Editorial: Real 'cancer' in higher education is lack of affordability

By the Editorial Board | Posted: Sunday, April 29, 2012 12:15 am | (4) comments.

MU MENTION P. 2

Todd Akin stumbled into some unintentional wisdom last week.

The Republican U.S. representative from Wildwood, a candidate for his party's nomination for the U.S. Senate, earned the ire of President Barack Obama when he said in a Senate primary debate that government investment in college student loans was like 'stage-three cancer of socialism.'

As generally happens in an election year, the story devolved into a he-said, she-said about who got his quote right. Make no mistake, Mr. Obama not only is right on the issue of keeping student loan interest at 3 percent instead of doubling it, but he also accurately quoted Mr. Akin.

But that's not the point.

The point Mr. Akin stumbled upon is that the unsustainable level of student loan debt is, in fact, a cancer on the nation's economy. The student-loan bubble is the next housing bubble, with debt surpassing $1 trillion, and more owed on loans for college tuition than is owed on credit card debt.

This is an epic problem, and, as Mr. Obama noted in one of his campaign-like college campus speeches: "This is the economy."

Exhibit A: As the state of Missouri has reduced support for public universities, tuition has skyrocketed. Middle-class parents are being overwhelmed, unable to contribute to moving the economy forward by buying houses, cars or other durable goods.

Some students are priced out of higher education, limiting their future earnings. Campuses can't keep up with capital needs, leaving crumbling infrastructure and reducing economic development opportunities that should come with vibrant and healthy college campuses.

The problem, though, is much bigger than decreased state support.
In a September 2011 report for the Delta Project, which is examining rising college costs, researchers Jane Wellman and Louis Soares pointed to another key reason that college costs are rising so much faster than the rate of inflation:

"One of the dirty little secrets of higher education finance is that competition leads to increased spending and mission creep rather than to greater differentiation of products, in part because of the absence of measures of quality, leading institutions to treat money and prestige as surrogates for excellence."

**Case in point: the Missouri University of Science and Technology. With one of the best engineering schools in the country in Rolla, why does the University of Missouri continue to prop up an expensive and mostly redundant engineering school on its Columbia campus 75 miles away?**

In Missouri, regional public universities compete for funding. Local state lawmakers fight for "their" school rather than treating the university system as a unified state asset. The last University of Missouri president to propose serious consolidation of the state system was Elson Floyd, who was run out of Columbia in 2007, in part for pointing out the obvious.

This is a serious national problem. It is bigger than any student's or parent's unaffordable tuition debt, any state's Balkanized college fiefdoms or any overblown war of words between the president and a congressman stumping for higher office.

Indeed, the student loan debt bubble and exponentially rising tuition costs have grown into a cancer. There is a cure, but implementing it will be painful.
Analysis: Budget grows after holdup in Mo. Senate

Nine fiscally conservative Republican senators who stalled debate on Missouri's proposed budget this past week claimed it spent too much, relied too heavily on one-time revenues and needed a structural overhaul.

They won about a dozen concessions from Republican leaders before finally allowing the budget to pass.

The end result?

The budget plan, which entered Senate debate with a projected $16 million balance in the general revenue fund, now has a $4 million shortfall.

So much for fiscal conservatism.

The Missouri Senate's unusual and some say, unprecedented budget debate had little to do with bold attempts to slash spending in the $24 billion plan for the fiscal year that starts July 1. Instead, it revealed the depth of the personality-driven divisions in the Republican-led Senate and illustrated how nine individuals with various personal agendas can band together to accomplish what none of them had been successful in achieving on their own.

They succeeded, for example, in stripping out $50 million in federal grants for a new Medicaid computer system because of fears it could pave the way to implement part of President Barack Obama's health care law.

But some of their changes were mere money swaps, with no effect on the bottom line.
For example, the Senate Appropriations Committee, led by Sen. Kurt Schaefer, R-Columbia, had consolidated the state's lottery revenues to go to K-12 public schools, instead of allotting a share to public colleges and universities. Schaefer said it was simpler that way. What colleges didn't get from lottery proceeds, they would still get from general state revenues.

But upon the group's demand, the lottery money was again split among lower and higher education. Sen. Jim Lembke, R-St. Louis County, counted that as a victory, because schools would be less reliant on the sale of lottery tickets.

The group also successfully reversed an Appropriations Committee decision that had transferred $5 million for job-training programs from the Department of Economic Development to community colleges, which Schaefer said are more directly involved in training people for work. Sen. Will Kraus, R-Lee's Summit, who pushed for that decision to be reversed, explained that it could have severed job-training contracts with businesses in his hometown.

Similarly, the group succeeded in undoing a decision by the Schaefer-led committee that had eliminated funding for a preschool grant program and transferred it to the Parents as Teachers early childhood development initiative. Sen. Brad Lager, R-Savannah, who included that item on the list of demands, explained that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education already has a plan to phase out the grants, which some preschools have come to depend upon.

In each of the cases, "I don't think it was a reduction of spending, I think it was a prioritization of spending," Lager said.

Other changes sought by the coalition of senators stemmed from grievances about particular state policies or personnel.

For example, coalition member Sen. Luann Ridgeway, R-Smithville, succeeded in cutting $300,000 from both the state Parks Division and the Office of Administration, which awards state contracts. The intent was to express displeasure that contracts for park furnishings, such as picnic tables and benches, have gone to an out-of-state company instead of Missouri firms.

The group of senators successfully inserted wording into the budget prohibiting money from going to the Sue Shear Institute for Women in Public Life at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Sen. Jane Cunningham, R-St. Louis County, has complained for a decade that the institute churns out liberal trainees for Democrats.

The group also prevailed in getting budget wording barring money from being used to implement a quality rating system for preschools and child-care centers. Cunningham, Ridgeway and others are particularly upset about one woman employed by both the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the University of Missouri-Columbia whom they blame for pushing the initiative administratively despite the fact it has failed to pass the Legislature.

The budget holdup was unusual in the Senate, which traditionally defers to the decisions of the Senate Appropriations Committee chairman. But the dissident senators complained that Schaefer was less willing to address the concerns of rank-and-file senators than past chairmen.
"It's the first time in my 12 years (in the House and Senate) that we’ve ever had an appropriations chair that has _ in the vernacular of 'The Rock' in WWE wrestling _ been smacked down," said Sen. Jason Crowell, R-Cape Girardeau, a leader of the nine budget-blockers.

Yet the "gang of nine" _ as one frustrated senator called them _ suffered its own setback. The group's effort to eliminate a 2 percent pay raise for about 46,000 state employees narrowly failed. That meant there were no savings to offset the additional expenses when several of the dissident senators provided the winning margin to restore funding for a blind health care program that had been targeted for cuts.

That ultimately is why the budget's general revenue spending ended up in the red.

Schaefer was frustrated by the whole turn of events.

"It's ironic that those that supposedly were making what really was an unprecedented move on the floor _ claiming to be fiscally conservative _ are the ones who actually knocked the budget out of balance," Schaefer said.
Students thank legislators for work on state funding

By RUDI KELLER

Friday, April 27, 2012

JEFFERSON CITY — The question of how much state money to give the University of Missouri is off the table in upcoming budget negotiations, House Budget Committee Chairman Ryan Silvey, R-Kansas City, told students rallying at the Capitol yesterday.

Silvey and Sen. Kurt Schaefer, R-Columbia, were honored as Legislators of the Year by the Associated Students of the University of Missouri, the multi-campus student organization. The budget for the university cleared the Senate late Tuesday with $398.2 million set aside for the school.

That's $5.6 million less than lawmakers approved last year but about $5 million more than Gov. Jay Nixon has allowed to be spent.

Nixon opened the year proposing a 12.5 percent cut in funding to state colleges and universities, about $106 million in all. Nixon restored $40 million of that with the announcement of a national mortgage fraud settlement.

Republicans made fighting those cuts a political priority from the beginning of the session.

"This year we finally draw a line in the sand," Silvey said to group of about 150 students with T-shirts proclaiming, "Less is More," a reference to funding that is below 2001 levels with 17,000 more students on UM's four campuses.

Zach Toombs, director of student communication for the Missouri Students Association, the Columbia campus' student government, said the students wanted to thank lawmakers who worked to block the cuts.

"We need the state to do their part," he said. "And we want to thank the legislators who fought for the students."

Earlier, the MSA had delivered 8,000 letters to Nixon and lawmakers opposing cuts. Yesterday's turnout was good for a class day close to finals, Toombs said.

Schaefer, who survived a two-day budget standoff followed by more than six hours of debate, said flat funding for higher education "in this budget ... is a huge, huge win." He promised the students he would
continue to pursue passage of a bill to give the student representative on the UM Board of Curators a vote in its proceedings. That proposal has had champions in every legislature since the 1980s.

Senate President Pro Tem Rob Mayer, R-Dexter, and Rep. Jason Holsman, D-Kansas City, also spoke, as did Rep. Chris Kelly, D-Columbia. Mayer said the students had been effective advocates. "We know that cuts to education have a dramatic effect on your future and your ability to be competitive," he said.

Holsman is the sponsor of a bill that would cap a student's tuition at the rate paid when entering school. It had a hearing in the House but has not reached the floor for debate.

The good news about next year's funding should be viewed realistically, Kelly told the students. "It is a tiny, tiny good thing in a sea of incredibly inappropriate funding," he said.

Without new revenue, funding will lag behind past levels, Kelly said. "We don't need to be talking about whether we can keep our head barely above the flood. It is about fixing the boat."

As the recession shrunk revenue in Nixon's first two years in office, he cut deals with college and university presidents to freeze tuition in exchange for limited cutbacks. Lawmakers did not extract that promise this year, and Toombs said students understand some tuition increases are inevitable.

"The board has to make up for the cuts over the last two years," he said. "They have to do what they have to do."
Lots of 'ifs' in state's latest nuclear plan

The most important sentence spoken or printed about the allegedly “transformational” plan to build small, modular nuclear reactors in Missouri is buried at the bottom of an Ameren Missouri news release.

“Given these uncertainties,” the sentence begins, “undue reliance should not be placed on these forward-looking statements.”

The sentence is required under a 1995 federal law called the Private Securities Litigation Reform Act that protects corporations when they lay out plans that may or may not come to fruition.

On Thursday, Gov. Jay Nixon and executives from Ameren and nuclear-industry giant Westinghouse announced a grand plan to seek a $452 million grant from the U.S. Department of Energy to develop the next generation of nuclear reactors: small, modular units that produce about 225 megawatts of power compared to the 1,000-megawatt monsters now in disfavor.

If Westinghouse gets the grant, it says it intends to design and build the first units for use at Ameren’s Callaway County plant, working with researchers at the University of Missouri’s engineering programs in Columbia and Rolla, thus planting the seeds for a multi-billion-dollar industry based right here in the Show-Me State.

If a chunk of that $452 million is spent in Missouri, it would be a welcome boost to the state’s economy.

The key word here is “if.”

If Westinghouse gets the grant, and if Congress appropriates the money, and if a market actually develops for new nuclear power, and if the smaller reactors are financially feasible, and if the industry ever figures out what to do with its dangerous waste, then, yes, the agreement could be, as Mr. Nixon said Thursday, “transformational.”

Of course, “transformational” is the same word Mr. Nixon used nearly two years ago, at the same spot outside the Governor’s Mansion in Jefferson City, when he announced a different agreement with Ameren that was supposed to be “transformational.”

That plan, which involved legislation that would force consumers to finance a nuclear plant before it was ever operational, assuming risks that Wall Street still won’t take, has been abandoned in favor of the new “transformational” plan.
The political lure for Mr. Nixon is the promise of jobs, even if in a best-case scenario they’re years down the road. But there is always a cost for those jobs, and that’s an important part of the equation.

We’d rather see some transformational work done on improving Missouri’s schools, or its moribund tax base, or its low health care rankings. But our leaders seem to be busy chasing the next great business idea, only to wash their hands of it and ask us to turn away when reality falls short of their grand pronouncements.

Missourians can be hopeful. It never hurts to hope. But this is the Show-Me State, and we’ve seen this transformational play before.
Colleges seek outside help as state support lags

NO MU Mention

By ALAN SCHER ZAGIER/The Associated Press
April 28, 2012 | 4:26 p.m. CDT

Whether exclusive private schools or massive public campuses, college has long been seen as extended preparation for the real world. These days, the real world is spending more and more time at college.

Historic lows in public funding and a shortage of skilled manufacturing workers are leading a growing number of states to turn to the private sector to train and educate students, potentially speeding their path through college, providing needed labor and reducing some of the budget burdens faced by higher education.

In Missouri, the emerging partnerships have spawned a so-called "Innovation Campus" where businesses will employ students as apprentices and help pick up the cost for their education — either by paying them or contributing money for their tuition.

University of Central Missouri President Charles Ambrose, whose school plans to build the "Innovation Campus" on a 100-acre expanse just outside Kansas City, sees the project answering demands on higher education institutions to deal with dwindling funding from state government while turning out students who don't enter the workforce with suffocating student-loan debt.

"It would be very difficult to tell where the production force stopped and the classroom started, who is a student and who is an employee, what is a laboratory and what is a production facility, who is a manager and who is a faculty member," Ambrose said.

Colleges see such partnerships as a chance to steer students into career tracks before their charges even leave campus. Businesses covet more educated workers with the specific skills necessary to succeed in their workplaces. And students envision getting a head start on a
four-year degree by taking college classes while still in high school, graduating after just two years on campus and with far less student debt than their peers.

"The decline in public support is causing people to cooperate and to rethink things," said Tim Franklin, a higher education consultant in State College, Pa., who previously oversaw university economic development projects and business partnerships at both Penn State and Virginia Tech. Ambrose's school is partnering with businesses such as Exergonix, a startup company specializing in utility-size storage units for electricity. Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon joined Ambrose and Exergonix's CEO in late February to announce the plan, which he envisions as a model for other efforts in the state.

The program expects to enroll up to 30 students this fall, starting with a group of high school juniors attending the Summit Technology Academy, a Lee's Summit school district program that draws students from 16 area high schools. The students will take dual-enrollment courses through Metropolitan Community College with the intent of graduating with an associate's degree on top of their high school diplomas.

Participants also will work closely with corporate mentors at companies such as Cerner Corp. and DST Systems Inc., which are actively involved in shaping the new program's curriculum. In return, the companies must commit to creating a certain number of new jobs for program graduates. Nixon is tapping a $500,000 federal block grant to start the effort and setting aside $10 million in competitive grants for the broader, statewide initiative.

"We're going back to the future of an apprenticeship model," Ambrose said. "You learn under the masters, and as soon as you are credentialed, you move up to the next level and advance."

Like most states, public support of higher education has been on a steady decline in Missouri for much of the past decade. Earlier this year, Nixon proposed a 12.5 percent cut to higher education spending in the next fiscal year, prompting lawmakers in the state House of Representatives to counter that proposal with a plan to eliminate a $30 million health care program for blind Missourians who earn too much to qualify for the Medicaid health care program for low-income residents.

State lawmakers subsequently agreed to keep funding flat for public colleges and universities, while the Missouri Senate has restored the money need for the blind health care plan. Lawmakers from the two chambers are now negotiating their differences before sending a budget to the governor for his signature by May 11.
A recent report by the State Higher Education Executive Officers association found that per-student state and local funding for higher education has fallen 12.5 percent over the last five years — and reached its lowest point in the 25 years since the study began.

In Pennsylvania, Gov. Tom Corbett is calling for budget cuts of between 20 percent and 30 percent for higher education in the next fiscal year, following a decline of about 20 percent in aid to state-supported universities this year.

That has prompted schools such as Bloomsburg University in central Pennsylvania to collaborate with a community college and career center in Lehigh on a job training effort that, like the Missouri program, taps local businesses to offer a specialized degree program — in this case a bachelor of applied science with an emphasis on technical leadership.

Vincent Basile, the program's interim director, said the school wants to more directly meet the needs of Pennsylvania employers with a focused degree program that aligns classes in information technology, accounting, business and management.

The focus is on applying technology to meet the needs of business organizations," he said. "We want their input. Any program like this needs to be continually evolving to meet the changing needs of the workplace and preparing the students to better fit in."

In New Hampshire, which ranks last in the nation in per-capita public support of higher education, the state system saw its already meager public support cut nearly in half last year. Keene State College, a liberal arts school, has turned to the local Chamber of Commerce to help develop a Regional Center for Advanced Manufacturing.

College President Helen Giles-Gee said the nascent effort was a response to employers "complaining of not having workers who met their needs."

Ambrose, the University of Central Missouri president, said that colleagues who retain the lone silo approach to educating their students do so at their own risk.

"There's going to be a lot of us in higher education who are going to wake up one morning and see that the train has already left the station," he said.

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN
The majority of babies who die unexpectedly in their sleep are in adult beds or lying on other surfaces not suitable for infants, a University of Missouri researcher says.

Patricia Schnitzer is an associate professor in the MU Sinclair School of Nursing. She and her team reviewed reports from the National Child Death Review Case Reporting System. Of the more than 3,000 deaths they looked at, researchers found that 70 percent of infants who died suddenly in their sleep weren't on suitable surfaces. Sixty-four percent were sharing sleeping surfaces, often with adults.

That's why Schnitzer thinks more than 4,500 infants still die unexpectedly in their sleep each year even though the government has had a program in place for 20 years to try to curtail sudden infant death syndrome. The Back-to-Sleep campaign encourages parents to place infants on their backs to sleep, but it doesn't explain the dangers of sleep environments, she said. Those include babies sharing beds, sleeping on soft bedding or furniture or sleeping near objects that can suffocate them.

"Since the Back-to-Sleep campaign began, deaths from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome have decreased, but infant sleep-related deaths resulting from suffocation dramatically have increased," she said in a statement. "Sharing beds with infants is more common now, so we want to help new parents understand the risks."

The study, "Sudden Unexpected Infant Deaths: Sleep Environment and Circumstances," was published in the American Journal of Public Health and was funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration's Maternal and Child Health Bureau. Schnitzer's co-authors include Theresa Covington and Heather Dykstra from the National Center for Child Death Review at the Michigan Public Health Institute.
Tap Day reveals newest initiates

By JANSE SILVEY

Saturday, April 28, 2012

There's not much Josh Travis, president of QEBH, will tell you about the supersecret society.

What's the name stand for? When are new members tapped? How do they serve the University of Missouri? That's all "part of the mystery," he said.

Cloaked in colorful hoods and capes, the newest members of QEBH and five other secret societies on campus became less mysterious yesterday during the 85th annual Tap Day.

The ceremony recognizes dozens of students, staff and faculty who are said to embody MU's core values — respect, responsibility, discovery and excellence.

"Today, those values come alive," Chancellor Brady Deaton said at the afternoon ceremony, held this year inside Jesse Auditorium.

QEBH is the oldest organization, having been founded in 1898 by Royall Hill Switzler.

"The charge was to promote the university and stand guard for her," Travis said before the ceremony. "We do so without pomp and circumstance."

The organization honors a diverse group of people who serve MU in a number of ways that might not carry a title or get their names in the newspaper, he said.

"This is really their time to shine."

Among new inductees was Rachel Newman, the sole sophomore selected to learn the traditions of the society and carry them forward. Each year, the sophomore selected among a group of juniors automatically becomes president when he or she becomes a senior.

LSV inductees yesterday were revealed to the public for the first time after having served in secret for a year, said member Shannon Whitney. During the year, inductees must finish a service project that remains secret. Members would or could not give examples of past projects.

"They don't want recognition," said member Deepika Parmar, a medical school student.
After all, LSV is said to have been formed underground in 1908, a time when most service that women did went unnoticed.

Also unveiled yesterday were the newest members of the Mystical Seven, Mortar Board, Omicron Delta Kappa and the Rollins Society.
MU's secret societies reveal new initiates at 85th annual Tap Day

By Allison Pohle
April 27, 2012 | 5:56 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — The secret’s out.

The identities of more than 50 individuals who are now members of MU’s six secret societies were revealed at the 85th annual Tap Day Ceremony, held at 2 p.m. Friday.

The six societies, QEBH, Mystical 7, LSV, Mortar Board, Omicron Delta Kappa and Rollins Society, revealed their new members in the order of the organizations’ founding years. The oldest society, QEBH, went first. Details about each society can be found in this previous Missourian report.

Membership in the groups is most often restricted to upperclassmen and graduate students, regardless of their academic majors. Each honorary can also "honor tap" MU faculty and staff members whom they feel have significantly contributed to the experience of MU students.

On Thursday, event organizers decided to move the event into Jesse Auditorium due to a rainy forecast. In her opening address, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Cathy Scroggs gestured to a picture of Jesse Hall and the columns projected on the screen. "Traditionally we met under the columns, as we are today," she said.

Although Jesse Hall isn't the traditional location, certain aspects of the ceremony remain constant from year to year. Before the ceremony begins, university officials, current members and new initiates file in after the audience is seated.

Because of the event's secret nature, initiates who have not yet been revealed wear hoods that cover their faces. Each society has a designated robe color, as well as a stole.

Chancellor Brady Deaton delivered the opening remarks.

"Respect, responsibility, discovery and excellence are forever ingrained in front of the columns," he said. "But today, the values come alive in the students' studies and work."
DEAR READER: A fond farewell for a retiring Missourian advocate

By Tom Warhover
April 27, 2012 | 4:29 p.m. CDT

Dear Reader,

On Sunday, July 20, 1969, astronaut Neil Armstrong took "one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind" by stepping foot on the moon's surface.

A graduate student at the helm of the Columbia Missourian that day figured it was news. Big news. So big, in fact, that the student helped convince the general manager to publish the newspaper's first "extra" edition, because at that time (and now) there was no Monday edition. Then that skinny, bespectacled student created another Missourian first by printing the edition using color on the front page.

There were no pressmen, no deliveries — all the paid workers were off on Sundays. So on Monday, July 21, 1969, students took to the streets, hawking papers the old-fashioned way.

The 2,000-copy press run sold out in an hour.

That graduate student, Brian S. Brooks, captivated this generation of students Friday morning at the Missourian's daily news meeting.

This is the generation that never knew of life before the Web. The first man on the moon is the stuff of history books, even those outdated ones gathering mold on some back shelf of a public school library.

Yet the motivations — get the news to our community, get the news right and get the news first — haven't changed all that much in nearly four decades.

Missourian staff and students honored Brian, associate dean at the Missouri School of Journalism, for his many years of work at and for your newspaper.
He got that master's degree and went out into the newspaper world. He returned to MU — and the Missourian — in 1974, and served for many years as copy desk chief. You might not have known him then; you don't see the bylines of copy editors with articles, and I'm told he was a quiet fellow, except at Missouri games. Brian was also the Missourian's top editor, and long after he left for other journalism school duties, he remained a fierce (and not so quiet) advocate for this publication.

I know that won't change. Ever.

But now, after 39 years at the School of Journalism, Brian is retiring. It's a great time to tell old stories of journalism done right. On Friday, the other moment Brian recalled was the time your newspaper beat out St. Louis and Kansas City papers for the Missouri Press Association's top investigative story of the year.

Did I mention he's competitive?

On April 24, 1980, President Jimmy Carter ordered a rescue of 52 Americans held hostage in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, Iran. Brian was the news editor that day. The next morning, he asked a photographer to take a picture of a row of boxes displaying front pages from newspapers.

Only the Missourian had the news of the failed attempt.

Thanks for your passion and dedication to the profession and to your students, Brian.

Tom

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COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Boyd Lecture Series discusses journalists' coverage of political issues

By Bethany Christo
April 27, 2012 | 6:57 p.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — The people, not the politicians, should be the focus of presidential election coverage in swing states. That’s the conclusion four journalists came to during an open discussion Friday.

The swing states represented in the discussion were Missouri, Florida, Ohio and Michigan. Each state’s vote is guided by news publications, whose coverage of election events can shape votes in these crucial states.

The discussion was part of the Gerald M. Boyd Politics and Press Responsibility Lecture Series. Panelists attempted to clarify their coverage of the major political issues of the day, including how issues in journalism might stem from those in power.

More than 60 people attended the event, packed together in a room in MU’s Reynolds Journalism Institute.

Mark Russell, a 1984 graduate of the Missouri School of Journalism, facilitated the discussion. Russell is currently the editor of the Orlando Sentinel in Florida. The four panelists included:

- **Major Garrett** is a White House correspondent covering the upcoming presidential election for National Journal. He graduated from MU in 1984 and was Russell’s roommate their senior year.
- **Rochelle Riley**, a columnist at the Detroit Free Press, called Michigan “most dysfunctional political state in the country.”
- **Darrel Rowland** is the public affairs editor of the Columbus Dispatch in Ohio.
- **Jake Wagman** covers politics for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and graduated from MU in 2000.

Here are the highlights:
Debates

Wagman said one of the problems in covering debates during the primaries is that new pieces of information from the politicians are elusive. "It's hard to find what's organic versus what's been aggregated over and over," Wagman said. He said this stems from politicians' fear of sticking their necks out and potentially losing voters.

Rowland agreed: "How much of a serious policy discussion can you have at a debate with a 90-second sound bite?"

Riley said the debates focus on entertainment rather than information. She said the problem is that the information accessible to voters has either been aggregated or is superficial and doesn't get to the issues voters care about most, like the economy or foreign policy.

"Instead of being able to Google the hundred million things about (the candidates), the debates should show us who they really are," Riley said.

Campaign coverage

All four panelists agreed that election coverage in the swing states is vital. Rowland said that instead of going to the candidates first, journalists should go to the people.

"We can tell that story," Rowland said. "We're not going to get one-on-one face time with the president, but we can with our neighbors."

Riley keeps her coverage local by talking to her barber and an 80-year-old woman she knows who watches MSNBC all day. They might not know the whole story, but they always remind her what they think is important.

"You have to find what issues people are talking about and what they're looking for in the coverage," Riley said.

Important issue coverage

Because debates only seem to scratch the surface of policies, viewers are left with little understanding of the issues they care the most about. Riley said the problem is that nobody wants to do the deep reporting.
"I want to contend that we haven't provided this in-depth coverage for decades," Riley said. "We don't really know anything about what the candidates know. It's like a soap opera rather than an economics class."

Garrett said his magazine, National Journal, has done a decent job covering issues. But he said his problem is that the magazine costs $4,000 a year for a subscription, so the information is only accessible to a limited audience.

The panelists agreed that politicians are wiggly sources and that asking and covering real people in the swing states will produce the best results. Only voters will know if this model will work when those results are revealed in the 2012 presidential elections.
Manager's first year filled with changes, controversy

By ANDREW DENNEY

Sunday, April 29, 2012

A few weeks ago, Columbia City Manager Mike Matthes — who, on Tuesday, will finish his first year as head of the city's government — was up for review during a closed meeting of the Columbia City Council.

Since coming to Columbia in May from Iowa — where he was known for fixing ailing city departments — his reputation as a municipal Mr. Fix-It has been put to the test. Municipal employee pension funds have amassed millions in unfunded liability; the police department is besieged with low morale; and the transit system is losing money, among other problems.

Those were the issues Matthes couldn't stop talking about at the council's April 2 closed meeting. He went on so long that the 30 minutes Mayor Bob McDavid wanted to set aside to talk about Matthes' performance was pared down to just a few minutes.

"We didn't get much of a chance in the meeting to talk about his record," First Ward Councilman Fred Schmidt said. But when council members did get a chance to weigh-in on the city executive who the council decided last year to bring on board, Schmidt said, council members had positive things to say about his performance.

Besides, Matthes is under scrutiny every day — not only from council members but also from staffers and the more than 108,000 Columbia residents who depend on the services the city provides.

"He's CEO, basically, of a very complex organization with some strengths and weaknesses," McDavid said.

Schmidt, who was elected a few weeks after Matthes was picked for the job, said Matthes has taken the city's problems head-on while displaying some political savvy — all without committing any "major gaffes."

Since Matthes began his tenure with the city, there have been changes to the way the city operates, but his first year is best described not by the changes he has made but by the major changes he has set in motion.
And in local government — as with politics in general — it is virtually impossible to make everyone happy. While residents and council members have yet to call for Matthes' head to roll, some of his decisions have not gone without criticism.

'AT THE PLEASURE OF THE COUNCIL' 

At about 5 p.m. Tuesday — near the end of another long day — Matthes, 43, looked tired as he peered out the window of his second-floor office at City Hall to a sun-kissed Broadway bustling with after-work traffic.

Columbia's city government can attract colorful characters, but Matthes is not the exuberant type. He speaks softly, smiles easily and chooses words carefully, taking long strokes of his salt-and-pepper goatee before he answers questions.

After a year on the job, Matthes said, he is still learning names and faces of Columbia residents and new details about the city government over which he presides.

"There are ordinances I haven't read yet, believe it or not," he said.

Matthes was chosen for the job less than a year after a "change" election in which McDavid, Third Ward Councilman Gary Kespohl and Fourth Ward Councilman Daryl Dudley — each endorsed by the Columbia Chamber of Commerce in their candidacies — were elected to the city council.

Voters elected Schmidt and Fifth Ward Councilwoman Helen Anthony to the council not long after Matthes was selected for the job, giving the city its most inexperienced council since the early 1970s, when the council was expanded from four members to six.

Matthes said he came to the city at a time of transition for both the city and its government; the city is adjusting to a rapidly growing population and all the benefits and pitfalls that come along with it.

"And I think I am part of those changes," he said.

Matthes grew up in Chillicothe in northwest Missouri and has been working in government since he graduated from college. He got his start in the Des Moines, Iowa, government in 1996 as an intern and worked his way up the ladder to lead various departments before becoming assistant city manager and chief information officer for the city of more than 200,000 in 2001.

Matthes was attracted to public service through his study of history. Originally drawn to service in foreign countries, he decided serving his local government was a more attractive goal. Matthes said he lacks the "special talent" to be an elected leader and said, in most levels of government, it is the bureaucrats working behind the scenes who tend to effect the most change.

"As Pollyannaish as it sounds, I wanted to make the world a better place," Matthes said.

Local government also appeals to his engineer's way of looking at things, he said. Matthes likes to look at the way a city does business and question how and why certain methods are used and whether
anything could be changed or updated without impairing function. Oftentimes, some procedures in city
government are so time-honored that no one remembers how they got started in the first place.

In the Columbia city charter, there is more space devoted to the rules regarding the council than for the
city manager, whose duties include hiring and firing city employees and presenting an annual budget to
the council for consideration. The council is tasked with hiring the manager, who serves indefinitely and
"at the pleasure of the council."

Four of the seven current members of the council were involved in Matthes' selection for city manager,
and members said it didn't take long for them to choose Matthes from a field of four candidates. They
liked his reputation in Des Moines as a fixer and the fact he could bring an outside perspective to the
city after the decades-long regime of former City Manager Ray Beck and the subsequent tenure of Bill
Watkins, who served as an assistant city manager under Beck before moving to the top spot in 2006.

Matthes said a major difference he has noticed so far between Columbia and Des Moines is the level of
engagement from residents. To be sure, Des Moines residents will turn out to city meetings, depending
on the issue, Matthes said. But unlike Columbia, he said, when Des Moines city business wasn't sexy,
residents weren't showing up to public meetings. Here, he said, it's "not a struggle" to get residents fired
up.

During his tenure in Columbia, council meetings have attracted a full house to the City Hall council
chamber, and more than once, attendees have had to be moved into an adjacent room to watch council
meetings on a projector screen to avoid violating the city's fire code.

Matthes also commended the city for the high level of educational attainment among its residents. That
became evident to him when McDavid took him to meet members of the Mid-Missouri chapter of Trout
Unlimited, he said. In Iowa, trout fishermen aren't usually men of letters, but members of the local Trout
Unlimited chapter generally had at least one doctoral degree, Matthes said. With a master's degree,
Matthes said, he was the least-educated person in the room.

As a government leader for a city with an educated populace, Matthes said it is important to keep his
mouth shut and his ears open when confronted with a topic he doesn't know anything about.

"You can't BS your way through anything in Columbia," Matthes said.

DRINKING FROM THE FIRE HOSE

There are plenty of metaphors used to describe the vast amount of information Matthes has had to
absorb during his young career here. His favorite is that it's like trying to take a drink from a fire hose.

When Matthes came to Columbia, the city had weathered the worst of the economic downturn, but the
budget was tight, and city employees had gone without raises since 2008. The Columbia Police
Department had recently attracted negative attention nationwide for a videotaped SWAT raid in which
officers fired shots that killed a suspect's family dog. The city was locking horns with the U.S.
Environmental Protection Agency over reducing the flow of stormwater into the Hinkson Creek. A
savings account for Columbia Transit was hemorrhaging money. Columbia Regional Airport was steadily increasing enplanements, but a volatile airline industry has proved to be a deadly atmosphere for regional airports.

The issue that "really sucked the air out of the room," Matthes said, was city employee pensions, which have more than $100 million in unfunded liabilities. But Matthes said he has had the help of his staff and the council to help steer the city through these issues.

The way Columbia's city government works is not vastly different from when Matthes started work at his position, but there have been changes on Matthes' watch. The Planning and Development Department, the Office of Neighborhood Services and the Building and Site Development Division of the Public Works Department were merged into a newly formed Community Development Department to help streamline the city's development approval process; 25-cents-an-hour across-the-board raises were given to all city employees — including Matthes, whose salary is $150,519 — and the level of funding for paving streets was increased, which came in response to a resident satisfaction survey indicating Columbians were unhappy with street conditions.

In terms of his management style, Matthes said he has an eye for detail in the work of the city but prefers to defer to department heads on most issues rather than micromanage.

Matthew Lepke, a city planner with the Community Development Department, said he prides himself on being detail-oriented, but he said when reports from his department land on Matthes' desk for final approval, the city manager will spot small errors that Lepke would miss.

"You'll look at it and say, 'Oh my heavens, how did he have time to catch that?' " Lepke said.

Things at City Hall have gotten more fast-paced since Matthes took over, said Public Works Director John Glascock, who was hired to his position by Beck. He said Matthes is "not a micromanager" and gives deference to department heads.

"He gives direction and expects you to go do it," Glascock said.

Despite positive reactions to Matthes' first year with the city, he did not enjoy a long honeymoon period after he was hired and has made proposals and decisions that have angered some residents. Less than two months into his tenure with the city, Matthes took up an unpopular proposal to merge the Office of Cultural Affairs with the Columbia Convention and Visitors Bureau, a plan that had been proposed by city administrators before his arrival and roundly rejected by board members for both entities.

Matthes adjusted the emphasis of the plan away from a money-saving move for the city and said a merger of the two departments could serve as a "force multiplier" that could boost tourism to the city and appreciation for its local arts scene. But board members weren't buying it, and Matthes eventually abandoned the proposal.

In an effort to cut costs within his office for his first proposed budget, Matthes eliminated the position held by former Assistant City Manager Paula Hertwig Hopkins, who had worked with the city for 11
years. To help balance the budget for Columbia Transit, Matthes proposed fare increases, a reduction of the number of miles buses take on certain routes and the elimination of evening service on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, which drew negative responses from residents.

Matthes also was one city official behind a proposal to college students to boost the bus system's budget and level of service and avoid service cuts with a new activity fee, but University of Missouri student representatives rejected the plan, saying the proposal sounded more like a threat.

The Columbia Fraternal Order of Police has called for Matthes to fire police Chief Ken Burton, but Matthes said he'll stand by the chief, who has had his share of controversies since taking the office. Burton last year fired Officer Rob Sanders for injuring an inmate, and Matthes refused to let Sanders purchase the police dog that had been under his care. The police association also has unsuccessfully called for Sanders to be reinstated, and Sanders is now appealing his termination with the city's Personnel Advisory Board.

Don Stamper, executive director of the Central Missouri Development Council, said developers have been "very disappointed" with the slow progress of a set of changes for the city's stormwater ordinance. But he said Matthes has had an "open ear" for the local development community and said he has enjoyed Matthes' ability to "think outside the box" on certain issues.

"He hasn't done everything we want, but he hasn't refused to listen," Stamper said.

Sid Sullivan, a former mayoral candidate and a frequent attendee to city meetings, said one year might be too soon to comprehensively judge Matthes' performance so far, but he said Matthes has brought new ideas to the city and should strive to strike a balance in a city that is divided between a "no-holds-barred" development community and smart-growth advocates.

"He's got the personality to do it," Sullivan said. "He has the ability to listen."

MOVING MOUNTAINS

Coming from a background in medicine, McDavid, who was an obstetrician, said crisis situations would require him to think and act in split-second increments. The at-times plodding pace of local government, McDavid said, was a new animal for him when he was elected in 2010.

"Sometimes, in government, a crisis means 'let's form a task force and meet in August,' " McDavid said.

Matthes compared change in a local government the size of Columbia's to trying to steer an aircraft carrier in a new direction — it almost never happens swiftly, especially with some of the city's more complex issues, such as employee pensions.

Finance Director John Blattel has said the city likely will need to reduce the amount of benefits offered to employees. Next month, city administrators will launch internal meetings with workers to determine which benefits could be cut with the least hardship for employees.
Another long-term discussion centers on the Columbia Regional Airport. In his 2012 budget letter, Matthes suggested that, in fiscal year 2013, the airport should be moved from the Public Works Department, which would have been a precursor for the airport to become an independent airport authority that could draw tax revenue from Boone, Callaway and Cole counties. But there has been a lack of support for the idea in Callaway and Cole counties, Matthes said, so Public Works will continue to govern the airport for the time being.

The airport’s sole destination is now Delta’s international hub in Memphis, but starting June 7, the airport will offer midday flights to Atlanta. The city will continue to work to make more destination cities available to travelers departing from the airport, possibly through offering a revenue guarantee to an airline, Matthes has said.

Communications is another area Matthes has flagged for improvement. He launched a process to get input from residents on what the city should prioritize when making budget decisions. An online survey is available at www.gocolumbiamo.com and at City Hall.

Matthes also said he would like to see improved communication between the city’s various departments and has begun to hold “cabinet” meetings with all of the city’s department heads. Staffers have told Matthes that before his tenure, it was rare to get all department directors at the same table to talk about anything other than the upcoming council agenda.

And the increased contact has already paid off, he said.

When Public Works was expecting this past winter to deal with as much snowfall as the previous winter, Glascock said during a meeting of department heads that he would need more snowplow drivers to clear streets. In response, other department heads began offering up employees who have CDL licenses who could help out if the city saw a repeat of the record snowfall experienced in winter 2010-2011. Although it ultimately wasn’t necessary, Matthes said it shows how collaboration can solve problems.

"If we can focus all of our resources on that one thing," he said, "we can move that mountain."