Missouri bucking national trend of few ag teachers

The University of Missouri has seen an increase in the number of students interested in agriculture education, even as national agricultural educators warn about a shortage in their field that is expected to grow worse in the next few years.

The shortage has been growing for 10 to 20 years, but several factors have combined to make the problem worse, said Ellen Thompson, the coordinator of Teach Ag, a national campaign launched last year by The National Association of Agricultural Educators.

"We've been really concerned as an organization about filling programs with quality ag teachers," Thompson told The Columbia Daily Tribune last week for a story published Monday. "It's been an issue for the last 10 to 20 years."

The shortage will get worse as a large percentage of agriculture teachers reach retirement age, she said.

"Couple with that the fact businesses and industries are realizing now how valuable ag students are, they're grabbing them up before they go into the teaching profession," she said.

The shortage has not reached the University of Missouri, which has had a steady increase in the number of undergraduates majoring in agricultural education at its College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources. This year, about 100 undergraduates are pursuing such degrees, and between 80 and 85 of them plan to teach, department Chairwoman Anna Ball said.

More students are coming to the school because it offers two areas of emphasis within its agricultural education program: teaching and leadership.
"We've really expanded the mission to be about leadership and preparing students for more than just farming but careers in all aspects of the agricultural industry," department Chairwoman Anna Ball said. "We get the word out that we are more than farming."

"Missouri is really a fantastic ag-education state," Thompson said. "Missouri is doing things right."

While high schools have seen more interest in recent years in agriculture as an elective class, that interest has not translated to college, where most students aren't focusing on agricultural studies, Thompson said.

"There are so many areas in agriculture for them to go into," she said. "If they're not told they would make a great ag teacher, they don't even think about it as a career. We want to encourage ag teachers to stand up in front of students and talk about why they love being an ag teacher, why it's a wonderful job and students should at least think about it."

Those who graduate with a college degree in agriculture education shouldn't have a hard time finding a job, even in the struggling economy.

On average, there are between 50 and 70 ag teaching positions open in Missouri every year, said Terry Heiman, the director of agricultural education at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. That's about 15 percent of the roughly 480 teaching jobs open every year. About half of all agricultural education majors are recruited by businesses, he said.

"There's always room for the new graduate," Heiman said. "That's a real asset when you talk about the possibilities for students, that there will be annual turnover and opportunities for them, as new graduates, to pursue their careers."
Engel's engineering students deny plagiarism

By Janese Silvey

The students who launched a complaint against a University of Missouri engineering professor say their charges against Greg Engel have nothing to do with his ongoing battle with administrators.

Lauren Griggs, Wanya Gu, Wenting Zhou and Yushan Chang — all electrical engineering students — filed a complaint against Engel accusing him of discrimination based on race and gender.

That complaint prompted the electrical engineering department within MU's College of Engineering to suspend Engel from all teaching duties, which is a rare course of action in the early stages of a student complaint, multiple sources on campus have said.

Engel has questioned whether the teaching suspension is the latest in a string of what he considers to be retaliation against him. MU spokeswoman Mary Jo Banken said the university would not comment as to why Engel was suspended.

Engel is the researcher who snagged a $2 million federal earmark to research advanced electromagnetic launchers, or rail guns, alongside the U.S. Office of Naval Research. MU administrators have said they replaced Engel as the lead of that project because he wasn't proceeding properly with the work, a charge he denies. Annie Sobel, an adjunct engineering professor who has a military background, was named project lead, which raised some eyebrows because she is also the wife of Rob Duncan, MU vice chancellor of research.

Gu, Zhou and Chang filed a complaint against Engel after he gave them zeros for lab reports he said had been plagiarized. Gu denied the charge, saying the team worked together on the same problem and came up with the same results but submitted different reports.

Engel said he was suspended before he had a chance to ask for the reports back and prove the plagiarism. The students did not have their reports available for the Tribune to review.

Engel declined to get into specific student information but stands by his charge that "it was obvious the students were plagiarizing."

Gu, Zhou and Chang also say other students turned in similarly structured reports but were not given zero grades.
Griggs said she joined her fellow female students to launch the complaint because she didn’t think he handled a concern involving her behavior appropriately. Griggs admitted she once told him a lab was “retarded” and that she jokingly told him to “shut up,” but she said she was shocked to discover he had attempted to file a complaint against her when she was enrolling for spring courses. She said he should have talked to her first.

Engel acknowledged he had a disruptive student and said he “followed procedure as outlined in the collected rules dictated through Chair Noah Manring.”

All four students reported they were consistently given the lowest grades in Engel’s class and believe it’s because they’re women.

But Engel said his teaching assistant assigned grades for some of the lab reports, physical labs and quizzes and that he didn’t see all of them. Asked about accusations of discrimination, Engel said: “Some of my best students have been female and foreign students.”

The students’ charge against Engel is proceeding. Griggs said they plan to meet with him in an informal hearing and request a public apology.

Meanwhile, Engel remains on campus in his research capacity. He’s no longer working on the federally funded research project but continues to pursue work in electric launcher advancement with a private company. He has retained Columbia attorney George Smith, although Engel has not begun any formal grievance or legal process.

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MU chemistry staffer dies after car crashes into tree

By Brennan David

A man was killed last night when his vehicle was split in two by a tree in a crash on West Obermiller Road in northwest Columbia.

According to the Boone County Sheriff's Department, Shannon Paul Mackey, 38, of Columbia was driving eastbound around 7:40 p.m. in the 1400 block of West Obermiller Road when his 1999 Toyota Avalon began to skid. It left the road at the top of a small hill, became airborne and hit a tree. Mackey was pronounced dead at the scene.

Mackey is believed to have been traveling at a high speed, Traffic Unit Sgt. Brian Leer said, and alcohol was suspected to be a contributing factor. The victim was traveling from a place where he had been drinking, Leer said.

An autopsy with the Boone County Medical Examiner’s Office was scheduled for today, and toxicology tests will be sent to the Missouri State Highway Patrol crime lab for results.

Mackey was wearing a seat belt at the time of the crash, Leer said. Neighbors heard the crash and notified authorities. Tire marks on the pavement indicated Mackey attempted to steer his vehicle back into alignment, but no skid marks caused by braking were found. The vehicle split in two where the front and back seat compartments meet.

Mackey had worked for the past 2½ years as a system support analyst for the University of Missouri’s Department of Chemistry. His supervisor, Bill Vellema, said today Mackey had a great sense of humor and was well-liked, and he was married with no children.

“He always played cards at lunch with a group of guys at work,” Vellema said. “He had a horrible poker face. He was too honest to play cards.”

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Still claims legislative proposals will modernize taxes, increase state revenues

One proposal would allegedly reduce the budget shortfall by about 25 percent.

By Steven Dickherber

Published Dec. 7, 2010

State Rep. Mary Still, D-Columbia, will propose legislation in the coming week to tax Internet sales at a more equal rate with traditional brick and mortar sales, a move that could provide $160 million in additional revenue to Missouri. Still will also propose a raise in cigarette tax by 12 cents per pack, and wishes to readjust income tax brackets to reflect inflation.

Still said the state cannot continue to cut its way to a better economy.

"We must take action that will support the University of Missouri and our state's public schools if we are going to compete economically," Still said in a news release.

Her proposal, The Main Street Protection Act, would provide tax code structure to level the playing field for traditional businesses against Internet sales.

State Rep. Chris Kelly, D-Columbia, has not filed any bills yet, but said he will file bills in the coming week which will simplify the organ donation process and reconcile the budget.

Kelly said he enthusiastically supported Still’s proposed legislation, but said he thought the bills had no chance of getting through the majority party, since they would raise taxes on some people.

"I think the most likely to get any traction might be the Main Street Protection Act," Still said. "The people that are getting squeezed are the middle class people who are working for a living, and that includes many of our store owners."

Still said there is an unfair advantage given to online sales because they are not required to pay the same state taxes as traditional small businesses.

Still said the proposal to raise taxes on cigarettes could get attention, but because the tax would still be the lowest in the country, the state would not lose money to individuals driving across the state line to buy cigarettes elsewhere.
Both Kelly and Still agree Still's third proposal, which would account for inflation to decide income tax rates, is the least likely to gain support. Inflation rates have not been adjusted since 1931, so the highest income bracket is still $9,000.

"When someone making $9,000 has to pay the same rate of taxes as a multi-millionaire, that is just wrong," Still said.

Her bill proposes updating the tax rate to reflect current income levels. According to Still, it is unlikely to get through, because it would raise taxes on some people, though it would decrease taxes for lower income individuals.

"People in the State House of Representatives like to protect the rich, and they don't want to raise taxes on the rich," Still said. "I feel it's the middle income people who need our protection."
Editorial:

Lawmakers should consider tax legislation before cutting education funding

Published Dec. 7, 2010

It’s no mystery: The nation's economic crisis has led to some tough budget decisions across the country, and the state of Missouri is not exempt. The UM system and MU have been somewhat protected from the drastic budget cuts the state has been making across the board the past couple of years due to a tuition freeze agreement with Gov. Jay Nixon, but other departments can only bleed for so long.

The UM system has become a sitting duck, and it's hunting season in Jefferson City.

The state's budget shortfall stands at $604 million, and state legislators will likely turn to higher education's budget with machete in hand to help close the gap — metaphorically speaking, of course. After remaining safe from the rest of the state's budget cuts, our university and Missouri higher education as a whole is set up to be screwed over by the state in the coming year.

But there are alternatives: State Rep. Mary Still, D-Columbia, will be proposing three bills this week in Jefferson City that will allegedly reduce the state's deficit by up to $229 million.

One of the three bills, called the "Main Street Protection Act", would create provisions in the state's tax code that would collect (presently) lost taxes from sales made on the Internet. It is expected this act would generate $160 million in tax revenue, which is a massive chunk of the state's budget. Other states have begun to collect these taxes and are generating millions of dollars to help pull state's budgets out of the economic crisis.

Missouri lawmakers have been ignoring this easy, untaxed source of income that could very well save higher education in our state down the road.

Another bill would increase the tax on cigarettes in Missouri from 17 cents per pack to 33 cents, an increase of 12 cents. Missouri’s tax on cigarettes is the lowest in the country, and an increase of 12 cents will only elevate Missouri’s status as the second-lowest cigarette tax in the country. Virginia taxes at 30 cents a pack, and, odds are, Missouri revenue won't be lost by smokers driving to Virginia to save 3 cents on a pack of cigs. This increase would generate around an additional $68 million in state revenue.
The last bill would restructure the Missouri income tax brackets, which, as of 2010, haven’t been updated since 1931. That’s right; Missouri’s income tax brackets haven’t been changed since President Herbert Hoover was in office — since a pre-WWII world, since there were only 48 states in the Union. The result? Missourians making $9,000 a year pay the same tax rate as those making millions.

But because politics can be generally defined as doing pointless, absurd crap over and over again, none of this is likely to pass. In the past, the majority party in Jefferson City has kept this bill in committee and never talked about it or brought it to a vote on the floor. The same is expected for the coming year.

And that is some straight bullshit. Here we are, passing up hundreds of millions of tax revenue for the sake of essentially protecting the rich of Missouri. Yes, politicians are wary of supporting raises in taxes, but at the same time, who wants to be the politician that puts a heavier burden on Missouri families already struggling to send their children to college? Ignoring these bills means disaster for MU. Departmental cuts and tuition hikes, reminiscent of those in California two years ago are only some of the nightmares that could come to be if this legislation is ignored yet again.

What it comes down to is weighing long term cost and gain. Yes, taxes will go up for a while, but it’s worth continued funding of the state educational system. Contrary to constituent demand, it’s literally impossible for a state to give more money to educational system without taxing more. It’s not even simple enough to be economics — it’s common sense. Money doesn’t grow on trees.

We urge the Associated Students of the University of Missouri to take a stance on this issue, as it is their job to protect the interests of MU students in Jefferson City.

We also urge all MU students to write to their hometown representatives in Jefferson City. A massive influx of letters to our representatives will not only emphasize our political power as constituents, but also show our politicians that MU students are a powerful, unified force that transcends any political party. We are going to school to get an education in order to make our state and country even better when our time comes to take the reins, and our noble politicians are jeopardizing it all.

At MU, we have students from every county in Missouri, and it’s time for us to use our English 1000 skills and tell our representatives what’s best for our education, our families and our state.
Bald eagle ready to fly again

By Janese Silvey

After spending nearly a year in rehab, Eagle Rare is ready to spread her wings.

The University of Missouri Raptor Rehabilitation Project team will release the bald eagle into the wild at 10 a.m. Saturday at Eagle Bluffs Conservation Area southwest of Columbia near McBaine. The event is open to the public.

Eagle Rare, a mature female, was found near Paris, Mo., in January by a resident who previously had seen her and a mate building a nest. The eagle had a broken left wing and was unable to fly.

She was taken to MU's College of Veterinary Medicine, where she was also diagnosed with a broken pelvis. After surgery, she was kept in at the veterinary teaching hospital until April, when she was moved to a larger caged area where she has been able to stretch and exercise her wings.

"The healing process can take quite a while for their bones to get to the point where we feel they're healed well enough to be put in a larger cage and stretch those wing muscles," said Elizabeth Matye, a program volunteer and MU senior.

And Eagle Rare wasn’t the most cooperative bird.

"There are birds that are rather stubborn, and Eagle Rare is one of them," Matye said. "She was a bit stubborn about flying when we needed her to. It took a while for us to be fully comfortable that she was able to fly well."

It’s unusual for the raptor program to release eagles at Eagle Bluffs Conservation Area because typically eagles are already nesting there, and eagles shouldn’t be released near other eagles during mating season. Right now, it’s too early for eagles to start nesting, though, making the area appropriate for Eagle Rare. Ideally, she will stay put and attract a male eagle come mating season.

"We expect her to hunt for herself and find a mate," Matye said. "We’d hope she’d be able to nest again."

Eagle Rare was one of three eagles brought to the raptor program in January. Another, named Screwball, was rehabilitated and released earlier this year. A third eagle found hobbling around in the woods in Montgomery County in January wasn’t treatable and had to be euthanized, Matye said.
The Raptor Rehabilitation Project is a group of about 45 to 50 veterinary students and volunteers who care for a variety of birds — mostly hawks and owls — at the teaching hospital and rehab facility, said Tracey Berry, spokeswoman for the veterinary medicine school.

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Report maintains possibility of flat tuition rates

Enrollment grew in 2010, but tuition held steady.

By Tony Puricelli

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The UM system's fiscal year 2010 report sheds a positive light on the university's financial status, despite talks of budget cuts and a possible tuition increase.

The report, an analysis of the collective finances from all four campuses of the UM system, praised the university's flat tuition for undergraduate in-state students for this year, increased financial aid of more than $5 million, a continually fully-funded pension plan and flat non-compensation expenses, which include university expenses other than personnel costs, such as supplies, travel and professional services.

The 2010 net tuition per student for the four system campuses came out to $7,709, which is $200 less than the 2009 net tuition. Net tuition is the amount of tuition the university collects in a given year minus the total of scholarships and discounts awarded.

"You'll see by looking at the 2010 annual report that we've really been able to hold costs even in light of increased enrollment," UM system spokeswoman Jennifer Hollingshead said. "It costs more when you have additional students."

The total financial resources of the UM system per student amount to $39,139.

According to the report and based on this year's numbers, the UM system does not expect tuition to rise, but many variables, namely state funding for higher education, influence the decision.

The UM system Board of Curators will meet Thursday and Friday in St. Louis and will continue the discussions on tuition rates, which is typically determined at the January meeting in Columbia.

UM system President Gary Forsee said in the report the UM system enrollment grew to more than 71,000, bringing the growth in enrollment since fall 2000 to 15,600 students in 2010.

"In their own right, these numbers are impressive, but they are even more so when you take into account a burgeoning enrollment that has resulted in 15,600 more students coming to one of our
four campuses in the last 10 years," said Nikki Krawitz, UM system vice president of finance and administration, in a news release.

"The system is outlining new programs to halt its yearly increase in expenses. Total operating expenses increased by $53.1 million, or 2.2 percent, in fiscal year 2010 compared to an increase of $72.9 million in fiscal year 2009.

"In fiscal year 2010, our non-compensation expenses increased only a half percent, and we are in the midst of benchmarking our administrative processes to identify shared service opportunities with a goal of reducing costs and improving service quality," Forsee said.

Hollingshead said a rise in students comes at the same time as a rise in energy costs for utilities, such as electricity.

"That we've been able to hold our non-compensation expenses relatively flat, at half a percent of an increase, is really a testament to the university's continued focus on cost cutting," Hollingshead said.

According to its website, the UM system believes this report shows its continued commitment to be good stewards of state resources.

"In so many ways, the four campuses of the University of Missouri System advance the education, economy, health, culture and overall prosperity of the state and the citizens we serve," Forsee said.
University accepts notes for Forsees

The University of Missouri System has set up an online tool to let people send notes of support to system President Gary Forsee and his wife, Sherry.

Sherry Forsee recently was diagnosed with cancer, prompting her husband to take some personal time from his post. To send a note, visit www.umsystem.edu and click on the "Messages of Support to the Forsees" link under "Featured."

UM System General Counsel Steve Owens is filling in for Forsee during his absence. He will lead the curators meeting Thursday and Friday in St. Louis.