MU tightens belt, releases more program evaluation data

By Walker Moskop
October 11, 2010 | 8:00 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — MU is taking immediate steps to alleviate its financial woes.

In a memo to deans last week, MU Provost Brian Foster announced several interventions and released a table containing a wide range of data measuring various facets of faculty and department productivity.

Despite funding concerns, Foster wrote on his website that MU has no plans to eliminate existing positions.

But he added that "business as usual is no longer an option at MU," and listed the following restrictions that have been implemented to mitigate "daunting" financial challenges:

- A freeze on new hiring requests for positions that are not already approved. It will remain in place at least until budget hearings are completed in November.
- A freeze on approval of new programs.
- A freeze on creating new centers and institutes, unless they are entirely grant-funded.

Program reviews

The table of data that Foster released includes 32 assessment measures, such as the average annual number of credits taught by faculty in a program and the percentage of credits taught in a department to students outside that degree.

The data provide deeper insight than MU's original list of low-producing programs, which took into account only the number of students graduating from a program.
However, many programs perform well in some categories and below average in others, making it difficult to draw clear conclusions.

The marketing department, for example, has been flagged for falling short of a provision requiring faculty members to be assigned at least 12 section credits or 180 student credit hours per academic year. However, the department also has low direct expenses per student credit hour and high teaching productivity.

The theater department has produced an average of 1.7 doctoral graduates per year from 2008 to 2010. But the doctoral program scores above average on a faculty scholarly productivity index and is ranked 8th among 30 programs nationally included in its discipline grouping.

MU Deputy Provost Ken Dean said it is difficult to measure individual programs on the same criteria and added that because the data measure only the activity of faculty on the tenure track, it might not accurately reflect a program’s productivity.

In his memo, Foster said the various factors "must be considered together, since they all interact in profoundly complicated ways."

To address MU’s resource challenges, he suggested deans consider the following measures:

- Combine degree programs.
- Combine organizational units such as departments, colleges and centers.
- Adjust faculty teaching assignments.
- Consider new marketing strategies to increase program enrollments.
- Collaborate with other departments, universities and corporate partners.
- Restructure management systems.

Deans must provide a preliminary, formal report regarding suggested action to Foster by Wednesday.

Dean said that MU will respond to the deans’ reports the following week and that the process is intended to trigger discussion.

The Missouri Coordinating Board for Higher Education extended its original Oct. 21 deadline for colleges and universities to submit recommended actions for low-producing
programs, Dean said. He anticipates the new deadline will fall near the end of the month.

The deans' final input must be submitted to the provost's office on Nov. 1.

Thomas Payue, vice chancellor and dean of the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources, said it is premature to determine what to do with the data.

He said the College of Agriculture is weighing all the data included in the table, but he added that it contains errors and needs to be corrected. Several programs that are already being phased out were incorrectly incorporated, he said.

Payne said he felt the process had people more worried than necessary.

"This (evaluation process) is something that we as a college go through on a continuing basis," he said. "This is just another day in the life of our college."

Faculty Council Chairwoman Leona Rubin emphasized that faculty scholarship — such as research and published works — as well as service measures are important to consider when evaluating a program.

"Teaching is not the only thing we do, but it seems to be the only thing that gets measured," she said.

Rubin, a biomedical sciences professor, said that if her department were to merge with another, it could potentially result in a better, larger program. Combining degrees, though, would be complicated, she added.

"The complaint that I've heard pretty consistently (from faculty) is that this is an unreasonable time frame to do something this complex," she said.
MU gets $2.1M to study ways to help the dying

COLUMBIA, Mo. (AP) -- Easing the pain of the dying is the goal of a $2.1 million federal grant going to a researcher at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Debra Parker-Oliver is studying whether better communication among family caregivers and hospice staff could make the final days of life more comfortable. Parker is an associate professor of family and community medicine.

The university says that the randomized controlled trial will involve 544 hospice caregivers and three long-standing hospice programs in Missouri. Caregivers will be able to connect with hospice personnel using a videophone or Web camera and secure videoconferencing site.

A smaller pilot study had promising results. The larger-scale trial will last four years.
Cold fusion

Will it work?

Several decades ago cold fusion grabbed our attention. The science promised to produce low-level nuclear energy without the frightening radiation produced in large power plants. But repeated attempts failed to develop the process, and most of the scientific community became skeptical.

Except for a few loners who kept trying. A team in Israel reported exciting results. The CBS show “60 Minutes” decided to do a program examining whether cold fusion has a future, and the producers needed a credible, objective scientist to ponder the question in the face of general skepticism among peers.

To the great credit of University of Missouri’s Robert Duncan, he was invited to appear on the program to give his views. Duncan is MU vice chancellor for research. He also had been skeptical about cold fusion, but “60 Minutes” became convinced of his open mind and sent him to Israel to examine what the researchers were doing. He told “60 Minutes” viewers the new research did have possibilities, and a new era of discussion was launched.

Directly as a result, the Israeli team — a company called Energetics Technologies — has moved its operation to the MU Life Science Business Incubator, installing millions of dollars’ worth of equipment, moving seven researchers from Israel and hiring two full-time people locally.

Read all about it in the good story by Tribune reporter T.J. Greaney in last Saturday’s Business section.

The Energetics approach has not yet been fully proved, but the potential is enormous. At this point, Duncan’s role is most impressive to me. He had the solid reputation causing “60 Minutes” to use him as a credible authority, and he proved it by expressing a conclusion about the future of cold fusion contradicting many of his colleagues.

His proposition seems unassailable: This is no time to conclude the science is worthless and give up in disdain, the position held by so many others.

Duncan need not rely on stubborn faith. His approach to the cold fusion inquiry is based on skepticism, but he understands the science well enough to explain why Energetics might be on to something and why it’s worthwhile for MU to invest some money making the incubator ready for the continued research.
If MU can become the place where cold fusion is brought back to life, the campus will gain enormous publicity as a place to do collaborative research and Duncan will deserve great credit for making it happen.

If in the end this latest attempt fails, the campus and Duncan still will look good, having been willing to pursue an elusive goal worth a serious college try. If pursuing cold fusion were a slam dunk, everybody would do it. That it is not makes the local pursuit unique and important.

HJW III
College Avenue needs fixing for all traffic

By Robert Johnson

Monday, October 11, 2010

If you haven't driven College Avenue between Rollins and Broadway, then you've at least heard someone complain about it. The typical “tale from College Avenue” involves a motorist, driving at 40 mph, suddenly encountering a student in the same lane. It’s a scary situation for the driver and probably an everyday encounter for that student. Often, the student is the “jaywalking villain” in these stories, but the real problem is a culture that places speed and the convenience of motorists over safety and common sense.

The University of Missouri knows that College Avenue is a danger to students and recently hired a consulting firm to study the situation and find solutions. The statistics it found help tell the story of why this is happening.

That section of College Avenue has:

- 18,500 automobiles per day
- Approximately 8,000 pedestrians
- A speed limit of 35 mph
- Five lanes
- One pedestrian crossing location (University Avenue) in nearly three-quarters of a mile of roadway

You don't have to be a traffic engineer to see that this situation is a problem for people who walk. College needs significant changes to make it safer for both motorists and pedestrians — changes such as lowering the travel speed, altering the conroad's configuration and adding frequent and safer places for pedestrians to cross.

Numerous studies have shown that lowered speeds have a huge impact on pedestrian safety, including one that showed the risk of death as a result of a collision is more than five times higher at 40 mph than at 20 mph. That is why speed limits on residential streets and areas around elementary schools, areas likely to have high numbers of pedestrians, are set at 20 mph.

College has more pedestrians than any residential street or elementary school and yet has a speed limit of 35 mph. Many roadways are designed to slow speeds when entering a pedestrian area, such as Broadway going through downtown. However, this is not the case with College, which plows through a pedestrian area at speeds that probably average 40 mph.
Just lowering the speed limit is not enough, however. Some kind of physical change to the road would have to occur so drivers would know they are driving on an urban street with heavy pedestrian traffic. The consultants MU hired recommended the removal of the center-turn lane to allow for a pedestrian safety island and a barrier down the center of the roadway. I would add that once the turn lane is removed, it would free up valuable space that could be used to add bicycle lanes.

When I hear drivers talk about College, they often complain about students “jaywalking” by crossing mid-block. That stretch of College between Rollins and Broadway is about three-quarters of a mile long. There are only three crosswalks in that length: one at Rollins, one at University and one at Broadway. This means a student who lives off College Avenue halfway between Rollins and University would have to walk nearly an extra half-mile if he or she wanted to use the crosswalk. No one, pedestrian or driver alike, wants to add an extra 20 minutes to the daily commute.

The solution is to add mid-block crosswalks along that stretch of College. Signals that stop traffic in both directions and allow pedestrian traffic to cross would improve safety and reduce jaywalking.

College Avenue is a lesson in contradiction. It’s designed to move automobiles very quickly and yet it travels through one of the most pedestrian-laden areas of Columbia. Every aspect of the road, like its infrequent intersections and high speed limit, is designed to limit motorist delay.

College can be fixed and its safety improved, but it would require the will to place some of the delay on motorists and not just on the pedestrians. Let’s redesign that stretch of road and consider both modes of transportation to be equal this time.

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