Editorial: Why do other SEC states care more about students than Missouri?

Here’s a question for Missouri lawmakers to ponder until their next legislative session begins in January:

Why should high school students in Georgia and Tennessee have more HOPE that they will be able to attend a state college than students right here in the Show-Me State?

Those two Southern states, new Southeastern Conference (SEC) rivals for the Tigers in all things athletic, have something Missouri doesn’t have: an in-state scholarship program (called HOPE) offering up to $6,000 for students with good grades who want to go to a state university.

In fact, eight of the 13 other SEC schools have significantly more generous scholarship programs for their states’ residents than does Missouri. The Tigers appear to bring up the league-wide rear in that department.

The revelation came in a story by the Columbia Tribune’s Ross Dellenger last Sunday examining why the Tigers might struggle to compete against SEC brethren in the nonrevenue sports like golf, wrestling, track, baseball and softball. The reason is that legislatures in most of the states that make up the SEC have made it a priority to help students obtain a higher education.

Such scholarships help coaches cobble together aid to attract athletes in the nonrevenue sports. But the story has implications far beyond sports.

As state Rep. Chris Kelly, D-Columbia, told Mr. Dellenger, the disparity is “another indication of the state of Missouri’s unwillingness to meet its obligation to fund higher education.”

Missouri’s two main academic-based scholarship programs for higher education are Bright Flight and the A+ program. Both are good, but both are also significantly limited and underfunded. Bright Flight gives about $2,000 to the top 3 percent of Missouri students who also have qualifying ACT scores. The A+ program provides a full two years of tuition to a community college for students who complete the program. They must keep their grades up and perform public service in high school.

The programs don’t measure up financially to those available in Georgia, Tennessee, South Carolina, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi (home to two SEC programs) and Florida.

Yes, those states are sports rivals. But they’re also economic rivals; when companies look for educated in the future, they’ll have a leg up on Missouri.

But that’s not the only place where Missouri falls short. No matter how you define support for higher education, Missouri’s is among the lowest in the nation, according to the State Higher Education Officers Association yearly reports.
Missouri’s per capita funding (the amount of taxpayer support based on population), is $190 per person, lower than all but Colorado, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Vermont, Pennsylvania and New Hampshire.

If you adjust for personal income, taking into account the low Midwestern cost of living, Missouri does even worse, ranking better than only five states.

As a percentage of its state budget, Missouri is spending less on higher education than it did a decade ago.

What this means is that students and their parents must bear more of the cost of a college education. It also means that other states are targeting Missouri students, and not just athletes. That’s hurting efforts to keep the best and brightest at home.

When student loan interest rates doubled this week because of congressional inaction, it was students in states that aren’t funding higher education who got hit the worst.

That means Missouri students are struggling today more than they already were, and they are doing proportionately worse than their colleagues in other SEC states.

The sports context is an appropriate one to discuss higher education funding. If you’ve ever been in the Missouri Capitol on a day when coaches or athletes from the University of Missouri visit, you know that lawmakers fawn over them like a free meal from a lobbyist.

You want bipartisanship? Check the Missouri Ethics Commission records and see which lawmakers are accepting tickets to free Tigers’ basketball and football games, while simultaneously standing in the way of proper funding for the schools.

For years, Missouri has been near the bottom of the barrel in terms of funding higher education. Lawmakers have made no serious attempts to fix the problem. This applies to all state college and universities, but maybe explaining it in terms of Mizzou athletics will help lawmakers understand.

The schools of the SEC are all showing a greater commitment to in-state students than Missouri is. The Tigers are in the SEC cellar.

Is that where the Missouri Legislature wants them to be?
Mizzou travel expenses among tops in SEC

The University of Missouri's first year as the SEC's northernmost outpost cost the school an extra $1 million in unanticipated travel expenses.

The Columbia Daily Tribune (bit.ly/14KaFPO) reported this week that Mizzou spent $7.1 million on travel in the 2012-13 academic year. That's $1 million more than what athletics officials expected and nearly $2 million more than travel costs during the school's final season in the Big 12 Conference.

Missouri shared the top spot for Southeastern Conference travel costs with fellow Big 12 exile Texas A&M among the seven SEC public schools that provided data to the Tribune. Four of the other six public universities in the conference said they had not yet compiled year-end spending reports, and two did not reply. Vanderbilt, the league's only private school, is not legally obligated to disclose its finances.

Missouri coaches and administrators knew that conference travel would be a challenge. Commercial air travel to most of the SEC campuses is limited, and the move from the Big 12 eliminated games at three schools within driving distance: Kansas, Kansas State and Iowa State.

Women's soccer coach Bryan Blitz said his squad was at a competitive disadvantage with its frequent, long-haul road trips. One of the worst: a 1,900-mile round-trip jaunt to Gainesville, Fla., and Tuscaloosa, Ala., that involved six bus rides, five flights and 11 stops in seven cities.

"I think we have to do some things moving forward to be able to compete for SEC championships, and travel is a part of that," he said. "I'm never going to question the SEC move. It was a no-brainer. But like everybody knew, there's a learning curve and adjustment."

Missouri's travel expenses were nearly twice as high as some conference members, the Tribune reported: Ole Miss spent $3.8 million and Georgia $4 million in 2012-13.

"We didn't do anything extravagant traveling last year at all, and we never have," said Doug Gillin, Missouri's deputy athletic director. "It's always going to be a high expense line item."

Even with the extra travel costs, Missouri still comes out ahead financially with the SEC move, receiving a $20.7 million from the SEC in league revenue this year. That figure is only expected to grow with the launch of the SEC Network, a joint venture with ESPN.

Missouri softball coach Ehren Earleywine called his team's travel requirements "brutal." Unlike the school's football and basketball teams, which fly charter, non-revenue sports such as softball, baseball are at the mercy of commercial air travel.

"It just wears on you," Earleywine said.
The average distance between Missouri and an SEC school is 518 miles, nearly 100 miles more than the average distance between the school and members of the 2011-12 Big 12.

The lack of big-city airports in the SEC hits Missouri in both directions. Columbia Regional Airport has just one commercial carrier, American Airlines, with nonstop flights to two cities outside the SEC's footprint: Chicago and Dallas. That typically means a bus ride to Kansas City or St. Louis, with another long bus ride once those teams touched down in Atlanta; Birmingham, Ala.; Memphis, Tenn.; or Jacksonville, Fla.

Among the longest Mizzou trips: 10-hour bus rides to Tennessee and to Hoover, Ala., for the baseball team, and a ride of nearly eight hours for a softball road trip to Ole Miss.

Former Missouri softball player Nicole Hudson, a recent graduate, said her teammates' travel struggles were magnified on return trips from weekend series that often brought the team back to Columbia after 11 p.m. on Sunday nights.

"Those are the rough ones," she said. "The girls have to turn around and get ready for the next week. It's exhausting. The added stress of school and the busy schedule can kind of affect you."

Gillin said Missouri is considering whether to use charter flights for non-revenue teams once or twice annually on particularly long road trips. That would also minimize lost classroom time, he said.

"We're taking a hard look at how much class time our kids are missing because of travel," he said. "Some of the SEC teams, what we've found, various times throughout the year they'll charter. We didn't do a lot of that this year. That'll be something that we'll look at, to charter a couple of our teams maybe once depending on how far away is it, how much class time will they miss."
Missouri revenue up 10 percent as state's 2013 fiscal year ends

By CHRIS BLANK/The Associated Press
July 3, 2013 | 7:22 p.m. CDT

JEFFERSON CITY — Missouri wrapped up its 2013 fiscal year with additional revenues, but that alone does not appear enough to thaw several hundred million dollars frozen in the current year’s budget.

On Wednesday, the state reported nearly $8.1 billion in general revenues during the 2013 fiscal year that ended Sunday. That was 10.1 percent higher compared with the 2012 budget year and greater than the 4.8 percent growth rate upon which the budget had been based.

Linda Luebbering, who is the budget director for Gov. Jay Nixon, said the cash balance is expected to be about $447 million. That is $339 million more than was expected but would be roughly half the balance in a normal year, she said. Missouri’s individual income tax collections during 2013 increased 9 percent compared with 2012, while corporate income taxes were up 4.5 percent. Collections from sales taxes increased by 1.3 percent. Tax refunds declined 7.8 percent.

The budget news does not appear to affect the spending Nixon put on hold last week when he signed a nearly $25 billion operating budget for 2014. Nixon froze $400 million of spending for education, building repairs and state services because of concern that state legislators could override his veto of an income tax measure that he argues would drain state coffers.

Nixon vetoed the income tax cut approved by the Republican-led Legislature that would have phased in a tax deduction for business income over the next five years. It also would have gradually reduced the income tax rate for individuals and corporations over the next decade. Luebbering said Wednesday the growth in Missouri’s revenues was considered before the budget action and that the income tax cut was the impetus.

"Until we have resolution on that, the restrictions will stay in place," she said.
Nixon vetoes rule change on foreign ownership of Missouri farmland

Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon has vetoed two bills that would have allowed limited foreign ownership of farmland in the state. The move could complicate a Chinese company’s purchase of a major pork producer with ties to Kansas City.

Other Nixon actions

• Vetoed a proposed online database that businesses could use to check a prospective employee’s workers’ compensation claims. The governor said such a database is “an affront to the privacy of our citizens.”

• Vetoed two bills that could have made it harder for some people to receive jobless benefits by broadening what constitutes “misconduct” on the job. Unemployment benefits can be denied to workers who are fired because of misconduct.

Missouri’s existing laws generally prohibit foreign businesses from owning or having an interest in agricultural land. The two measures vetoed Tuesday would have allowed foreign ownership of up to 1 percent.

Nixon said the decision of whether and how much foreign ownership of farmland Missouri should permit needed more study by the General Assembly.

While vetoing those measures, Nixon signed an agriculture bill with provisions on several topics, including farm loans, University of Missouri extension districts and urban agriculture zones.

Weeks before a Chinese conglomerate agreed to buy Smithfield Foods Inc. in the largest such takeover of a U.S. business, Missouri lawmakers quietly approved legislation removing a ban on foreign ownership of agricultural land.

Rep. Casey Guernsey, a northern Missouri legislator, added amendments to two larger bills and helped push the plan that Nixon vetoed this week.

Shuanghui International Holdings Ltd. announced its plans to buy Smithfield Foods on May 29 in a deal that still requires shareholder approval and a federal regulatory review by the U.S. Committee on Foreign Investment.

The deal’s expected value is $7.1 billion, including debt. Smithfield owns Kansas City-based Farmland Foods.
Missouri is one of several Midwest states with little-known laws passed in the 1970s amid concerns over Japanese investment that prohibit or restrict foreign farmland ownership. Smithfield Foods has said the companies recognized the foreign ownership rules in drawing up the sale and did not see them as a barrier.
"What is inside fireworks, and what causes them to explode?"

By TABITHA FINCH and DEANNA LANKFORD of MU's Office of Science Outreach

Wednesday, July 3, 2013 at 2:00 pm

Question submitted by Allie Pennington and GK12 Fellow Jessica Merricks' fifth-grade class at Blue Ridge Elementary School.

When the Chinese invented gunpowder in the ninth century, modern fireworks were born. Chemist Steven Keller, an associate professor at the University of Missouri, explains the main chemistry behind fireworks is a combustion reaction: "A combustion reaction combines a fuel and oxygen to make gaseous products, and releases heat." The reaction does not happen spontaneously, so a fuse connected to the firework is lighted in order to provide the energy needed to start the reaction. Then nitrogen and carbon dioxide gases from the gunpowder buildup inside the firework and produce the propulsion that sends the firework airborne. Keller says the gas produced from this chemical reaction is what leads to the first explosion, and "once the firework gets in the air, it explodes again." When the second fuse in the firework sets off another charge of gunpowder, another explosion occurs, which is the colorful display we see in the sky.

How are different colors produced? Keller notes, "White sparks are produced when metal powders get hot from the burning gunpowder. The other colors come from chemical compounds that have different metals in them." For example, copper sulfate creates a blue firework. When the metal powders get hot from the burning gunpowder, they glow. The same chemical principle applies to glow sticks, and, in nature, a chemical reaction occurs inside fireflies to make them light up.

Safety is important to keep in mind when using fireworks. Keller reminds us not to light fireworks in an enclosed space, such as your hand, because the buildup of gas from the chemical reaction can cause an unintended explosion.