Officials call for state scholarships for both public and private schools

Didi Tang • News-Leader • March 18, 2010

A group of private and public college officials in Missouri have agreed the state should provide need-based financial aid to eligible Missouri students attending either private or public schools.

But the group -- which met Tuesday night at University of Missouri System President Gary Forsee's home -- also reached consensus that the state financial aid should be "guided by the principle of equal maximum awards to all students."

The group statement came as the state lawmakers debate whether to equalize the need-based Access Missouri scholarships between students going to private school and those attending public institutions.

As the program stands, students going to private colleges can receive up to $4,600 per year, compared to $2,150 for students attending public four-year institutions.

The group's statements -- made public Wednesday afternoon -- came just five days after Gov. Jay Nixon, faced with a $500-million budget gap, suggested the state eliminate financial aid to students enrolled at private colleges.

"... In times like these, we simply can't continue to subsidize the choice to attend a private school," Nixon said.

Mike Nietzel, president of Missouri State University, was at the meeting. He was not available for comment Wednesday.

No official from Drury University, the College of the Ozarks or Southwest Baptist University was at the meeting.

On Wednesday, Mark Miller, spokesman for Drury, declined to comment because State Commissioner of Higher Education Robert B. Stein, who served as the meeting facilitator, was tapped to be the group spokesman.

Elizabeth Andrews, spokeswoman for the College of the Ozarks, said Stein was unlikely to comment beyond the news release issued Wednesday.

Andrews said her school wants to know more details.
"The devil is in the details," she said. "The college wants to hear more descriptions."

The debate over the equality of Access Missouri began last year, but two bills in 2009 to equalize Access Missouri awards did not make it to the floor.

This year, the efforts continued in Jefferson City.

The House Higher Education Committee on Tuesday passed a bill to equalize the maximum Access Missouri awards at $2,850 per student, and a similar bill in the Senate has cleared its education committee.

The debate over Access Missouri prompted Stein in February to call the meeting of representatives of public and private colleges.

The group met for four hours Tuesday night, according to statement issued through Stein.
Duo lights up stage at MU pot debate

Ex-DEA agent, journalist spar.

By Janese Heavin

Marijuana should be legal in the United States because of its medicinal and environmental benefits, longtime legalization activist Steve Hager told a college audience last night.

But face it, countered his opponent, former drug agent Bob Strutman: Most students don’t care about hemp and don’t need marijuana for medical purposes. Rather, they want it legal because “it’s your recreational drug of choice and you don’t want to be hassled by the cops,” he said.

Strutman, who is retired from the Drug Enforcement Administration, and Hager, editor of High Times magazine, brought their “Heads vs. Feds” debate to the University of Missouri campus yesterday, attracting some 1,200 people to Jesse Hall.

Hager started the two-hour program by arguing that marijuana is “good medicine,” helping offset more diseases and disorders than any other substance. He thinks pharmaceutical companies are behind the fight to keep weed illegal because they don’t want to see the billion-dollar prescription pill industry “go up in a puff because you’ve got marijuana in your backyard.”

But Strutman countered that those advocating legalized pot aren’t only interested in its medical benefits. He pointed out that chemicals found in marijuana are being tested in prescription form to provide the medical benefits without the high. Plus, he said, it should be up to scientists and doctors to determine how beneficial marijuana is, not lawmakers or voters.

Strutman said he’s thinks legalizing marijuana will increase the number of users, which in turn would lead to more dependency, more traffic accidents and an increase in cancer patients.

But if the government is OK with outlawing dependency-prone substances, it should also ban coffee and junk food, Hager argued. If accidents are a reason to ban it, alcohol should be illegal first; if cancer is a concern, cigarettes and tobacco should be illegal, too, he added.

Both men agreed the marijuana offenders should not be sent to prison and that criminal drug problems won’t disappear if marijuana is legalized. Rather, Strutman said, those selling pot on the black market will simply switch to pushing and selling illegal drugs. Unless all drugs were made legal to people of all ages, he said, there will be drug-related criminal activity.

At times, last night’s debate turned personal. At one point, Hager challenged Strutman to try marijuana at a legal medical cannabis festival this summer. Unlike side effects that often
accompany prescription pills — decreased appetite, loss of sleep and sexual dysfunction — after using weed, "you eat good, you sleep great and you have the best sex of your life," Hager said, sparking cheers from the crowd.

"Hanging out with a bunch of 55-year-old hippies who can’t get it on without smoking a joint is not exactly my idea of a good time," Strutman quipped.

Hager, who did not advocate that students smoke pot, concluded that Strutman painted "the worst possible portrait of marijuana he could paint."

Strutman, in turn, challenged students not to take Hager’s testimony as fact. "If the law is on your side, you argue the law," he said. "If facts are on your side, you argue facts. When nothing is on your side, you just keep arguing. That’s what Steve Hager will do, and you’re too bright to fall for that."

Reach Janese Heavin at 573-815-1705 or e-mail jheavin@columbiatribune.com.
COLUMBIA, Mo. -- The University of Missouri's new master plan will focus on improving existing buildings rather than putting up new ones.

The 2010 master plan for the flagship Columbia campus was scheduled to be presented Thursday afternoon at a public meeting in the Reynolds Alumni Center.

Planner Perry Chapman says the new plan seeks to enhance landscaping and to strengthen connections between the campus and surrounding parts of the city of Columbia.

Missouri's shaky economy has made it difficult for the university to get funding new buildings, such as a replacement for the aging Ellis Fischel Cancer Center.