Colleges forced to cut deeper

BY TIM BARKER tbarker@post-dispatch.com | Posted: Monday, August 23, 2010 12:10 am

They're cutting back on professors and staff. Some courses are being offered less frequently. Travel has been slashed. Academic departments have been consolidated. Salaries are frozen.

In short, these aren't pleasant times for the region's colleges and universities, which need to find ways to make up for the millions of dollars in lost state funding. But with no end in sight for the financial troubles of Missouri and Illinois, the cutting is far from over.

Earlier this week, Gov. Jay Nixon warned college leaders to expect more bad news next year, with revenue growing too slowly and federal stimulus funds about to run out. That's likely to translate into something deeper than this year's 5.2 percent cut and slashing of need-based scholarships. Illinois educators fear similar news in their state.

Everywhere, administrators say they are doing all they can to minimize the impact on classrooms. Yet there are reasons to worry, particularly if all this cost-cutting results in fewer college students, said Jennifer Delaney, a professor of educational organization and leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

"We really run the risk of not educating this generation as well as we did the generation before," said Delaney, who studies educational funding.

Schools have taken a range of approaches to solve their budget woes. So far, tuition increases have been rare across the region.

The Southern Illinois University campuses in Edwardsville and Carbondale held off on increases this year for undergraduates, while Missouri's public institutions had a deal with the state in which they agreed to freeze tuition in exchange for a cap — the 5.2 percent figure — on state funding cuts. It's a deal that is not expected to be renewed next year by the state, making tuition increases likely.

For most schools, booming enrollment has softened the blow, at least temporarily. At the University of Missouri-St. Louis, for example, enrollment gains are expected to pump an extra $1.4 million into the school's coffers in the coming year.
Yet even with that, officials have to make up a $3.7 million shortfall, prompting relatively rare layoffs. Nearly 40 staff jobs have been eliminated since March 2009, and officials also put a hold on 24 faculty searches, while eliminating eight open positions, said spokesman Bob Samples.

UMSL has consolidated some departments and eliminated its Institute for Women and Gender Studies.

"We still offer courses in women and gender studies, but we just don't try to maintain it as an institute," Samples said.

Already, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville has lost $5.3 million in state appropriations, prompting a general belt tightening across campus. Nonessential travel is gone. Equipment upgrades are being delayed. And then there are the little things like the annual holiday party, which typically features a variety of finger foods, sandwiches and egg rolls.

"We still had it, but it was cut down to punch and cookies," said Bill Winter, the school's budget director.

The school has not yet frozen salaries, but it's something that could be considered if things get much worse. And the school is developing a plan that includes furloughs and layoffs — just in case.

The University of Missouri-Columbia by nature of its size, has been hardest hit in terms of sheer dollars lost. Still, the school seems to have weathered the $10 million cut with relative ease.

Nearly half of the loss was erased by a change in how it handles management fees for its endowment fund. The school used to pay those fees from its budget but now taps into the endowment to cover those costs. That will save as much as $5 million a year, said Tim Rooney, the school's budget director.

Administrators also have been pushing departments for more than a year to scrimp and save wherever possible in anticipation of tough times. Faculty and staff have cut back on travel. Computer replacements used to occur every three to four years. Now it's every four to five years. Custodial staffers are being asked to cover twice as much ground.

"We've told them to hold onto as much savings as possible," Rooney said. "We still have $4 million to $5 million that we're holding for next year. But my big fear is that it's not going to be enough."

It's a feeling expressed by virtually every school in the region. The states simply aren't recovering quickly enough, while key federal stimulus dollars are almost gone. For the University of Missouri system alone, that loss of stimulus money represents nearly $19 million — or 4.4 percent — of next year's budget.
At Missouri State University in Springfield, declining federal support could take another $4 million out of the school's $160 million budget. So far, the school has managed the cuts through increased class sizes, holding jobs open and increased enrollment. There have been no furloughs or layoffs yet, said James Cofer Sr., the school's new president.

"It's 2012 where the problem is," Cofer said. "That's when the big money gets cut."

Stephen Malott, vice chancellor of administrative services at the Missouri University of Science and Technology, said he's unsure how deep the cuts can go before they hurt students or the university.

Officials at the Rolla school have offset a $2.6 million cut, in part, through larger classes and hiring more adjunct professors, who aren't expected to contribute to the underlying research mission of the school.

"That has an effect over time that can be very damaging," Malott said. "An institution like this builds its reputation not only on the quality of its students, but on the reputation of its faculty and its research."

**The impact on faculty is a significant cause for concern in schools within the University of Missouri system, which had just started to make progress on faculty salaries before the recession hit.**

The system started a three-year plan in 2008 to boost faculty pay — each of the four schools is at or near the bottom of their respective peer groups. But they managed only one round of makeup raises before the fiscal crisis put the plan on hold.

And there's little reason to think the school will be gaining any new ground next year, said Betsy Rodriguez, the system's vice president for human resources.

One of the bigger fears is that other states could recover from the recession faster, putting their schools in better position to steal away some of Missouri's top educators. But at least for now, everyone seems to be encountering the same financial hardships.

"Almost nobody else in our peer groups got raises," Rodriguez said. "I don't think we lost ground. But then we really didn't have anywhere to go."

For faculty members already underpaid — relative to their peers at other schools — two years of pay freezes have sapped morale, said Karen Piper, professor of English literature at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

This fall, the 14-year veteran will be teaching her first evening class as part of the school's effort to schedule more efficiently. And with fewer full-time faculty to go around, everyone's being asked to do just a little more, she said.
The lagging pay, she said, creates a sort of double whammy as some professors move on to higher-paying jobs.

"Not only do we lose good people, but we can't recruit people, either," Piper said.
Missouri's senior senator hosts campus talk on clean energy as economic engine

By Associated Press

4:00 AM CDT, August 23, 2010

COLUMBIA, Mo. (AP) — Retiring Missouri Sen. Kit Bond hosts a University of Missouri campus forum on Monday to promote clean energy as a way to boost the state's economy.

The round-table talk will include state and local officials, university leaders, business owners and agricultural industry representatives. The 10 a.m. event takes place in the Bond Life Sciences Center, which is named for Missouri's senior senator.

Bond says Missouri is poised to "create a new biomass industry" due to its abundant supplies of timber, timber waste, grass and other natural resources.
MU street signs disappear fast
Athlete arrested in one incident.

Photo by Gerik Parmele
A sign marking Elm Street is safe for now, but several other new Tiger-themed street signs on the MU campus have been stolen after being installed earlier this month.

By JANISE SILVEY
Friday, August 26, 2010

A University of Missouri wrestler was arrested Wednesday on suspicion of stealing two of the new Tiger-themed street signs around campus.

Zach Toal, a sophomore from Sidney, Ohio, allegedly took the connected Champions Drive and Providence Road signs, MU Police Capt. Brian Weimer said. Toal, 20, was caught on video surveillance, Weimer said.

He’s apparently not the only one who wants one of the new black-and-gold campus street signs installed this month as a way to boost school spirit. A total of 16 signs, eight connected, have been stolen since Sunday, said Karlan Seville, spokeswoman for Campus Facilities.

The Mizzou Alumni Association paid $5,000 for the signs, which also display the Tiger logo.

Word of the arrest appears to have gotten out, though, Seville said, because a few signs have been returned to the bases of their original locations since Wednesday night.

Campus Facilities has replaced some of the stolen signs, which cost $100 for two connected signs. The money to replace them comes out of the maintenance budget.

Seville said Campus Facilities attempted to install the signs in a way that would deter thieves, but workers will go back and add extra features to make sure the signs are tougher to get down.

“We talked about it a lot before the signs went up,” she said. “We knew where there’s a will, there’s a way, and we are on a college campus. We knew it was highly likely this would happen.”

This morning at his Campus Lodge apartment, Toal denied taking the signs. When a Tribune reporter told him his arrest was public record, he said he didn’t want to talk about it.

Toal will still be allowed on the wrestling team but will be disciplined, his coach said.