health care and support a growing health-care industry. But it rests on the Capitol floor with no foreseeable signs of resuscitation.

For those of us in the St. Louis region, the biggest slap in our educational face is the refusal of the lawmakers to address the historical equity gap at University of Missouri-St. Louis. Five years ago, the Coordinating Board of Higher Education studied all the state campuses and determined UMSL has a significant funding gap of \$10.8 million in state appropriations when compared to peer institutions. With the support of the coordinating board and new system President Gary Forsee, UMSL requested \$2.6 million to address the funding gap.

That money was not included in HB 2003.

This comes at a time when state support per full-time-equivalent (FTE) student at UMSL, \$5,800, ranks ninth among the four-year public colleges. No. 1 on that list is University of Missouri-Rolla which receives \$9,500 per full time student. The Columbia campus receives \$7,500, ranking third. St. Louis' only other representative campus on the list, Harris-Stowe University, ranks sixth at \$7,200.

No one is making the case that any of these schools should receive less, only that St. Louis students who are educated at UMSL deserve more. Right now their

student fees per dollar of state support top the list at \$1.28 of student fees per dollar of state support. At UM-Rolla, not surprisingly, the amount is 77 cents.

The irony is that UMSL enrolls more students who demonstrate financial need than most of the other campuses.

An educated work force is key to our region and our state's economic viability. College costs are increasing as are the fees and interest rates for student loans.

Lawmakers have had their spring break. Now it's time for them to do their homework and go back to school, making sure others, especially those in St. Louis, go to the front of the class.

© 2008 American City Business Journals, Inc.