

## **Plan will improve schools Institutions won't be 'diploma mills.'**

BY DAVID RUSSELL

Columbia Daily Tribune Tuesday, September 27, 2011

The Missouri Department of Higher Education often deals with "diploma mills" as part of its oversight function. Diploma mills are fly-by-night businesses that attempt to sell fraudulent pieces of paper that purport to be real academic credentials. Reputable colleges and universities, on the other hand, maintain high academic standards, thus giving graduates credentials that have real value.

So it was with interest that I read Hank Waters' assertion that Gov. Jay Nixon's proposal to tie higher education funding to measurable outcomes is a bad idea that will somehow cause our public colleges and universities to become purveyors of worthless sheepskins or worse.

The Sept. 20 editorial claims — without any supporting evidence — that tying a small portion of an institution's state appropriation to such important outcomes as six-year graduation rates and increased degree production will inevitably lead to rampant grade inflation.

According to this scenario, institutions will water down academic standards to produce more degrees, so they can collect more bonus bucks from the state. I think faculty would be offended by the implication that they would compromise their integrity by "dumbing down" academic standards to attract more funding.

**This is nonsense, of course. The University of Missouri's own system of accountability, which has been tracking nearly 80 performance indicators for years, provides data contradictory to that claim. For example, MU alone has increased the number of bachelor's degrees every year between fiscal years 2007 and 2010. During the same period, MU graduates' pass rates for licensure exams in such professional fields as teacher education, nursing, engineering and accounting have gone up.** The same is true for general education exam results. If grade inflation were the reason for the increased numbers of graduates we are seeing, then the performance of those graduates on nationally normed exams would suffer. It has not.

The idea of holding public colleges and universities accountable for results is nothing new. The movement within higher education toward strategic plans supported by clear and reasonable goals and indicators that tell how we are doing has gained momentum nationally during the big economic downturn. States and hard-pressed taxpayers want to know they are getting value in return for all those tax and tuition dollars.

As I see it, Missouri higher education is not being asked to do anything it is not already doing. State and university officials are working on a set of sensible performance measures that address five broad goals: degree productivity, student progress, quality of learning, affordability and one goal that is institution-specific. No big surprises there.

Faculty and administrators should see the proposal to link funding and performance not as a threat but as an opportunity to show taxpayers and lawmakers they get it when it comes to spending public dollars wisely to produce quality outcomes in higher education. That is a message I look forward to taking to Missourians.

David Russell is Missouri's commissioner of higher education.

# COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

## **Big 12 athletics directors put focus on league solidarity**

### **MU Mention on Pg. 2**

By STEPHEN HAWKINS, The Associated Press

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GRAPEVINE, Texas — Big 12 Conference athletic directors discussed ways during their meeting Tuesday to stabilize their league before they can determine if and how much they might expand.

Iowa State athletic director Jamie Pollard, the chairman of the Big 12 athletic directors, said there were "healthy discussions" about what might happen numbers-wise in the future.

"There's a lot of possibilities. It could be nine, it could be 10, it could be 12, it could be 16, pick a number," Pollard said.

"I think what we're more focused on is doing what we all believe is right for the membership of the Big 12, and the most important piece right now is the solidarity among the nine and finding a way to make sure that we provide that solidarity so that we can be stabilized before we entertain whether that should be nine, 10, 12, 16."

The regularly scheduled fall meeting of the Big 12 athletic directors came a day after Texas A&M was formally introduced as the SEC's 13th member, a move that takes effect for the 2012-13 school year. The Aggies are the third member to leave in the past 15 months.

Nebraska (Big Ten) and Colorado (Pac-12) began play in their new leagues this season.

Newly appointed interim commissioner Chuck Neinas took part in the meeting even though he will not officially take over his new role until next Monday.

Pollard, who spoke on behalf of the league, said there is a process for stabilization. He wouldn't go into specifics but said there was a clear consensus among the nine schools on the items discussed.

"Ultimately, we have to prove it because there will always be doubters," he said. "All I can say is the people we were locking arms with in that room feel pretty committed to me. I take people on their word. I'm not worried about it at all."

Pollard said formal agreements to ensure stability were "still a work in progress" but insisted that "all nine member institutions are fully engaged and committed" to putting those together.

He said everything would have to go through the normal chain of command with decisions made by the league's board of directors, which is made up of the presidents and chancellors of the member schools.

The athletic directors spent a lot of time talking about ways to provide input to a special four-member committee appointed by the league's board that is working on initiatives designed to provide solidarity and stability to the Big 12's future.

That committee will be made up of the presidents or chancellors of Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas and Iowa State.

When the nearly four-hour meeting ended late Tuesday, Texas athletic director DeLoss Dodds declined comment and referred all questions to Pollard.

**"It's a crazy time," said Missouri athletic director Mike Alden, who also deferred to Pollard.**

**There have been persistent rumors that Missouri might be a possibility to follow Texas A&M to the SEC.**

SEC commissioner Mike Slive, though, reiterated Tuesday that his league's presidents and chancellors are not currently considering any other schools for

admission and that Texas A&M was the only one to submit an application. Slive said he anticipates having just 13 members in 2012-13.

Pollard said there wasn't much time spent talking about what other leagues were saying or doing and that the focus was on what the remaining nine Big 12 schools needed to do to make their league viable for an extended period.

"You go through these processes and it's an inward look, and each institution has to figure out what really matters to them, and you come out of it I think stronger on the other side. It feels like that today," Pollard said.

"The nine of us in that room, we've been through a lot together, an awful lot together. Our obituary has been written several times and hasn't come to fruition, and I think that's strengthened us, and we said this a year ago, that ultimately we have to prove it."

Oklahoma president David Boren said last week that the nine remaining schools had "agreed" to give a six-year grant of their first- and second-tier television rights to the Big 12 for the next six years.

That means all revenue from the top television games — shown currently on networks owned by ABC/ESPN and Fox — would continue to go to the Big 12 even if a school left for another league.

The six-year term runs past the next negotiating period for the top-tier contract, currently with ABC/ESPN, in a bid to keep the nine schools together for the next contract.

While Pollard again didn't get into specifics about what the athletic directors talked about regarding those TV rights, he said, "Everybody has been very forthcoming about doing what we know we need to do in order to get the stability that this league so deserves."

# ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

## SEC 'anticipates' no increase for now

BY TOM TIMMERMANN ttimmermann@post-dispatch.com > 314-340-8190 | Posted:  
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The Southeastern Conference has 13 teams after officially welcoming Texas A&M on Monday night, and SEC commissioner Mike Slive says they're expecting to have 13 next season. As for taking the next, some would say inevitable, step to 14, Slive said Tuesday they're going to think about it and are in no rush.

"There are no institutions currently under consideration by SEC presidents and chancellors and we have not received any applications from anyone beyond A&M," Slive said on a conference call with reporters. "We anticipate being at 13 teams in 2012-13."

Asked what would make a 14th team — Mizzou, perhaps? — appealing to the league, Slive wouldn't say.

"At this point, we have had very, very careful, strategic and thoughtful thinking about expansion. Ultimately, we wanted to get A&M into our league and we're working on integrating them. Obviously, we're a league that's had some success. We value the kinds of institutions we have in this league. We'll see how the future plays out."

Slive said there wasn't a definite date when the door closes for the 2012-13 season and, of course, those fond of parsing words, who have had a field day during this latest line of conference revisions, will note the use of the word "anticipate," which obviously implies the door isn't closed yet. And while Slive made it sound as if no other movement is imminent — he said he's looking forward to taking a few days to relax now that the A&M matter is dealt with — "how the future plays out" leaves some pretty big openings.

One of those things that could play out, presumably, is what another team leaving the Big 12 would mean to the league's future. A&M President R. Bowen Loftin, on the same call with Slive, said that while he has not received an assurance from Baylor or other schools that there would be no litigation to keep A&M from leaving, he got the impression on a conference call with the league's board (of which Loftin is still a member) last week that the league would go on just fine, noting that the league had reactivated its expansion committee. "I had no indications there was going to be any animosity directed at A&M," Loftin said. "The Big 12 would be stable. With no harm done to members of the Big 12, there would be no basis for litigation."

**In San Antonio on Tuesday, T. Boone Pickens, the billionaire oil magnate and prominent Oklahoma State booster, said that if Mizzou left for the SEC, "We got a real problem" in the Big 12. If that's the case, the possibility of litigation could return. (Pickens also said he**

**thought Texas Christian and Houston were the sensible candidates to join the league.) Which raises a curious situation. A&M alone leaving might not trigger a lawsuit. A&M and Mizzou leaving, however, could indicate it's time to roll out the lawyers. Because the SEC has shown itself to be litigation-adverse, as it delayed bringing A&M into the fold until the threat of lawsuits seemed to go away, that could be just the kind of thing that will have to "play out."**

But even if no one else has applied for admission to the SEC, Slive and his presidents and chancellors certainly know who's out there and what they might bring and that as long as they have an open spot, people will talk. Which is why Slive is fully aware that the speculation will continue and maybe even accelerate as to who will be lucky No. 14.

"I hate to keep using these words, I've been using them for a year and a half," he said, "but we try to be thoughtful and strategic. ... We do our best for the league. There's enormous speculation about how we'll schedule, if we'll go to 14 teams and who that's going to be and how that's going to happen and when it's going to happen. We understand that and they're all appropriate questions. We'll deal with those carefully on a timetable that works for us. We have operated with integrity and responded to an inquiry from A&M. There was lot of swirling around us. In the league, we have to keep our heads about us and develop the league in a thoughtful way for generations and generations to come.

"Talking about A&M, there were some difficult short-term issues but this is an investment in the long-term strength of the Southeastern Conference, long after I'm gone."

Slive said he didn't know what the economic value of adding A&M to the league would be, but "to say we don't know what state it's located in would be naïve." As to what made A&M a school that made a league that wasn't looking for teams to add change its mind, Slive said that A&M was "a great fit academically, athletically and culturally." Which give you three more words to parse as to how Mizzou fits in that equation.

## Hospitals Risk Revenue Cuts as They Fail to Reduce Readmissions

September 28, 2011, 12:31 AM EDT

*By Pat Wechsler*

Sept. 28 (Bloomberg) -- U.S. hospitals risk cuts in Medicare payments next year after failing to reduce avoidable readmissions, a Dartmouth Atlas Project study showed.

The report tracked 10.7 million discharges at 1,925 hospitals from 2004 to 2009 and found that readmissions of elderly patients within 30 days of a hospital stay have remained the same or increased. Earlier work by the Lebanon, New Hampshire-based research group influenced strategies in President Barack Obama's 2010 health-care overhaul.

Avoidable readmissions cost Medicare, the federal health plan for the elderly and disabled, at least \$17 billion annually, according to U.S. estimates quoted by the Dartmouth group. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services in Baltimore plans to cut payments by 1 percent to hospitals with excessive rates starting in fiscal 2013.

"This report should be a wakeup call for hospitals," said David Goodman, a physician and co-author of the Dartmouth Atlas study. "It clearly shows how far we have to go and how difficult it's going to be to get there."

The 30-day readmission rate following a surgery was 12.7 percent nationally in 2004 and 2009. The rate after an illness rose to 16.1 percent in 2009 from 15.9 percent in 2004.

### Academic Medical Centers

The medical and surgical readmission rates of about half of the 94 academic medical centers surveyed increased during the four years. Among those with the largest statistically significant jumps were Montefiore Medical Center in New York, Albany Medical Center in Albany, New York, and University Hospitals Case Medical Centers in Cleveland, all of which gained 3.8 percentage points for surgical readmissions. The University of Connecticut Health Center in Farmington, Connecticut saw its medical readmission rate rise 4.8 percentage points and Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha climbed 4.6 points.

**The academic medical centers with the largest drops in surgical readmissions were the University of Missouri Hospital and Clinic in Columbia, Missouri, which fell 5.2 percentage points, and Oklahoma University Medical Center in Oklahoma City, which dipped 3.9**

**percentage points. Chicago-based Northwestern Memorial Hospital's medical readmission rate dropped 3.2 points.**

Other medical centers that experienced an increase in the rate of readmitted patients were New York Presbyterian Hospital, a gain of 3.3 percentage points for surgical readmissions and 2.2 for medical; Massachusetts General Hospital, an increase of 2 percentage points for medical readmissions; and Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center, based in Lebanon, New Hampshire, up 2.7 points in surgical readmissions.

No Monitoring

The persistent readmission rate is caused by a lack of early follow-up with patients and caregivers to ensure they understand and heed doctors' orders, Goodman said in a telephone interview. Often too, patients are treated for the illness that landed them in the hospital, even though they are suffering from other conditions that will send them back weeks or even days later, he said.

U.S. payment systems have also tended to reward fragmented care, Goodman said. Many hospitals don't change their practices because they benefit in the short run from higher revenue that comes from readmissions, he said.

"So it has remained business as usual for the last few years," Goodman said. "Yet, when Medicare starts penalizing them, you know there will be complaints."

The agency's penalties will rise from the 1 percent payment cut in fiscal 2013 to 2 percent in fiscal 2014 and 3 percent in 2015. While hospitals are likely to improve Readmission rates before the penalties kick in, the nation shouldn't focus on what happens to a patient after only 30 days, Goodman said.

"The health care system needs more than just 30 days responsibility for a patient population," Goodman said. "Tell me what happens on day 31 and day 90."