Higher-Education Lobbyists Keep Expectations Low for State Budgets

By Eric Kelderman

As higher-education advocates prepare for state legislative sessions across the country, a new reality has set in about what they can expect from state budgets.

"The new 'good budget' is the no-reduction budget," says Daniel C. Holsenbeck, vice president for university relations at the University of Central Florida. "I think we're looking at a good budget."

Even as state tax revenues creep back into the black, lobbyists for public colleges are not expecting lawmakers to increase appropriations substantially, or at all, for the next fiscal year. In most cases, a flat budget might look good compared with recent years. Florida lawmakers, for instance, cut state appropriations for higher education by nearly 25 percent from 2008 to 2013, according to figures from an annual survey by researchers at Illinois State University.

Colleges that do hope to see larger appropriations are increasingly having to prove to lawmakers that they deserve them. Accountability has become the watchword of legislators who are interested in tying performance standards, such as completion rates, to state dollars.

Lawmakers are putting strings not only on the money they give to colleges but also on the dollars that colleges collect from students. With threats or actual measures to limit tuition, money from students is no longer a simple way for colleges to bolster revenues. Legislators are paying critical attention even to how colleges spend or save the money they do take in, whether it's kept in cash reserves or used for financial aid for low-income students.

"It's an election year, and I think a lot of our elected officials are sensitive to things constituents are concerned about, especially student debt," says Rochelle A. Black, vice president for government and community relations at Oakland University, in Michigan.

To try to preserve their relevance in statehouses, colleges emphasize that they are central to the state economy by attracting or retaining businesses that require well-educated workers and by enabling those employees to earn more money than if they had only high-school degrees.

"All they want to talk about right now is getting the economy going," says Dawn S. Wallace, director of state- and local-government relations at the Maricopa Community Colleges. "What they want to hear is, How does my organization help the state bring more high-wage jobs to Arizona or cultivate them from within?"
Slow Growth

The picture has brightened a bit for higher education since the recession, with some restoration of the cuts that were made during the depths of the economic downturn. For the current fiscal year, about three-quarters of states increased spending on higher education, by an average of more than 3 percent, according to an informal survey by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. In a few states, such as California, Colorado, and Massachusetts, elected officials and voters have made above-average increases in higher-education spending.

In general, however, spending on higher education remains lower than in 2008, and the lukewarm expectations for the next budget cycle reflect overall concerns about the nation's economy. States are continuing to see increased tax revenues, with only four—Alaska, Indiana, Tennessee, and West Virginia—anticipating budget gaps for the current fiscal year, according to a fall report by the National Conference of State Legislatures.

A tone of caution remains about the slow pace of economic growth. "Although budget gaps are rare and policy makers may have some added flexibility to deal with spending overruns or other unexpected developments, there appears to be little room for major new policy initiatives," the report warns.

As usual, higher education will compete for attention and money against high-profile needs like elementary and secondary education and health care, as well as such other legislative concerns as state pension liabilities. Medicaid accounts for nearly a quarter of state budgets, and elementary and secondary education for 20 percent, according to the National Association of State Budget Officers. Higher education, by comparison, accounts for about 10 percent of state budgets.

Performance Counts

What nearly all public colleges can expect during the coming legislative session is higher expectations for how they use the state money they receive. Those expectations are being expressed through legislation that sets performance benchmarks for some or all appropriations to higher education. About 20 states have put such measures in place in recent years, says the state-colleges association, and more are certain to follow.

Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Mexico, and North Dakota are among the latest states to enact financial incentives for public colleges to increase completion rates for courses and degrees, says the group.

In the coming year, Texas community colleges will be working with the state's higher-education coordinating board to set new rules for performance standards, such as how many students complete 15 or 30 credits or receive some sort of credential, says Justin H. Lonon, vice chancellor for public and governmental affairs at the Dallas County Community College District.

Colleges have not resisted such plans, but they are wary because legislators don't always understand the varying missions of different kinds of colleges, says Nick Kallieris, director of resource development and legislative affairs at the College of Lake County, in Illinois.

"Legislators might lump all of us together as 'higher education,'" he says, but community colleges serve a much different population, and students are not always interested in earning associate degrees.
Legislators are also putting the brakes on tuition increases at public colleges over concerns about affordability and student debt. More than a dozen states froze tuition or capped tuition increases during the 2013 legislative sessions, sometimes in exchange for modest increases in appropriations.

Colleges can expect more of the same in 2014. "Governors have already made controlling tuition hikes a priority," says a policy brief from the state-colleges association that cites Colorado, Florida, South Dakota, and Tennessee as states where lawmakers are considering such measures.

What has been a bigger problem for higher education is legislators' interest in how colleges are using their tuition revenues. Issues of affordability and student debt have pushed lawmakers to take a close look at the financial practices of institutions with which they may have little experience.

"They often don't appreciate the complexity and diversity of our institutions," says David F. Giroux, executive director of communications and external relations for the University of Wisconsin system.

Beyond undergraduate education, the system supports statewide extension services and federally funded research, he notes. "There are so many pieces that contribute to the state that lawmakers might not have encountered as college students."

The Wisconsin system has been under scrutiny precisely because legislators didn't realize that a multibillion-dollar enterprise would keep cash reserves on hand like any other business. Lawmakers responded to a report on those reserves—which the major bond-ratings agencies generally regard positively—by freezing tuition and requiring the system's universities to spend down their reserves. Those measures will result in an estimated $62-million budget shortfall if they are not reversed, Mr. Giroux says.

In the coming legislative session, he says, the Wisconsin system will work to develop standards, which will have to be approved by lawmakers, for financial and academic reports. System officials are concerned, however, that such reports may not reflect the complexity and contributions of the state's universities.

"We hear the word 'dashboard,' but there's a big difference between the dashboard of a Volkswagen Beetle and a Boeing 777," Mr. Giroux says. "Our institution is probably more similar to a Boeing."
The leadership of the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities on Thursday denounced the recent votes by some scholarly groups to support a boycott of Israeli academic institutions, becoming the latest prominent higher-education organization to criticize the movement.

In a written statement, the association’s executive committee and its president said that the boycott “wrongly limits the ability of American and Israeli academic institutions and their faculty members to exchange ideas and collaborate on critical projects that advance humanity, develop new technologies, and improve health and well-being across the globe.”

Scholars “certainly have the right to express their views,” the statement continued, “but the call for a boycott in this case is severely misguided and wrongheaded. We urge others to express their opposition as well.”

The American Council on Education, the Association of American Universities, and the American Association of University Professors have also opposed the boycott movement, which has faced criticism from many college leaders who believe that it limits academic freedom.
Flu cases in Boone County double; H1N1 prevalent

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BY FRED BROSCHART

No MU Mention

COLUMBIA — The flu, including the more virulent H1N1 strain, took some of the joy out of the holiday for some people in Boone County over the last two weeks.

And it's just getting started.

Comparing the periods of Dec. 15-21 and Dec. 22-28, the number of reported flu cases in the county almost doubled, said Andrea Waner of Columbia/Boone County Public Health and Human Services.

Some of the illnesses were caused by what epidemiologists call the 2009 H1N1 virus. "Of the type A cases that have been sub-typed, they're predominantly the H1N1 virus," Waner said.

Missouri is one of four states in the U.S. that was characterized by the CDC as having a "high-activity level" for flu during the third week of December. From Sept. 29 to Dec. 28, the number of confirmed influenza cases in the county was 89, Waner said. Thirty-one of those cases were reported in the final week of December alone, up from 17 cases the previous week.

Across the state, flu cases are also up. The number of cases almost doubled from 708 in the third week of December to 1,306 cases in the fourth week, according to weekly reports issued by the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services. Statewide, the proportion of emergency room visits attributed to flu-like symptoms was 2.9 percent in the second week of December, 5.33 percent in the third week and 7.18 percent in the fourth week, according to the reports.
In the last week of the year, the Department of Health and Senior Services reported 77 deaths in Missouri that involved pneumonia and influenza.

In Boone County, there were two confirmed deaths of individuals in the 29-49 age group who had the flu, Waner said. She cautioned, however, the department has not determined for certain that flu caused their deaths.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, nearly 4,400 cases of H1N1 have been confirmed in the U.S. since Sept. 29, when the 2013-2014 flu season officially began. During the third week of December, 56.8 percent of respiratory specimens tested contained H1N1.

H1N1 is most lethal for middle-aged adults, unlike the seasonal flu that is most dangerous for young children and the elderly, according to the CDC.

"In Boone County, we're mirroring what is going on nationwide," Waner said.

As students begin to return to schools and colleges in the next few weeks — living in dorms and studying in close quarters — flu projections become even more difficult to make.

"The flu season is predictably unpredictable," Waner said. "You can only hope that people take the precautions to limit the spread of the virus."

Getting a flu shot is the best precaution, she said, and flu shots are still available at clinics around the county. All flu vaccinations after 2009 immunize patients against H1N1, Waner said.

It takes up to two weeks for the vaccine to offer its best protection.
Bill McClellan: Bowl games are sign of the times

For many, many years, people have watched football games on New Year’s Day. In fact, that’s when the bowl games were played — the Rose Bowl, the Cotton Bowl, the Orange Bowl and the Sugar Bowl. Because they were played on the same day, they tended to overlap. The games started in the late morning and continued until the early evening.

This was long before the Pinstripe Bowl, the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl, the Beef O’Brady’s Bowl, the Russell Athletic Bowl, the Go Daddy Bowl, the Fight Hunger Bowl and so on. Four bowls was all you had, and they all were played on New Year’s Day.

It was a day to watch football.

Emailer Luanne remembers those times. So when her husband announced Wednesday morning that he was going to spend the day watching football, she was fine with it.

Of course, times have changed. Of the four original bowls, only the Rose Bowl was played Wednesday. It shared New Year’s Day with the Gator Bowl, the Heart of Dallas Bowl, the Capital One Bowl, the Outback Bowl and the Fiesta Bowl.

Traditionalists might roll their eyes, but that is still a lot of football.

Sadly, though, Luanne’s husband was out of luck.

The Gator Bowl was on ESPN2. The Outback Bowl, the Rose Bowl and the Fiesta Bowl were on ESPN. The Heart of Dallas Bowl was on ESPNU. Only the Capital One Bowl was on a noncable channel.

Luanne and her husband are retired. They are frugal. They don’t have cable. So much for a New Year’s Day tradition.

I heard about this and was reminded of the calls I got during the baseball playoffs. They were on cable, too. I remember in particular a call from a woman in a nursing home. She talked about the days when anybody with a television could watch the World Series.

That is sort of true. In those days, the World Series games were played during the day. If you worked, you were out of luck.
Obviously, all of this has to do with maximizing profits. Games are televised on cable stations because cable stations outbid the networks. World Series games (and many bowl games) are played at night because prime time is when the ads are most expensive.

The Cubs of my youth played all their home games during the day, and all of them were televised. (Cable was not an issue because there was no such thing.) But certainly prime time was more expensive than afternoon time even then. What were the owners thinking? Didn’t they want to squeeze every possible dollar out of the team?

Apparently not. Owners even scheduled doubleheaders on Sundays and holidays. Two games for the price of one.

It is probably heresy to suggest this, but maybe we weren’t as interested then. From 1950 through 1959, the Cardinals’ highest average attendance was in 1957 when the team drew 15,371 per game. The lowest average attendance this decade was in 2003 when the team drew 35,930 per game. This past season, the team averaged more than 41,000 per game.

Still, I get the sense that owners weren’t trying to squeeze every possible dollar out of their teams.

Of course, the business of sports has changed. Players used to have to work offseason jobs to make ends meet. There was no such thing as free agency.

It’s not just in sports that people have decided to maximize profits. I got a call from a woman a couple of weeks ago who noticed that one of her tires was flat. She sounded like an older woman, perhaps even old enough to remember the days before self-service gas stations. In those days, an attendant would come out to the car and in addition to pumping gas — “Give us a buck’s worth!” — would ask if you wanted your battery or tires checked.

At any rate, she said she went to a gas station and told the attendant — whose main job is acting as cashier for sales of candy and cigarettes — that her tire was low. He directed her to the air pump.

“The air costs money,” she told me. She sounded surprised.

Actually, this is a relatively new development. Even now, at certain gas stations, air is free. But those stations are almost like fishing holes. A person does not want to give them away. If they get overrun, they will start charging. Or perhaps if an owner sees his station listed in the newspaper as giving away air, he will think, “What am I doing? Don’t I want to maximize my profits?”

Let me return for the moment to Luanne’s husband. I have good news for him. The University of Missouri is playing in the very traditional Cotton Bowl tonight — and the game is on network television. A throwback to the days when air was free.
J-turns, like roundabouts, are not universally popular among motorists. Traffic engineers, however, insist they reduce serious accidents. And they have the data to prove it.

A number of J-turns replaced the traditional perpendicular, grade-level intersections on U.S. 63 between Jefferson City and Columbia since the fall of 2012. J-turns, like roundabouts, are designed to reduce the frequency of angle accidents (including T-bone collisions, which often are severe).

A recent MU study of five intersections where J-turns have been installed revealed no fatal accidents and a 50 percent reduction of injury accidents. The duration of the study varied between one and three years, depending on when the J-turns became operational.

And, to dispel the notion that J-turns only affect serious accidents, the study found J-turns reduced the number of all accidents by 35 percent.

“The numbers speak for themselves,” said David Silvester, Central District engineer for the Missouri Department of Transportation. “We know J-turns are not popular with some drivers, but they are the exact kind of safety solution we need to use in many instances. This report proves they reduce traffic deaths and injuries, and they will continue to be a tool we use to make our roads as safe as possible.”

Credit MoDOT and the university for not dismissing motorists’ concerns. In an effort to understand those concerns, the agency and university conducted an online survey to evaluate the J-turns on Route 63 at Deer Park Road near Columbia.
Although respondents conceded the J-turns did not increase travel time, they registered concerns about: merging difficulty after the U-turn, insufficient U-turn radius to accommodate large vehicles, general driver uncertainty and improper use of acceleration and deceleration lanes.

Those concerns are not surprising. J-turns, and roundabouts, are relatively new; consequently, motorists must adapt. As motorists become educated about and familiar with these changes, criticism, like serious accidents, should diminish.

Silvester acknowledged the importance of education when he said: “We will continue to promote the safety benefits derived from using J-turns and work to inform drivers on how to properly navigate them.”

J-turns represent another example of resistance to change, even when statistics show it is for the better.
LEWIS W. DIUGUID

Colorado marijuana could create headaches for neighboring states

January 2

A ton of college students from the University of Missouri-Columbia in the 1970s used to pile into whoever had the most roadworthy car and dash to Colorado mostly on weekends for as many cases of Coors as the vehicle could hold.

The legal drinking age in Colorado was 18 back then, which was a bonanza to beer-guzzling college students in Missouri who loved to boast that they were within the law to buy beer — at least in Colorado. Bringing it back to campus, not so much.

But that never stopped the frequent Colorado beer runs to keep the dorm and frat house refrigerators well stocked. Most of the time, authorities looked the other way.

But authorities in Missouri and Kansas need to be more concerned now about Colorado shops being open to legally sell marijuana for recreational use. That may require law enforcement officers to have different drug detection equipment.

Penalties for being caught with Colorado grass also may have to be re-evaluated. The liberalization of weed in Colorado will cause a lot of headaches for authorities in neighboring states.

Read more here: http://www.kansascity.com/2014/01/02/4725657/colorado-marijuana-could-create.html#storylink=cpy