Paying colleges for performance: Good policy or passing fad?

By Koran Addo kaddo@post-dispatch.com 314-340-8305 and Alex Stuckey astuckey@post-dispatch.com 573-556-6186

Just as parents sometimes resort to paying their children for good grades, a number of states are taking the same approach with their public colleges and universities.

Increasingly, they are offering extra tax money for showing improvement in key areas such as graduation rates and job placement.

**It’s called performance funding, and many of the state’s educators, from Harris-Stowe State University to the University of Missouri system, appear to be on board with the concept.**

But there’s a growing body of research that suggests that while cash-for-performance programs sound like smart education policies, they don’t necessarily deliver on the promise of improved results.

At best, national research says there’s a lack of definitive proof that performance funding leads to better academic outcomes. At worst, researchers say, it causes schools to “cook the books,” and manipulate their statistics to show growth.

Regardless, the idea has taken hold in Jefferson City. The Missouri Legislature overwhelmingly approved a performance funding bill this month and sent it to Gov. Jay Nixon’s desk where it sits awaiting his signature.

If the bill becomes law, Missouri’s public colleges and universities would compete each year for a share of money set aside by lawmakers.

Should the bill become law in time for the start of the 2014-15 fiscal year, state schools would jockey for a share of $43 million, which is on top of the roughly $800 million lawmakers have set aside for higher education funding.

Sen. David Pearce, R-Warrensburg, sponsored the bill. While acknowledging that it’s not perfect, Pearce said it was important to pass it. The Missouri Department of Higher Education already uses a performance funding concept, but Pearce’s bill would make it a part of state law.

He framed his bill as one step toward making colleges more accountable to the students they serve, and said more strict criteria, such as retention rates, could be considered next year.
“Honestly, if students show up and just get credit hours (but don’t continue), they’re wasting their time and their money,” he said.

‘PERVERSE INCENTIVES’

Despite some negative reviews from researchers, there is evidence that performance funding policies result in colleges taking an inward look at their performance.

Kevin Dougherty, an associate professor for higher education policy at Columbia University, said performance funding often results in schools devoting more resources to track student progress. In turn, those efforts sometimes lead schools to offer more services, including counseling and extra help, to struggling students.

On the other hand, Dougherty said, performance funding can also lead schools to manipulate admission standards and start turning away less-prepared students. It’s a tactic that schools use to weed out students who are less likely to graduate, and therefore, are less likely to count against the school’s performance scores.

Pressure to perform, researchers say, can also turn schools into so-called diploma mills where faculty are encouraged to assign passing grades to failing students.

Researcher Nick Hillman, has studied performance funding in different states. He said it’s a policy that produces what he calls “perverse incentives.”

In Washington, for instance, the goal for educators was to increase the number of degrees produced. Shortly after the policy took effect, researchers found that community colleges were steering students toward easier-to-complete certificate programs rather than traditional two-year associate degree programs.

“And those short-term certificates don’t yield any better financial impact to the student than a high school diploma,” said Hill, an assistant professor of educational leadership and policy analysis at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

A look at states like Pennsylvania and Tennessee also didn’t uncover any meaningful improvement in college performance, Hillman said.

“Does it produce more degrees? No. Does it improve retention or graduation rates? No. It’s not really working the way it was designed,” he said.

Performance funding has become a nationwide fad, Hillman added, possibly because lawmakers are typically skeptical of how colleges are run.

“Maybe some states just want to have more control over their colleges,” he said.

GROWING POPULARITY
The country’s first performance funding policy started in Tennessee in the late 1970s. The concept has seen a resurgence since around 2007. Now, half of all states either have a performance funding model in place or are considering it.

Unlike Missouri, Tennessee has adopted a much stricter policy in what academics are calling performance funding 2.0. Under Tennessee’s model, all of a school’s state funding is determined by performance. It means that colleges can be stripped of state funding for poor outcomes.

In contrast, Missouri and several other states tie performance to just a small fraction of total funding. Under that approach, academic institutions compete over any excess money a state earmarks for higher education, while base funding for schools is generally protected against reductions.

Russ Deaton, a finance executive with Tennessee’s Higher Education Commission, said performance funding has helped the nine four-year universities and 13 community colleges in his state define their respective roles.

In a bid to secure their share of state funding, Chattanooga Community College has emerged as a leader in workforce training and job placement, Deaton said.

Meanwhile, Austin Peay State University, a small liberal arts school in Clarksville, Tenn., has carved out a niche as one of the leaders in producing undergraduate degrees, Deaton said.

“Austin Peay has a pretty wide-open admissions process,” he said, noting that schools that are easy to get into aren’t necessarily the best at producing graduates. “They’ve just done a good job getting students to graduate. They just find ways to get it done.”

Conversely, Deaton said the University of Memphis has been hurt by Tennessee’s performance funding policy.

“Memphis has improved, just not as fast as other schools, and they’ve lost money because of it,” he said. “That’s a tough thing for some schools to take.”

Missouri’s new foray into performance funding comes with broad support from educational leaders.

Leroy Wade, an assistant commissioner with the state Department of Higher Education, said all the key players are on board, including the Legislature, two higher education task forces, his department and the state’s Coordinating Board for Higher Education.

Wade said he’s heard the concerns that performance funding can lead to schools becoming diploma mills. He said that hasn’t been a problem so far, and likely won’t become one going forward.

“We have provisions in place,” he said.

Performance funding, he said, is a concept that can’t be ignored. “We’re seeing these national trends and we’re trying to get ahead of it. It’s better to design something yourself than to have it imposed on you.”
Missouri College Advising Corps grows with grant funding

Program helps at-risk students.

**NO MU MENTION**

By Ashley Jost

Friday, May 23, 2014 at 2:00 pm

Missouri College Advising Corps, a group that embeds recent college graduates into Missouri schools to help at-risk students realize their college potential, is expanding its base in the coming academic year.

Although $500,000 of funding from the state didn't make it through the budget process this year, the organization is able to expand from 25 to 41 advisers with the help from a grant from AmeriCorps, Executive Director Beth Tankersley-Bankhead said.

The grant will cover part of the cost for each adviser, she said.

The grant was for $524,000, she said. Advisers receive a $32,000 package that includes their benefits, pay and a $5,645 education award that also comes from AmeriCorps. Including the education awards, the AmeriCorps funding covers $753,000.

The program's operating budget for the coming year is about $1.85 million.

In addition to the increased number of advisers, the organization is also expanding to 37 schools from 26. Four advisers will be placed in schools the program already covers but could use additional help with because of the school's size. The schools include Winnetonka and North Kansas City high schools in Kansas City and Ritenour and McCluer high schools in North St. Louis County.
Others sponsors had to match the AmeriCorps funding, Tankersley-Bankhead said. Those sponsors include people from corporations and communities. Many of the sponsorship arrangements are for multiple years.

Tankersley-Bankhead said the corps will try to secure funding for the coming years the same way she and other coordinators did this year: by continuing to lobby the General Assembly and applying for grants and reach out to corporations and organizations for additional funding.

"We will just have to work at it year after year after year," she said.

House Budget Committee Chairman Rick Stream, R-Kirkwood, said the fact that Missouri College Advising Corps didn't receive funding this year isn't an indication of what could happen for the following years. This session was the last one for now for Stream because of term limits.

"When I look at a program, I look for results, documentable results," Stream said. "We spend a lot of money in our budget, all taxpayer dollars, and try and spend it as wisely as possible. In this particular case, we felt that we didn't see results that warranted funding this year. That doesn't mean that next year Sen. "Schaefer and the next budget chair, whoever that may be, won't make a different decision."

This expansion announcement comes shortly after the corps announced the opening of the Kansas City Metro College Connections Center, or C3, in Kansas City. The center is a no-cost service for students transitioning from high school to college, trying to engage them the summer before their first year in college when students are most likely to change their minds, according to a news release from Missouri College Advising Corps.

At the new center, which is funded by the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation, students can meet with guidance counselors, financial aid officers from area institutions and representatives from colleges and universities that many Kansas City metro students attend. C3 will operate out of the Metropolitan Community College Penn Valley campus 30 hours each week from June 2 to the beginning of August.

SPRINGFIELD, Mo. (AP) — A Springfield businessman has worked to bring donated artwork valued at nearly $710,000 to several institutions.
Sam Hamra announced the donations of 60 paintings to the Springfield Art Museum and colleges and universities earlier this week, The Springfield News-Leader reported (http://sgfnow.co/1qVkiuz).

Several of the artworks will remain in the Springfield area, including six that are going to Drury University, five to Evangel University, and 14 to the Springfield Art Museum. The University of Missouri will receive seven paintings valued at $111,500. Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, will receive 10 paintings valued at $97,100, and Ohio Wesleyan University will receive seven paintings valued at $92,500.

The paintings include one valued at $35,000 by artist Robert Vickrey.

"I am hopeful that you will enjoy seeing the paintings which will enhance Springfield, Missouri," Hamra said. "The value of these paintings will increase dramatically over the years."

Hamra, an attorney, founded Hamra Enterprises, which owns and operates several restaurants and has real estate properties in Missouri, Texas, Illinois and Massachusetts. Hamra worked with Bill Meek of the Harmon-Meeke Gallery in Naples, Florida, on the donations. Hamra said the paintings previously belonged to the artists or their estates.

Mayor Bob Stephens thanked Hamra and his wife, June, for "bringing a little bit more art education to the city of Springfield."

The Wall Street Journal

Greek Life Shown to Be Linked to Real-Life Happiness

Survey Finds College Graduates Who Were in a Fraternity or Sorority Are Generally More Content

May 27, 2014 3:00 a.m. ET

If you always figured fraternity brothers had to pay a price in their careers for partying through college, here's a news flash: They probably don't.

A new survey finds college graduates who were members of a fraternity or sorority are generally happier than their peers who didn't pledge. Greeks have higher engagement in their jobs and a better sense of well-being. They are less stressed about money, have more supportive social lives and are physically healthier. They also are more likely to have connected with a professor during school and taken part in an internship—two key indicators for future professional accomplishment.
"I am not surprised by those results at all," said Brandon Ehrhardt, a 2009 graduate of Indiana University, where he was a member of Phi Gamma Delta and is now employed by United Airlines. "It seems to me that 90% of my fraternity brothers are extremely successful and happy with their lives."

The Gallup-Purdue index, a survey of 30,000 university graduates of all ages taken this spring, was designed to determine what happens during college that leads to happy, successful lives so that prospective students can better gauge the value of a school and schools can adjust their programs. The first-of-its-kind poll didn't measure earnings but looked at several subjective measures of life satisfaction at both home and at work.

Only 39% of all college graduates feel engaged at work—meaning they enjoyed what they did on a daily basis and are emotionally and intellectually connected to their jobs. And only 11% reported they were "thriving" in five different aspects of their lives, among which are financial stability, a strong social network and a sense of purpose.

It isn't a degree from one of the nation's most elite colleges that produces happier or more engaged graduates. Two of the largest indicators are gender—women tended to be more engaged at work then men—and student-debt load. Graduates who owe more than $20,000 were one-third as likely to report they were "thriving" in their personal lives as graduates without debt.

The connection to a fraternity and sorority comes as researchers drill down into the data. The portion of Greek graduates who described themselves as engaged at work was 43% compared with 38% for non-Greeks. And 37% of Greeks strongly agree that their institution prepared them for life after college, as compared with 27% of non-Greeks.

One possible explanation: Students who pledge fraternities aren't as saddled with student debt. Only 42% of Greeks took out loans to pay for their undergraduate education, compared with 49% of non-Greeks, according to the study.

Peter Smithhisler, president and CEO of the North-American Interfraternity Conference, which represents 74 fraternities, said research commissioned by the group in 1997, at the University of Missouri in Columbia, found that fraternity members have greater connection to their schools after graduation. But the positive correlations between Greek life and happiness were almost entirely anecdotal.

"I opened the study with a little bit of trepidation, but I was thrilled to see the results," said Mr. Smithhisler, who wasn't connected to the survey. That trepidation comes after considerable research linking fraternities to excess drinking and a slew of media reports this past year highlighting abuse in secret fraternity pledging. Mr. Smithhisler called that behavior antithetical to what fraternities stand for, adding that his group has created a series of committees to curb those behaviors.

"I do think we're at a point where a good look through the magnifying glass will benefit our future success," he said. "We have to create safe spaces for students and the more we can do that the better off the fraternity will be."
The number of active members in the nation’s fraternities climbed nearly 40% between 2005 and 2013, according to the North-American Interfraternity Conference.

Mr. Ehrhardt said he would change nothing. At his fraternity, he said he and his fraternity brothers played hard but also studied hard.

"Without question [being in a fraternity has] benefited me, whether it's been networking or just having a common link with a boss who was also in a fraternity," he said.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR: Federal regulations dampen prospects for business graduates
Monday, May 26, 2014 | 6:00 a.m. CDT
BY RUSH JAMES

As graduation season is in full swing nationwide, a whole new generation of educated and motivated young adults is trying to find its way into the work force.

Unfortunately, many are not finding the opportunities they wanted and expected upon completing their degrees.

As an MBA student in Columbia, I think that the lack of opportunity for both jobs and entrepreneurship stems from a much larger problem — an overly complex federal regulatory system and excessive regulations.

I wish employers means to hire freely, but the uncertainty created by today’s regulatory environment, has made many hesitant to do so.

With federal regulations coming out of each agency with no oversight as to how these regulations work in relation to each other, the regulatory system has grown in complexity and redundancies.

Small businesses find themselves in a constant state of uncertainty and spending valuable resources simply trying to understand the federal regulatory process. These resources would be better spent hiring new workers and finding other ways to expand.

My hope is that Missouri’s elected officials — Sen. Claire McCaskill and Sen. Roy Blunt — will prioritize modernizing rule-making, so that small business owners can get back to
Meningitis survivor lobbies for vaccine measure

Bill is on desk of the governor.

By Andrew Denney

Saturday, May 24, 2014 at 2:00 am Comments (1)

One day about 10 years ago, Andy Marso, who was a University of Kansas journalism student at the time, was covering a springtime softball game when he felt a sudden shiver, which, given the fact it was warm outside, struck him as odd.

The shivering intensified and became uncontrollable. He felt nausea and broke into a cold sweat. Marso thought he was coming down with a major case of the flu, but when he awoke the next morning, both of his feet were in pain and thousands of small purple spots covered his arms.

At the insistence of a friend, Marso sought medical attention and a spinal tap confirmed he had contracted meningitis. Soon thereafter, Marso began to suffer organ failure. He was flown to a level 1 trauma center in Kansas City and put into a medically-induced coma that lasted three weeks. "All of this was within 24 hours of that first shiver," Marso said.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are fewer than 1,000 cases of meningococcal disease reported in the United States annually, and 10 percent to 15 percent of the cases are fatal. Of the patients who survive, 11 percent to 19 percent lose extremities and suffer hearing loss or severe neurological effects.

After Marso came out of a coma, he had to have all of his fingers — except for one thumb and a portion of the other — and the front halves of his feet amputated. Doctors told him his tissue damage was equivalent to third-degree burns covering 30 percent of his body, and he endured painful treatments in a burn unit to have the skin removed. He spent 141 days in inpatient care.
"It's worse than everything that I had imagined a medical treatment could be," Marso said. But, he said, he felt a "sense of euphoria" that he was alive.

This past legislative session, Marso lobbied the Missouri General Assembly to pass legislation to require meningitis vaccinations for Missouri college students who live in on-campus housing at public institutions. Language to require the vaccination was rolled into an omnibus public health bill that passed and is currently awaiting Gov. Jay Nixon's signature.

Marso has also been calling on the FDA to allow the use of a vaccine for serogroup B meningitis, the type Marso had, in the U.S. The vaccine is available in Canada, and last month, the FDA granted its "breakthrough therapy" status to a vaccine for serogroup B.

Kristin Sohl, medical director at the University of Missouri Thompson Center for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders, said the most common time for someone to contract meningitis is in their college years, as they tend to live in close quarters with other people. High school students and residents of military barracks also are at increased risk of contracting the infection, she said.

Immunization is the best prevention method for the infection, Sohl said, because the disease spreads fast and its initial effects mimic non-lethal ailments.

"A lot of symptoms are very similar to your run-of-the-mill illnesses," Sohl said.

In the years since his recovery, Marso has gotten in touch with a "tightly-knit" community of meningitis survivors spread throughout the country. He now works as a state government reporter for the Topeka Capital-Journal, using what is left of his thumbs to crank out copy. Support from family and friends helped him cope with some of the darker points of his recovery, he said, as did writing. Last year, he published a book about his experiences: "Worth the Pain: How Meningitis Nearly Killed Me — Then Changed My Life for the Better."

"I think this gave me a story that was worth telling," Marso said. He added: "There's a lot of hope in it."