MU medical school faces more sanctions

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Six months after the University of Missouri-Columbia medical school was released from probation, the school's largest physician residency program was downgraded.

The Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education, or ACGME, placed the internal medicine department on a three-year probation over the summer.

The medical school has made 'significant strides' toward improvement, according to a statement.

"We continue to train the 60 internal medicine residents in this program, maintaining our focus on providing excellent graduate medical education," the statement reads. "We look forward to the ACGME's next site visit where we anticipate that our progress will be validated."

The probation involves residency training, the three to seven years of specialization and research that doctors practice after graduating from medical school.

The 38 residency programs at MU represent about 400 doctors training in specialties from anesthesiology to urology. The education council accredits the whole education program and critiques each residency department separately.

In April last year, the accreditation council placed the entire residency program at MU on a two-year probation based on a lack of funding and support staff that led to medical residents scheduling patient appointments and retrieving medical records, among other problems.

The probation was lifted ahead of schedule in January after the school changed its system of oversight and hired a vice chancellor in health and a medical school dean.

Officials from the accrediting body and the medical school declined to name the violations recorded in a site visit in June that led to the latest probation. The education council's investigators monitor all 8,855 residency programs in the country for their curriculums as well as quality of life for the doctors.

Reviewers grade medical schools and teaching hospitals on factors including residents' sleeping facilities, work hours, insurance coverage and access to counseling.
Probations are rare — fewer than 1 percent of residency programs nationwide currently have that designation. If a residency program loses certification, the residents are ineligible to become board certified in their specialties and may have trouble obtaining medical licenses.

Missouri's orthopedic surgery residency program is also serving a five-year probation that started last year.

Other specialties at MU have been disciplined in the past. Credentials for the heart and lung surgery program were withdrawn by the accrediting body in 2007, meaning investigators found a "catastrophic loss of resources."

Residency programs in anesthesiology and obstetrics/gynecology were on probation the same year. The problems were mostly tied to lower patient volumes and reduced staffing, school officials have said.

The internal medicine department is scheduled for a review from the education council in May.
Raising tuition carries red tape
UM likely will need waiver from state.

By Janese Silvey

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If the University of Missouri System needs the state’s OK to raise tuition next year beyond the rate of inflation without penalty, administrators will be taking that request to a longtime colleague.

A three-year-old state law requires public universities increasing tuition beyond the consumer price index to be financially penalized unless that fine is waived by the Missouri commissioner of higher education. This year, that decision falls to interim Commissioner David Russell, who’s also on leave from his post as UM System chief of staff.

Russell this morning vowed not to let his personal ties get in the way of the waiver process.

“Frankly, I’m going to make the call the best way I can regardless of my own personal interest,” he said. “I take this job very seriously and am not going to compromise it based on any personal situation.”

Last week, UM President Gary Forsee indicated he’ll seek a tuition increase higher than the inflation rate.

“Without question, we will need to be coming to the board for a proposition to increase tuition, and I think the board should expect that will require us to ask for a waiver,” he told the Board of Curators.

This will be the first time colleges and universities are expected to seek tuition waivers since the law went into effect in 2007.

The statute says colleges can justify tuition waivers based on higher operational costs, but Russell said he’ll also take into account what they’ve done to rein in costs during lean budget years.

That factor could give UM an edge. Two years ago, Forsee put a freeze on hiring and salaries and ordered administrators to slash travel and supply budgets.
UM administrators ignored Tribune questions about the waiver process, saying in an e-mail only that curators will make a tuition decision based on budgetary needs and the level of state appropriations.

Last year’s 5.2 percent cut to higher education won’t be a factor, Russell said, because it affected all public colleges and was “less of a decrease in appropriation than almost any other part of state government.”

The waiver process will include some checks and balances. Russell said he’ll have Department of Higher Education staff review each request and make a recommendation, ensuring he has “someone else’s independent assessment.” Those denied a waiver can appeal to the Coordinating Board for Higher Education.

Russell said he won’t feel obligated to approve any request and that he’ll look at each case independently.

“If the University of Missouri came in first with a request for waiver of penalty and I approved it, somehow would I be obligated to approve all others?” he said. “That’s not valid. That’s no more valid than the idea of some other institute coming in first and making me obligated to approve all others because of some precedent.”

Russell said he’ll make tuition decisions with students in mind.

“I’ll be thinking of this in terms of a student sitting down at a kitchen table with his or her family and looking at a tuition bill for the subsequent fall,” he said. “Is this maintaining higher education at a level that ensures quality while also ensuring access and affordability?”

Using that process, “it makes no difference what institute I may have worked for in the past.”

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Russell has trust of state leaders

By Janese Silvey

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David Russell, the UM chief of staff who's now interim commissioner of higher education, will be the one who ultimately decides whether the UM System can increase tuition higher than inflation next school year.

UM administrators last week in Springfield said several times undergraduate tuition will increase and indicated a waiver from the state will be necessary. You can read that story here.

Russell vows to keep his personal ties to the university out of the picture when making tuition decisions from his current position.

He's got the faith of state leaders to do that, including Lowell Kruse, chair of the Coordinating Board for Higher Education.

"David is transparent," Kruse said. "The data is going to be out there, and everyone is going to know why a decision was made."

Whoever took the interim higher education position likely would have had some sort of connection to a university, Rep. Chris Kelly, D-Columbia, said.

"David Russell has a long-standing reputation as a straight shooter," he said. "I believe he'll do the job he's being paid to do."

"As long as it's all in the open," Russell's UM history "doesn't make any difference," said former Columbia Rep. Ed Robb, who was in the house when the tuition waiver law was passed. "It would be difficult to find somebody who hasn't been involved in administration at some university."
Loophole gives some colleges easier process

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Under the tuition freeze agreement with Gov. Jay Nixon this past school year, Missouri public colleges and universities were allowed to put a tuition increase “on the books” without actually charging it to students.

Schools that took advantage of that will be allowed to increase tuition next school year by last year’s 2.7 percent consumer price index, plus whatever the CPI is at the end of this year, without penalty or a waiver from the commissioner of higher education.

The University of Missouri System did not take advantage of that, which means it will need permission to raise tuition beyond CPI or else be fined.

“It did not make sense for the university to ‘book’ a tuition increase it was not going to implement,” UM System spokeswoman Jennifer Hollingshead said in an e-mail.

About half of Missouri’s 13 four-year public universities took advantage of that “on the books” tuition increase, said David Russell, interim commissioner of higher education.
With Tiger Institute a year old, technology thrives

By Janese Silvey

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Some University of Missouri Health Care patients apparently have already benefited from the creation of the Tiger Institute for Health Innovation.

A new barcode stamped on medical bracelets has saved some from receiving the wrong medication or an incorrect dosage. The barcode, which debuted in June, allows nurses to swipe the bracelet to make sure the medications they're giving patients match doctors' orders — a system that previously relied on handwritten notes.

"Have we caught some things because of this? Yes," Tiger Institute Executive Director Sherry Browne said.

The technology will "allow us to be able to track medications from the pharmacist's hand to the patient's mouth," Hal Williamson, vice chancellor of the health care system, told the UM System Board of Curators last week. "We have documentation of a number of prevented medication errors, which is a real bugaboo in hospitals."

A year ago yesterday, university administrators announced the creation of the Tiger Institute, a partnership between the health system and Cerner Corp., a Kansas City medical software company. This year, the institute is expected to have invested $16 million to get the operation off the ground, Browne said. That includes the creation of new technologies, new office spaces and upgrades to software and wireless capabilities at hospitals and clinics.

The institute's administrative offices and "Living Lab," the innovation side of the center, moved this month to 27 S. Tenth St., a 10,000-square-foot, two-story location where engineers and doctors can brainstorm. The location is within walking distance of MU's engineering schools, allowing for collaboration with students and faculty, Browne said.

The institute's next major project is expected to roll out in November. The Computer Physician Order Entry system will require doctors to enter all medical orders into an electronic database rather than giving them to nurses or secretaries on handwritten notes. That allows orders to be time-stamped and permanently stored. Physicians will be given lightweight laptops to make data entry more convenient.
The institute has several prototype projects, including a mobile application that would allow physicians to review patient information and give orders via smartphones. Browne would not provide many details because of intellectual property issues but said the goal is to let doctors work remotely. For instance, a patient whose condition has improved would not have to wait for a physician to return to the hospital before changing treatment or medications.

Another project on the horizon would allow individuals to add personal details to medical information from the hospital. The idea is to allow patients to share pertinent information with doctors, such as changes in weight, exercise habits or results of a previous doctor visit.

Tiger Institute was created amid some concerns among former university information technology employees, many of whom became Cerner employees in January. The work to date, though, has helped shift attitudes, Williamson told curators. Although it has required some effort, “the mindset about information technology and the Cerner Corp. is, perhaps, 180 degrees at our place,” he said. “So it’s been a great partnership and really will allow us to be leaders in this area of improving care.”

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