MU wins National Science Foundation grants totaling $3 million

The National Science Foundation has awarded the University of Missouri three grants totaling $3 million to support plant genomics research.

The awards, which range from $600,000 to $1.5 million over five years, will support projects studying how plant genes function and govern corn, soybean and canola interactions with the environment.

Gary Stacey, professor of plant sciences, is principal investigator on a four-year $1.5 million project to use soybean root hairs as a model system for studying cellular function in plants.

Scott Peck, associate professor of biochemistry, is co-investigator on a four-year $600,000 project aimed to develop canola with greater tolerance to drought.

And James Birchler, curators professor of biological sciences, will study functional genomics in corn with a $900,000 award.
New test for salmonella faster

Tuesday, November 30, 2010

COLUMBIA, Mo., Nov. 30 (UPI) -- U.S. scientists say they have developed a faster and more accurate test for salmonella.

University of Missouri-Columbia scientists say the advantage of the new test is the reduced testing time that could enable companies to have accurate results before shipping. This could help keep salmonella infected products off market shelves, the researchers say.

Earlier this year, an outbreak of salmonella caused by infected eggs resulted in nearly 2,000 illnesses before a costly recall of a half billion eggs could be implemented, the researchers say.

"Processors and consumers will benefit from the speed and sensitivity of the new test's results," lead test developer Azlin Mustapha of the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources says in a statement.

Mustapha says salmonella food poisoning can cause salmonellosis -- a disease in humans characterized by diarrhea, vomiting, fever, abdominal cramps and, in severe cases, death.

Salmonella testing in poultry is important, says Mustapha, because it persists in birds' spleens and reproductive tracts and infected birds pass the infection on in all of their eggs.

Mustapha, Luxin Wang and colleagues conducted a research study on the test. The results have been published in the Journal of Food Science.
State Student-Aid Policies Drive College Prices, Researchers Say

By Eric Kelderman

November 30, 2010

College leaders often argue that the way to attract more low-income students to college is to increase the amount of need-based financial aid that states offer to those students.

But doing so may also increase the cost of attending college, according to a study that was presented this month at the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Higher Education. The researchers who conducted the study found that an increase in need-based aid resulted in higher tuition and fees at both public and private institutions in the state. Public colleges also lowered their average institutional-aid awards, while there was no change at private colleges.

When states increased merit aid, both public and private colleges had smaller tuition increases, says a paper describing the study's findings. In that case, colleges may be suppressing tuition increases to compete for highly qualified applicants, say the authors, Bradley R. Curs, an assistant professor of higher education at the University of Missouri at Columbia, and Luciana Dar, an assistant professor of higher education at the University of California at Riverside.

The results of the study may ultimately confound national efforts to increase college access and completion rates, the authors conclude: "State public resources spent on student aid may not meet the expectations of a lower cost of higher education if not coupled with better policy design and/or institutional oversight and control."
Missouri hosts crop management conference

Posted: Dec 01, 2010 5:46 AM CST  Updated: Dec 01, 2010 5:47 AM CST

COLUMBIA, MO (AP) - The University of Missouri is hosting a 2-day crop management conference to update farmers on disease, insect and weed problems.

The annual conference begins Wednesday and features speakers from the University of Wisconsin, the federal Department of Agriculture and elsewhere.

Among the scheduled topics is a discussion of using fungicides to enhance the yield of field crops rather to just control the spread of disease.

The conference will be held at the Hilton Garden Inn. Additional details can be found at http://www.plantsci.missouri.edu/emc.
AAUP says MU administration, not programs, should be cut

The organization of professors points to chronic underfunding from the state as the core of the problem.

By Caitlin Swieca

Published Nov. 30, 2010

MU’s recent elimination of five degree programs and the ongoing process of reconfiguring 34 others has become a topic of concern among members of the American Association of University Professors.

AAUP is a national organization with a chapter at MU. The local organization has a non-voting representative to the Faculty Council. MU operates under a system of joint governance, in which administration and faculty collaborate to make decisions concerning the future of the university.

Although AAUP often publicly criticizes universities for cutting programs, the organization has yet to make a statement regarding the changes at MU.

According to Stephen Montgomery-Smith, MU AAUP co-vice president and representative to Faculty Council, the cuts were a main topic of discussion at the last meeting of MU’s AAUP chapter.

“The general discussion seems to be that this is a bad idea,” Montgomery-Smith said. “My sense is that they’re really cutting into the bone of what the university does, its core mission, yet there’s a huge amount of bloat in upper administration. It’s a terrible way of trimming the budget.”

Faculty Council Vice Chairman Clyde Bentley said although the programs slated for elimination are small, MU’s biggest challenges lie in the upcoming program reconfiguration.

“The actual eliminations of programs are pretty small, and they don’t have a whole lot of impact,” Bentley said. “The major issue is not in this round, it’s in the next round, because if this document’s accepted, then there are a number of courses that the administration has said need to be examined, redesigned or consolidated.”

Although the national organization has not publicly reacted to MU’s situation, AAUP has concerns that resonate throughout the nation.
"Our general principle has been that temporary fluctuations in enrollment and financing are not sufficient criteria for eliminating an entire program," said John Curtis, AAUP director of research and public policy. "There should be academic considerations and a decision-making process that looks at what the impact on the curriculum will be."

The program changes at MU come as a result of pressure from the state legislature, a factor that has made the process more difficult.

"This is not something coming out of Jesse Hall," Bentley said. "It's coming from the state government, so it's a little more difficult for faculty to deal with because we're not dealing with our partners. We're helping our partners deal with someone from state government, and that's a little harder to do."

Victoria Johnson, MU AAUP co-vice president, said she sees the program changes as a result of chronic underfunding of higher education in Missouri, which consistently ranks among the lowest in terms of its allocation of funds for higher education.

"Given the overall underfunding of higher education, MU is doing the best it can with the little that it has," Johnson said. "The MU system has been cutting costs and trying to be more efficient for the last decade. With the economic crisis, we are being so underfunded that we have to cut valuable programs."

Bentley said the program cuts stand in opposition to Gov. Jay Nixon's stated goal of 60 percent of adults holding a college degree by 2025.

"We're talking about a very rapid and large increase in people who need to go to college," Bentley said. "We're also being told that, under the current political climate, there's almost no chance in seeing an increase in funding for higher education. That's a very difficult formula."

Despite such funding issues, AAUP feels universities could be making more of an effort to preserve the quality of its programs.

"One problem with the current rounds of discussions is that, very often, the focus is on how much it costs to pay faculty or what kind of jobs students are going to get when they finish a degree in a particular area," Curtis said.

Although MU has promised it will not cut faculty, Bentley said that with 25 percent of faculty members either eligible for or close to retirement, MU could save money simply by not replacing departing staff members.

Montgomery-Smith is skeptical of MU's claim that it will preserve its faculty.

"If they don't fire faculty, I don't see how they're going to make any savings," Montgomery-Smith said. "If they do fire faculty, they'll be making very small savings because they'll be cutting people with low salaries."
Multicultural program could shape diversity requirement

The certificate program seeks to expose students to various cultures.

By Jimmy Hibsch

Published Nov. 30, 2010

Amid continued debate over a diversity general education course requirement, the faculty members shaping the new requirement are turning to the College of Arts and Science’s Multicultural Certificate as a potential model.

The certificate, first offered four years ago, provides students with an opportunity to show their commitment to multicultural and diversity issues, Multicultural Certificate Program Director Evi Naveh-Benjamin said.

It will also help students in their post-college years.

“In an increasingly global environment, students earning this certificate will be better prepared to understand and to facilitate cross-cultural interaction in their future careers, as well as in their general life experiences,” the certificate’s website states.

Although earning the certificate does not count as an official minor, it is almost identical, Naveh-Benjamin said. She said it’s something employers would be pleased to see on a resume.

“It’s similar to getting a minor, but you don’t have to take any special classes for it,” Naveh-Benjamin said. “Basically, classes that you take for your major, minor or general education can count for the certificate. Having the certificate shows that you are interested in learning about other cultures.”

Because around 500 courses qualify for the certificate, many students might graduate without knowing they’ve completed its requirements. To prevent this, Naveh-Benjamin encourages interested students to contact her office.

“We try to make sure that as many people hear about this as possible,” Naveh-Benjamin said.

Requirements for the certificate are 15 credit hours from a list of approved courses on the certificate’s website. The courses must be from at least two different departments or programs, and at least six credits must be completed in a 3000 or above level course.
According to a 2009 student survey provided by Naveh-Benjamin, the majority of students graduated without taking any diversity courses. Nearly 80 percent of students enrolled in zero to three of these classes throughout their time at MU.

“You can tell, according to these statistics, most people have not taken a lot of diversity classes at all when they graduate,” Naveh-Benjamin said. “That is exactly why people are talking more about the diversity requirement and this certificate. It’s really important.”

Since the certificate’s inception, more than 550 students have registered or applied for the certificate, and 260 have already completed the requirements. This leaves around 300 students currently working toward the certificate.

“There’s not really anything else like it at Mizzou,” graduate student Kimmy Fleming said. “I think that having a multicultural background is really important, especially heading into grad school and a professional career. It’s something that I wanted that the university hadn’t offered, so I was really excited to hear about it.”

Fleming earned the certificate last year, and said it is already benefitting her in her studies in the psychology department’s clinical track.

“It’s surprised me how ahead it’s put me, compared to some other people that I have classes with,” Fleming said. “It’s given me a really great base of knowledge.”

A campus full of students who, like Fleming, have earned the certificate is something Naveh-Benjamin said she would love to see.

“We hope that by learning more about other cultures, people will be more informed and hopefully the atmosphere on campus — and of course afterward — will foster tolerance, acceptance, openness and social justice,” Naveh-Benjamin said.
Tiger Tailgate Recycling saves 18 tons of garbage from landfill

By Amanda Stevenson-Grund
November 30, 2010 | 8:17 p.m. CST

COLUMBIA — When ESPN’s "College GameDay" came to MU, show employees passed out rain ponchos to thousands of fans. But after the show ended, Francis Quadrangle was littered with them. Sustain Mizzou’s Tiger Tailgate Recycling program rushed to the rescue.

"I sent my best volunteers to clean up the quad," said Maggie Holleman, Tiger Tailgate Recycling project coordinator. "There was a truck full of rain ponchos, literally thousands. It started to rain, and we had all of these unused or lightly used ponchos."

The group collected the ponchos and gave them back to wet fans who needed them.

"It was an excellent way to reduce, reuse, recycle," Holleman said. "We definitely reused."

This was just one example of the ways that Tiger Tailgate Recycling, a project within Sustain Mizzou that focuses on recycling at football games, conserves resources. This autumn alone, the group collected 18.6 tons of recycled material at six home football games. This marks an increase from the 15.1 tons collected last year.

"I would definitely consider this year a success," Holleman said. "We recycled more than last year, over a ton more. Eighteen tons is not too shabby. That is 18 tons that would be in a landfill."

Tiger Tailgate Recycling volunteers work on football game days by splitting into two shifts. The volunteers in the first shift work for about three hours before the game. They cover each of the tailgating sites, distributing bags so that tailgaters can recycle.

Holleman said that tailgaters have gotten used to seeing the group. She said that a common response they hear is, "We’ve been waiting for you guys to come around."