MU reverts to previous merit-based raise schedule

By Ashley Jost

Sunday, July 13, 2014 at 12:00 am

The University of Missouri is back to its normal schedule for merit-based raises after a break from the routine last school year. But some faculty have concerns about university leaders’ timing and communication.

Faculty who are chosen by department chairs, deans and upper-level administration for the merit-based raises will receive them starting Sept. 1, interim Provost Ken Dean said. Deans have to turn in their finalized recommendations by the end of July.

As part of the campus’ strategic plan — an effort organized on the campus level with approval from the UM System — merit-based raises were deemed a priority to maintain and attract highly-productive faculty.

MU requested money from the UM System for hiring, raises, infrastructure and student-retention programming in a routine annual process, Dean said, but system administrators have indicated MU will only get money for hiring, and only if the governor releases funding withheld from higher education.

Dean said that in response, MU Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin decided the campus was setting aside about $2 million for high-performing faculty raises.

The raises will actually be between $1.4 and $1.5 million, with the last third of the money going toward increased benefits costs for all of those employees, Dean said.

The school is reverting to awarding raises in September after the 2013-2014 school year in which selected faculty received midyear raises this spring. Dean said last year’s exception was caused by the modifications administrators had to make to the strategic plan, which calls for the merit-based raises. The amount budgeted for September raises is about $200,000 less than the spring raises given in March.

When faculty members are recommended from their department chairs or deans on up the ladder, their supervisors have to discuss their research productivity, among other characteristics that
positively affect the university’s ranking in the Association of American Universities, a prestigious organization that includes only 34 public universities. Much of MU’s strategic plan is based on improving the university’s rank in the AAU from No. 32 to No. 28 by 2018.

Faculty, while happy about the raises, have some reservations about the process.

“It’s important to stress that the faculty, in general, are pleased that these significant raises are going to productive people,” Faculty Council Chairman Craig Roberts said. “There’s no question about that. We like our star colleagues — we admire them.”

The timing and lack of communication about expectations are the issues, Roberts said.

The last two years of merit-based raises come after years of “negative raises,” which Roberts said defines the period of time the faculty continued to work without their incomes adjusted for increased cost of living and benefits.

“Then out comes this burst of money for a small group of people,” Roberts said. “There’s a line drawn where someone could be highly productive but might be missing one metric to put them over the edge. It’s basically an all-or-nothing raise after 10 years of none.”

Roberts pointed out that grants faculty have acquired are part of what their bosses are looking toward. Grants can take as many as three years to acquire, but this new system of defining productivity wasn’t provided to faculty with enough years to prepare for it, he said.

“Faculty think they’re doing the right thing here,” Roberts said. “They’re pushing for our AAU ranking and faculty are adjusting to AAU criteria in the right direction, it just takes a couple of years to get there. The direction is not the problem, the timing is.”

There’s a second change this year. After the UM System announced a cap on the percentage of salary that each department has to pay toward employee benefits, most of those departments have between 1 to 2 percent of their budgets in reserve for increased benefits cost that they no longer need. The System, and now the campus, suggest they put that money toward one-time, merit-based payments.

These merit-based, one-time awards would not impact the employee’s base pay or retirement. It could also go to faculty or staff, depending on what department chairs and other leaders decide. The final decision on who gets those merit-based awards will come from the person who directly reports to the chancellor over that particular area.
Mellon Comes to the Rescue of Missouri’s Moldy Books

July 11, 2014 by Jennifer Howard

This past January, Jim Cogswell, director of libraries at the University of Missouri at Columbia, got news no library administrator wants to hear: Mold had invaded a rented remote-storage facility that housed some 600,000 of the university’s books.

It wasn’t a happy time.

Then came an email from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation expressing sympathy and offering to help. “I practically shouted out loud,” Mr. Cogswell said. “It was the first time in so long that we’d had anything that approached good news.”

Mellon’s offer has now taken the form of a $400,000 grant that Missouri’s library will use to restore or replace the materials affected by the mold. The library announced the grant in a blog post this week.

Because of the grant, “we will be able to salvage the greater majority of those 600,000 books,” Mr. Cogswell said in an interview. “We thought we would have resources to do maybe half of them.” (Money from the library’s self-insurance fund will also subsidize the effort.)
The library has hired an outside contractor to decontaminate the books, which will be rehoused in “a clean, above-ground storage facility,” he said. Some books may be scanned and printed out, if necessary, but “it’s not as if we’re going to digitize all these volumes and then send them to landfills.”

But some other materials, especially federal- and state-government documents, may be impossible to salvage. That’s a particular worry because Missouri serves as a regional repository of federal documents, “so we are obliged to retain and make available public copies,” Mr. Cogswell said.

To deal with that problem, the Missouri library plans to use some of the Mellon money to support a partnership with two other institutions in the state, Washington University in St. Louis and Missouri State University. The idea is to better catalog the three institutions’ document collections and produce replacement copies of specific items, or get them to patrons through interlibrary loan.

“Everybody in the state wants to know who’s got these collections of documents,” Mr. Cogswell said.

That collaborative impulse helps explain Mellon’s interest in helping out. The foundation rarely provides financial assistance for disaster relief, according to Donald J. Waters, the program officer who oversees its scholarly-communications program.

It stepped in this time because it wanted “to encourage the imaginative, collaborative approach that the University of Missouri took to create partnerships with other institutions, not just to ensure physical access to lost materials for UM faculty and students but also to use the opportunity to improve the cataloging of those materials,” Mr. Waters said by email. “This approach is in keeping with Mellon’s broader support for library efforts to build and improve a national ‘collective collection.’”

Ridding 600,000 books of mold is no small task. Getting three universities to work in sync won’t be a breeze either. “We are testing the extent of how we want to be collaborative and cooperative,” Mr. Cogswell said. “How much can we do, how do we gear up to do it, and what are your institutional priorities?”

Thanks to the grant, “we’re not asking somebody else to give up their time and treasure to help us out,” he said. “I hope it’s going to demonstrate that if the will is there, the funding may be there.”
A successful collective response to the mold outbreak could help other libraries. “We’ll learn about the efficacy of sharing collections” physically and digitally, Mr. Cogswell said. Mold or some other environmental disaster can strike anywhere. “There’ll be a fire, there’ll be an earthquake, there’ll be a flood,” he said. “There will be something like this that will result in catastrophic loss of one sort or another. That’s unavoidable, as I see it.”

Gov. Nixon signs meningitis vaccination bill for Mo. college students

By Andrew Denney

Saturday, July 12, 2014 at 12:00 am

Gov. Jay Nixon signed a bill Thursday to require students attending Missouri’s public colleges and universities and living in on-campus housing to get vaccinated against meningitis starting July 1, 2015, unless they have a medical or religious exemption.

There are fewer than 1,000 cases of meningococcal disease reported in the United States annually, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and as many as 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.

The language requiring vaccinations was contained in SB754, an omnibus health care bill. All of Columbia’s representatives in the Missouri House and Sen. Kurt Schaefer, R-Columbia, voted in support of the legislation.

Because college students tend to live in communal living situations, they are particularly susceptible to contracting meningitis, health officials said. High school students and military personnel are also at risk.

Kristin Sohl, medical director at the University of Missouri Thompson Center for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders, said the state has done an “outstanding job” in working to prevent the spread of meningitis and that more public awareness about the infection could lead to more people getting covered.

“I’m hoping that by having the statute in place that private institutions will follow suit,” Sohl said.
Andy Marso, who contracted meningitis about a decade ago when he was a student at the University of Kansas and who lobbied in Jefferson City for passage of the legislation said he found it “somewhat bittersweet” that Nixon signed the bill into law because it will not take effect until after the upcoming school year.

“Obviously, that’s a lot better than not having a law at all,” Marso said.

In his battle with meningitis, Marso, who now works as a state government reporter for the Topeka Capital-Journal, had to have all of his fingers and the front halves of his feet amputated. He still has one thumb and a portion of another, which he uses to peck away at the keyboard when he’s writing stories.

Marso detailed his experiences with the infection in his book “Worth the Pain: How Meningitis Nearly Killed Me — Then Changed My Life for the Better.” He said he is considering heading to other Midwestern state capitals including Nebraska and his native Minnesota to lobby for meningitis vaccine mandates.

“Our regulations up there are not quite where they should be,” Marso said.

Marso has also called on the FDA to allow the use of a vaccine for serogroup B meningitis, which Marso had contracted, in the United States. The vaccine is available in Canada and earlier this year the FDA granted its “breakthrough therapy” status to a vaccine for serogroup B.

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

UPDATE: Meningitis vaccine to be required at Missouri's public colleges

By Cameron Dodd
July 11, 2014 | 7:39 a.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — Beginning next summer, students living on all Missouri public university and college campuses will be legally required to be immunized against meningitis — a requirement already in place for the the University of Missouri System.

The mandate was a provision of Senate Bill 716, which Gov. Jay Nixon signed into law Thursday.
The new requirement will begin in July 2015 and apply for the 2015-16 academic year. Students are able to opt out for religious or health reasons.

State Sen. Gina Walsh sponsored the measure.

"My provision protects both students and, by extension, the general public from the spread of a deadly disease," Walsh said in a statement.

As with the new law, MU students have had the option to opt out for religious or health reasons.

"This is nothing new for the University of Missouri," said Scott Henderson, medical provider director at MU's Student Health Center.

Meningitis is a bacterial infection that causes the lining of the brain to swell. It spreads through the "exchange of respiratory and throat secretions," according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Meningitis' flu-like symptoms develop quickly and can be fatal. Ten percent to 15 percent of meningitis cases result in death, according to the National Meningitis Association. One in five survivors of the disease lives with permanent disability, such as brain damage.

Meningitis is rare. It is less contagious than the germs that cause the flu or the common cold, and fewer than 1,200 Americans contract meningitis every year.

Young adults ages 16 to 21, however, are at an especially high risk, according to the CDC. Communal living situations, such as college dormitories, increase the rate of spreading the disease. A meningitis outbreak at Princeton University in March 2013 spread to eight students, and a death at nearby Drexel University was traced back to the same strand.

In December 2013, four students at the University of California at Santa Barbara contracted meningitis within a three-week period. One student had both feet amputated as a result of the disease.
Missouri's statewide meningitis vaccination rate for ages 13-17 was 54.6 percent, according to the 2011 National Immunization Survey. The national average was 70 percent.

"This statute is among the most important steps to take in protecting college student from meningitis," said Kristin Sohl, a pediatrician at University Hospitals and Clinics. It's "very important for Missouri because we have so many opportunities for higher education."

Texas enacted a similar law, requiring the vaccine for incoming college students, in 2012. Thirteen other states require students to be educated about the risks of not being vaccinated.

The vaccines cost $130 each, said Sharon Rudder, a pharmacist at Gerbes.

Brent Butler, a governmental affairs officer at the Missouri Insurance Coalition, said the vaccines should be covered by most health insurance.

"I don't know why there would be anything unique that would exclude the vaccines from coverage," he said. "I imagine they're the same as tetanus shots."

The vaccine is already widely available and administered frequently to children, Sohl said. The risks associated with the vaccine are no different than any other immunization.

“I see it as opportunity to really protect young adults who are at risk for fatal disease,” Sohl said.

Mizzou keeps pace with SEC arms race

July 12, 2014 12:10 am  •  By Dave Matter dmatter@post-dispatch.com 314-340-8508

COLUMBIA, Mo. • The newly renovated east side of Memorial Stadium makes its debut in seven weeks when the University of Missouri’s football season kicks off Aug. 30 against South Dakota State. As of this week, construction crews were on target to have the project finished by kickoff.
“We’re on track to have substantial completion in early to mid-August,” said Bryan Maggard, MU’s executive associate athletics director. “There’s no question as a staff we’ll be working up until the day of the first game to get everything shined and ready and making sure everything’s operable. But we’ve been told we’re in good shape.”

 Finished a year ahead of MU’s initial plans, the facelift includes upper deck and club seating, new restrooms, concessions, lounge areas, elevators and a new secured tailgating area called Truman’s Terrace.

 Fans who haven’t been to Columbia since last season will barely recognize the stadium’s east side. The latest changes complement last year’s west side renovations and north concourse expansion — part of a $72 million project first hatched in 2012, shortly before Mizzou joined the never-ending facilities arms race in the Southeastern Conference.

 Stadium capacity this season will be back to its 2012 size, around 71,000, which ranks 10th in the SEC. (Capacity was down to 67,124 last year when MU removed temporary bleachers in the north end zone and north concourse.)

 The latest upgrade was MU’s biggest project in the 10-year, $200 million vision the school launched two years ago.

 “It’s changing the whole look and the skyline,” Maggard said. “I’m most excited to walk out of that visitor’s tunnel (on the southeast side) and see that upper deck full. It’s going to be a great sight to see.”

 With Memorial Stadium’s makeover close to completion, Missouri can soon shift focus toward its next major projects as athletics continues its cycle of spending and building to keep pace in the SEC. While MU’s athletics expenses and revenues still rank closer to the bottom of the conference — in 2012-13, among the 13 public SEC institutions, MU ranked 11th in athletics revenue ($76,306,889) and 12th in athletics expenses ($70,276,015), according to USA Today’s annual survey — the school continues to push for bigger and better facilities for its top programs.

 In June, the UM System Board of Curators approved a campus-wide master renovation plan that included a new softball stadium and a new indoor football practice facility.

 Mizzou athletics and campus leaders reviewed several sites for the softball stadium but settled on the current parking lot east of the Hearnes Center on Stadium Boulevard. That’s been coach Ehren Earleywine’s preferred location for years. His team has been MU’s most consistent winner the last several seasons, with six consecutive NCAA regional championships from 2008-13.

 “Coming in there on Stadium, we think it’s going to make for a very nice introduction to the sports park,” Maggard said.
One casualty of the new stadium will be the football game-day parking spots at the proposed site, though Maggard said MU will open new parking areas south of the stadium.

The indoor football facility will be built on the current outdoor practice field that sits behind the Mizzou Athletic Training Complex. Unlike the shortened indoor field in the 16-year-old Devine Pavilion, the new indoor building will house a 100-yard field.

“If you’re eastbound on Stadium coming from the west it’s going to be a big focal point,” Maggard said.

In the next few months, MU will put together a funding plan for both projects and identify architects to design the facilities, Maggard said. MU would like to have funding and design proposals finalized in time for the curators’ next scheduled meeting, set for Oct. 2 in Kansas City.

Once approved, MU can begin the bidding process for potential builders. Both projects will take several years before they’re complete, Maggard said.

Earlier this year, MU opened a new home facility for its women’s tennis team and a $4 million refurbished clubhouse and offices at Taylor Stadium, the home of MU baseball.

With more revenue expected to flow into MU coffers with next month’s launching of the SEC Network, other projects are on the horizon. The campus master plan included a practice gym addition to Mizzou Arena, a welcome center just east of Memorial Stadium and a human performance center south of the Devine Pavilion that would be partnered with the Missouri Orthopedic Institute.

The Devine Pavilion, where the football team practices indoors, could be converted into an indoor practice facility for the track and field team, Maggard said.

Down the road, Mizzou has discussed building an all-encompassing football complex just south of the stadium to house all offices, locker rooms and meeting rooms.

“That would be a big fundraising project in and of itself,” Maggard said.

As for the Hearnes Center, a relative antique compared with its younger neighbors, MU officials are unsure about its future. The building is home to MU volleyball, gymnastics and indoor track.

“That facility is now 42 years old,” athletics director Mike Alden said, “and certainly it’s been a great facility for us. But how long you can sustain that and maintain that and make sure that it’s a viable facility? I don’t know.”
MU students start social media weather service

By Ashley Jost

Saturday, July 12, 2014 at 12:00 am

A group of graduate students with interests in meteorology saw an opportunity and went for it, with the blessing of a professor.

Peter Speck, a University of Missouri graduate student, decided to create the MU Weather Service Twitter and Facebook page because of his love of forecasting the weather. Plus, there were limited opportunities for students to explore in extracurricular meteorology previously.

Undergraduate students in the atmospheric science program take a course near the beginning of their tenure that, at one point, required them to update a university-run meteorology website. A lack of interest from the general populace led to the site’s demise.

“So, we started a weather page to see what we could do with it,” Speck said about his social media accounts. “I have enjoyed it so much. It’s easier to get this information out on social media.”

Speck rolled out the MU Weather Service Facebook and Twitter accounts in March and has gained a steady stream of followers and onlookers since, including a few meteorologists who Speck said have shared their posts.

Speck is the site manager of each page, but he has help from several other students, including undergraduate, graduate and even a doctoral candidate. It’s summer, making a rotation more difficult as some of the contributors are away from Columbia, but Speck said the goal is to allow everyone a chance to forecast weather for their followers.

Tony Lupo, department chair and professor for atmospheric science, said the traffic on the program’s old forecasting website died off because of the dawn of social media. This extracurricular project from Speck and his peers picks up where the site left off.
“This is definitely something we have kind of adopted, at least informally,” Lupo said about the MU Weather Service. Lupo said that if the students pitched ideas for changes they would like to make, the department would consider helping to fund their efforts.

Speck and his friends would like to create a website for their work, or maybe even produce a video or live-streamed newscasts. They have even “joked about” how cool it would be to create and manage a smart phone app that Columbia residents could download. Speck said future plans depend on how much interest the social media pages accumulate.

The MU Weather Service is on Twitter at @MizzouWX and on Facebook as Mizzou Campus Weather Service.

Nixon signs $600 million bonding bill
July 11, 2014 12:45 pm • By Alex Stuckey astuckey@post-dispatch.com 573-556-6186

JEFFERSON CITY • The state now has $600 million of bond authorization available for maintenance and repair projects thanks to Gov. Jay Nixon's signature on a bill Wednesday.

But that doesn't mean projects will roll out immediately.

The bill, sponsored by Sen. Mike Parson, R-Bolivar, authorizes the Board of Public Buildings to issue bonds for repair and maintenance projects on state and public higher education facilities.

Now that the bonds are authorized, the state could take on a new deferred maintenance projects or funding could be released for bonding projects withheld by Nixon as part of his $1.1 billion worth of cuts to the current fiscal year's $26.4 billion budget, Nixon's Budget Director Linda Luebbering said.

Two of those bonding projects were for the Cortex Innovation Community, a collaboration of educational, research and health care institutions redeveloping an old industrial area as residences, stores and a research park.

The Legislature approved $11 million in bonds to build a MetroLink station between Duncan and Clayton avenues and $8 million of bonds for a new business incubator at Cortex. Nixon withheld the funding, which was part of a $220 million capital improvements bill.

Releasing the funding for those projects appears unlikely given the state's negative revenue growth during fiscal year 2014. The $8 billion of general revenue for the fiscal year that ended June 30 was 1 percent -- or $79.4 million -- lower than 2013.
This problem carried over into the fiscal year that began July 1. About $400 million of the $786 million in general revenue Nixon either withheld or vetoed is due to the revenue miscalculation. The rest of the cuts, Nixon says, are due to tax breaks awarded by the Legislature and the failure to expand Medicaid, among other things.

Even if funding was released, however, many of the bonding projects -- likely including those at Cortex -- in the capital improvements bill would not qualify because they are not deferred maintenance projects, a stipulation in the bonding bill.

The bill is SB 723.

July 14, 2014

States Give Slightly More Money to Higher Education, Raising Expectations

By Eric Kelderman

NO MU MENTION

A new dynamic is emerging in many statehouses, where policy makers are debating not only how much money to appropriate for higher education but also what colleges should do to get that money.

That discussion may be a welcome change for public colleges, after the deep cuts of the recent economic downturn. With most legislatures having finished their 2014 sessions, next year’s state budgets are expected to increase, over all, for a fifth consecutive year, according to a report from the National Association of State Budget Officers. The predicted increase, less than 3 percent over all, is below historical standards for state spending, the association said in its annual survey of state-budget conditions.
While final numbers have not been tallied, proposed cuts to higher education were confined to just a handful of states, including Illinois, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Washington, and West Virginia, according to the association. Enacted budgets, it said, were likely to largely follow the early recommendations.

Policy makers have largely embraced the idea that an increase in college graduates will fuel a better economy for their states. But any increases in state appropriations to colleges are likely to come with lots of strings attached, including the expectation that higher education will somehow buffer the state from the next recession.

**Less Cost**

One way that elected officials are trying to get more students into college is to make it more affordable.

Tennessee, for example, plans to pay community-college tuition for two years for all high-school graduates. The measure was championed by Governor William E. Haslam, a Republican, and is paid for with state-lottery reserves.

A similar measure failed in Mississippi, and Oregon’s legislature has approved a study of such a plan.

Community colleges in Colorado got a boost from a new law allowing them to offer four-year degrees in career and technical education. California policy makers are considering a pilot measure allowing some two-year colleges to grant baccalaureate degrees.

States are also trying to increase the job skills of nontraditional students, especially military veterans, said Dustin Weeden, a higher-education-policy analyst for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Laws granting in-state tuition for all U.S. military veterans passed in Florida and Maine this year. Nearly half of all states have approved such measures.
Lawmakers in Florida and New Jersey approved in-state tuition for some children of undocumented residents, while Virginia’s attorney general approved such a policy after it was rejected by the legislature. At least 21 states have now adopted such policies, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures

**Greater Expectations**

In several states, the discussion of college affordability has taken on the tone of a negotiation, with lawmakers agreeing to increase appropriations for higher education if public colleges agree to freeze tuition. Such deals were struck in nine states in 2013, said Daniel J. Hurley, director of state relations and policy analysis at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

In California, Governor Jerry Brown, a Democrat, has reached that deal with public universities for three consecutive years. In Iowa, legislators approved a similar deal for the second year.

South Dakota legislators made a similar arrangement this year with the state’s six public universities. The University of Texas system, under pressure from Governor Rick Perry, a Republican, agreed to hold tuition steady, even though the Legislature was not in session this year.

Another popular policy option involves setting performance benchmarks for higher-education appropriations. Colorado and Missouri this year joined a growing number of states that award a portion of state money on the basis of outcomes such as graduation rates, although the specific measures have yet to be approved in Missouri.

In the past, money for performance benchmarks was usually given as a bonus to public colleges, Mr. Weeden said. Now, however, legislators are applying the outcomes to base appropriations, even if the result is a smaller sum. "No matter if appropriations change from year to-ear," he said, "some portion of that money is tied to performance."
Veterans vs. Land Grants

July 14, 2014

By Michael Stratford

NO MENTION

As Congressional lawmakers seek to reconcile the differences between the House and Senate versions of Veterans Affairs Department reform legislation, one provision on the negotiating table has sparked a clash between veterans groups and public universities.

Part of the Senate-passed bill would, in effect, require public universities to offer in-state tuition to any veteran within three years after he or she comes off active duty. It would also extend that benefit to spouses and dependents.

Under the bill, states or institutions that don’t make those changes to their in-state tuition policies would be unable to continue to accept federal veterans educational benefits.

Veterans’ advocates say the provision is needed because of the transient nature of military deployments, veterans often have difficulty meeting the residency requirements that would qualify them to pay the in-state tuition – often a difference of tens of thousands of dollars. Several publicized cases of veterans being denied in-state tuition have prompted many states to change their policies.

But the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities say the changes will reduce federal funding to their institutions, which are already cash-strapped in the wake of state budget cuts over the past several years.
Under the Post-9/11 GI Bill Yellow Ribbon Program, colleges and universities can enter into an agreement with the VA to fund the gap between a veteran’s GI Bill benefits and the tuition and fees (in excess of the most expensive in-state public university tuition rate). Universities can fund up to 50 percent of that cost and receive a matching federal grant to cover the rest.

By awarding in-state tuition to veterans, public universities would essentially be picking up the tab for those veterans’ education without any matching federal money.

“We are deeply concerned that the in-state provision for veterans and their spouses and dependents would precipitate the loss of yellow-ribbon educational benefits, even though private nonprofit and for-profit higher education institutions would still retain the yellow-ribbon benefits,” the APLU said in a letter last month to lawmakers negotiating the legislation. The reduction of the yellow ribbon program benefits for public universities would add further financial strain to these institutions. Additionally, as more veterans take advantage of this in-state tuition provision, costs to public universities will further increase.”

The group called for an increase in federal yellow ribbon funding to make up for those expected losses for its institutions.

Veterans groups, however, were riled by the APLU’s opposition to the Senate-passed in-state tuition benefit.

Steve L. Gonzales, assistant director of the American Legion, said that veterans enlist in the military on behalf of the entire country – and their educational benefits on the back end should be equitable across state lines.

He said that the APLU’s emphasis on the cost its members will incur from providing in-state tuition to veterans was misplaced.

“We are being looked upon as a revenue stream with cutting costs of education,” he said. “That is no different from what some bad actors in the for-profit sector have done.”
Ryan M. Gallucci, deputy director of the National Legislative Service at the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, made a similar comparison.

“Whether your motives are to turn a profit or to balance a state budget, if you’re looking at college-bound veterans only as a source of revenue then you’re looking at this the wrong way,” he said.

Jeff Lieberson, spokesman for the APLU said that the group’s institutions are “very supportive of veterans and we believe that veterans enrich our campuses.” But, he said, institutions are grappling with very real declines in state resources and feel that a decline in federal funding that only affects public universities is unfair.

If lawmakers move ahead with an in-state tuition provision, the APLU said, they should limit the benefit to veterans (not their spouses and dependents) and provide states more time to comply with the new rule, as a separate House-passed bill called for last year.

The APLU also says it has a philosophical objection to the federal government setting in-state tuition policies. States and university systems should be able to set their own in-state tuition policies free of federal interference, it says.

“We believe that individual states should retain their autonomy to determine in-state residency status and the allocation of states’ resources,” the group said. “We urge Congress to take that into consideration as they proceed with this legislation.”

Over the past five years, veterans' groups have convinced some 30 state legislatures or university systems to make it easier for veterans to qualify for in-state tuition. (Active-duty service members, under the Higher Education Act, are entitled to receive in-state tuition wherever they are stationed.)

Gallucci, of the VFW, said that Congress is correct to address in-state tuition for veterans as a national problem.

“When you’re in the military, you’re at the whim of the federal government, but when you come out you’re left back at the whim of a patchwork of state policies,” he said. “To see a concerted effort to dial that back or water down these protections
for veterans in the name of revenue generation is really concerning."

The bills are Capitol Hill’s response to the controversy that erupted earlier this year in the wake of reports that veterans died while waiting for appointments at Veterans Affairs hospitals and clinics. The ensuing public outrage led to the resignation in May of VA Secretary Eric Shinseki.

The bills are one of a few pieces of legislation that actually stand a chance of passing a largely gridlocked Congress during this election year. The biggest sticking point so far during the negotiations over the legislation has been the cost of the health care provisions.

Corn prices fall near levels that would trigger subsidies

July 11, 2014 1:00 pm • By ALAN BJERGA Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON • The U.S. government increased its forecast on Friday for a surplus of corn, raising the prospect that prices will tumble to levels that would trigger subsidy payments to farmers.
Corn supplies in 2015 will reach 1.801 billion bushels, 4.3 percent larger than forecast last month, the U.S. Department of Agriculture said, even as it cut the estimate for the size of this year’s crop.

Futures sold in Chicago briefly fell under $3.83 a bushel, nearing the $3.70 support price contained in the farm bill that Congress passed this year.

Payouts are based on a longer-term average, so a dip will not immediately add to taxpayer costs. Still, as U.S. grains such as corn and rice head toward bigger surpluses, an era of low crop subsidies may be ending.

“This could wipe out any savings we had in the farm bill,” said Scott Faber, government affairs vice president for Environmental Working Group, which opposes most payments to growers. “The current prices are certainly a reminder that this bill could become a budget-buster.”

Farm-bill supports shield growers from market declines, with federal subsidies closing the gap between actual prices and a target. Corn reached a record $8.49 a bushel in 2012 as drought withered crops. Futures have since
declined 54 percent through Thursday, as better weather and stagnant demand for ethanol made from the grain has rebuilt inventories.

The $956.4 billion farm bill was touted as changing the subsidies that watchdog groups called excessive government support for farmers who last year had record profits. A $5 billion annual program to pay farmers regardless of crop price was eliminated, replaced by aid for insurance programs and a so-called Price Loss Coverage program, a vestige of the old subsidies approach that would still be an option for producers.

Booming prices for corn, soybeans, wheat and other commodities has led to less spending on traditional forms of payouts in recent years. Corn growers received $2.7 billion in 2012, down from a peak of $10.1 billion in 2005.

Assuming continued high prices, the farm bill was estimated to save $23 billion over 10 years, according to congressional estimates. That isn’t happening.

As surpluses push down prices, annual farm profits are forecast to drop 27 percent to $95.8 billion this year from last year’s record, the government said in February. Revenue from major crops will be $189.4 billion, down 12 percent.

Wheat, corn and soybeans prices have dropped at least 9.4 percent this year through Thursday. Wheat traded in Chicago dipped below the $5.50 government target on July 9, and rice has fallen under the support levels, as have peanuts, which aren’t publicly traded. Soybeans, the second-biggest U.S. crop, aren’t near the price trigger.

Rice and peanut farmers probably will get payments this year, said Pat Westhoff, an agricultural economist at the University of Missouri, but corn, wheat and other crops should remain higher than the price set for triggering payouts.

Westhoff said export demand and requirements to add ethanol to some fuels might be enough to keep corn above target prices, assuming crops don’t become too large.

Farmers planted 3.9 percent fewer acres of corn this year, the USDA said June 30, even as higher yields on what’s now growing may produce a record crop. Future bumper crops will only drive prices down further, Westhoff said.

“Weather matters,” Westhoff said. “We have relatively decent demand. The larger question is, how large are these crops going to be? Supply is going to affect the outcome much more than demand will.”

The USDA last month projected corn will average $4.55 a bushel for the year that ends Aug. 31 and $4.20 for the next year. Prices would have to remain low for some time before the government would need to pay producers, said Paul Bertels, a vice president for the National Corn Growers Association and a corn and soybean farmer near Alton.
Because the farm-policy bill hasn’t been fully implemented, it’s not known how many farmers — who can choose traditional supports or additional insurance aid — will decide to seek price-based aid. Should prices for some crops stay low, growers should switch to more-profitable options, reducing supply gluts.

“Southern acres won’t stay in corn at these prices,” instead switching to cotton, Bertels said. Still, in the event of a global crop surplus, profitable options may be limited, he said. “We’re going to have some interesting times ahead.”