Typical federal government right hand/left hand confusion has some graduate students at the University of Missouri in Columbia turning their pockets inside out to scrape together enough money to afford health benefits.

On one hand, Obama administration education officials are pushing for colleges and universities to ease the rising cost of attending college, increase institutional need-based scholarship, and do whatever it can to help students avoid drowning in student-loan debt.

Of course, there’s also a push to make sure all Americans have affordable health care.

Meanwhile another hand — the Internal Revenue Service — is pointing to the employer mandate provision in the Affordable Care Act that it says stops universities from subsidizing health care benefits for graduate student teaching and research assistants who are paid a stipend by the school.

The IRS sees what the research and teaching graduate students do as work. Educators say the teaching and research furthers the student’s academic career. But if that work is a job, then grad assistants are employees — not just students. And according to the IRS, an employer can’t subsidize an employee’s private healthcare plan.

It affects graduate students at schools across the country.

Consider MU which in its 2015 fiscal year spent nearly $4 million subsidizing the health insurance costs of roughly 3,000 of its more than 6,000 graduate students.
Earlier this month, MU notified those graduate assistants that “due to changes in federal policy and IRS interpretation of that policy, general counsel has informed us that the University of Missouri no longer is allowed to pay for graduate students’ health insurance.” Doing so, they said, could cost the university $36,500 in fines per impacted individual.

MU stopped the subsidies.

Affected students complained about the change and that they had gotten only a day’s notice before the change went live. MU Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin was bombarded with student comments about how the shift would throw many of them into financial turmoil.

Loftin responded with apologies and money.

The dollars that would have paid students’ health benefit subsidies would instead be made available in the form of fellowships to all qualifying graduate students. Grad assistants could then use those dollars to pay for health care. But the money would only last a semester. After that those students would be on their own.

The cost of graduate school far exceeds what undergraduates pay. In 2014 about 40 percent of the then $1.1 trillion in student-loan debt was owed by graduate students. If you ask graduate students they’ll say they’re being left out of the national dialogue on reducing college costs and this latest situation “is just another hard hit,” said Hallie Thompson, a research assistant in plant science losing health benefits at MU.

The IRS ruling on subsidized health insurance forces struggling grad students, many of whom are married with families, to add the cost of healthcare to a budget already strained by high educational cost. Thompson says she’s lucky because she may be able to get on her husband’s health plan. But, lots of other grad students have no backup.

Kansas public universities that subsidize health plans for graduate research and teaching assistants, have decided to continue the practice and are waiting for clarification on the IRS interpretation of the policy.

Some national groups have rushed to grad students’ aid, challenging the IRS.
The American Council on Education has recommended the U.S. Department of Treasury and IRS treat grad assistants as students. “What schools are trying to do is to provide good health coverage at a low cost to graduate students,” said Steven Bloom, director of federal relations for ACE.

The College and University Professional Association for Human Resource said the IRS guidance “… interferes with longstanding practice intended to enhance access to higher education and lower the cost of graduate education…”

Mizzou journalism faculty will support student walkout

Graduate Faculty from the University of Missouri School of Journalism agreed unanimously Wednesday to support student teachers who've threatened to walk out next week over the university's abrupt decision to stop paying for their health insurance.

The journalism school’s graduate faculty members agreed they will impose no sanctions on graduate students who choose to participate in the proposed walkout scheduled for Wednesday.

In a statement posted on Mizzou's journalism graduate studies website, faculty offered strong support for students, calling the university's decision distressing and surprising.

“Our graduate students are crucial to our … mission and a tremendous source of pride to the Journalism school,” the statements says.

In the past week, Mizzou's graduate assistants – typically students pursuing doctorates who teach classes, grade papers and conduct research – have formed the Forum on Graduate Rights in response to the university's decision to discontinue subsidizing their health care.

On Tuesday, the group presented the university with a list of seven demands. They have given the university until Tuesday to respond with a plan to address their concerns or face a walkout and other protests.

So far, the Forum on Graduate Rights has planned for students to walkout on Wednesday before meeting at the Columns in front of Jesse Hall between noon and 1 p.m.
Group member Matt McCune, a research assistant pursuing a doctorate in physics, said student teachers are not going on strike.

“This is a show of organization,” he said. “We want to see some real action from the university.”

The group is demanding the university restore the health insurance subsidies to students by the spring semester, provide more affordable housing and childcare facilities and guarantee no graduate student earns below the federal poverty line.

Mizzou is blaming its change in policy on how the IRS interprets the Affordable Care Act. They say the law prevents employers from giving employees money specifically to buy health insurance from individual market plans. Because the IRS classifies graduate teaching and research assistants as employees, rather than students, they fall under this interpretation.

To offset the shock, Mizzou's administration is offering students a one-time chunk of money this semester in the form of a fellowship. The amount should equal roughly the same amount students previously received for health insurance subsidies, but they are free to use the dollars in any way they choose.

The university reports that it spent about $4 million to subsidize the health care plans of 3,100 graduate assistants in 2014.

McCune and others said one of the most distressing things about the university's decision, is the way it happened.

The university discovered the issue on July 21, but did not notify students until August 14.

Meanwhile, other schools around the country have access to the same information as Mizzou, but are continuing to subsidize health insurance for student teachers.

“This is nothing but a cost-cutting move on Mizzou's part,” McCune said. He called it a step toward stripping students of a benefit the school used to recruit them.

The Forum for Graduate Rights demands are:

• A guarantee that no graduate student employee be paid at a rate below the individual poverty line.

• A guarantee that all graduate student employees receive full tuition waivers.

• A fully subsidized student health care plan for all graduate student employees in place by the beginning of the spring semester.

• Immediate action on the party of the university to ease the burden on international students caused by the loss of the health insurance subsidy.
• More, and affordable, university-sponsored graduate student housing.

• A return of affordable, on-campus, university-sponsored childcare facilities for graduate students.

• An elimination of fees imposed by colleges and departments.

Grad Students Walkout Planned

A developing story at the University of Missouri. The school will support a graduate student walkout. The university will no longer subsidize the health insurance. Grad students say the school gave them almost a zero notice. They threaten to walk out of classes next Wednesday. A spokesperson is reviewing the demands.

Watch the story: http://mms.tveyes.com/PlaybackPortal.aspx?SavedEditID=309b01b2-e027-498d-923c-b9ab735e1f0e
Sen. Roy Blunt gathers with survivors, MU administrators to call for increase in cancer research funding

JIAYI WANG, 8 hrs ago

COLUMBIA — A roundtable discussion Thursday at University Hospital was held to support increasing federal funding for cancer research.

The discussion was organized by the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, which is the advocacy arm of the nonprofit organization, according to a news release. Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Missouri, attended the meeting and heard from local cancer advocates and cancer researchers.

The focus of the meeting was the One Degree campaign, a national initiative to increase funding for cancer research. Blunt was joined by MU administrators and cancer survivors.

“Everyone has a connection to cancer; we are all just one degree away from a family member or friend who has fought the disease, and many of us have battled it ourselves,” said Nicole Nichols, a caretaker who lost her husband to brain cancer in 2014.

Advocates are seeking $1 billion for cancer research at the National Cancer Institute, according to a news release. They also want an additional $6 billion over the course of two years for the National Institute of Health.

According to the ACS CAN, federal funding for NIH has declined more than 24 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars since 2003.

Blunt, who has had cancer himself, supports an increase in funding.
“One of the things government can do probably better than anybody else is fund healthcare research, and the results of the research can be broadly shared,” Blunt said, highlighting the government’s role in battling the cancer.

The NIH has seen its budget cut in the past several years, particularly after sequestration in 2013, according to the release. A fact sheet from the NIH at the time said that it had to cut $1.5 billion from its budget, resulting in a delay in medical progress. The NIH is the largest source of funding for medical research, according to its website.

According to the release from the American Cancer Society, federal funding has played a key role in cancer research, helping to decrease the mortality rate of the disease.

Patrice Delafontaine, dean of the MU School of Medicine, said that research is the only way to develop treatments for the thousands of individuals faced with chronic diseases and incurable diseases.

Blunt heard stories at the meeting from people who have been affected by cancer.

Cassie Santhuff lost her six-year-old son, Sam, in September 2014. Her son was diagnosed with rhabdomyosarcoma, a rare blood cancer. Although she made up her mind to become an expert on the illness and not let it take her son, her individual efforts were not enough to defeat the disease.

Santhuff spoke to Blunt of the need for funding, urging him to fight for the kids.

"I was mortified when I went to do my research," she said. "I found out that our children don't get the funding they need."
MU students move into new, renovated residence halls

By Megan Favignano

Thursday, August 20, 2015 at 2:00 pm

University of Missouri sophomore Kelsie Hall placed a tan rug in the middle of her dorm room Wednesday afternoon. She looked around the room and surveyed her home until next May as she decided what to unpack.

Hall is among the first group of students to live in MU’s new Gateway Hall, which opened this month.

“It’s awesome,” she said, pointing out her room’s high ceilings. “It makes the room open up and seem brighter.”

Students finished moving into residence halls Wednesday throughout campus, less than a week before classes begin at MU.

Wolpers Hall, which was renovated this year as part of a larger project that included Johnston Hall next door, welcomed new residents as well. The work on Johnston and Wolpers halls was approved in August 2011 with a budget of about $39 million.

Johnston closed in December 2012 and reopened in August 2014 with 300 beds. Wolpers closed December 2013 and reopened this month with 312 beds.

Gateway, which initially was named Virginia Avenue South, received UM Board of Curators approval in June 2012 with a $29,115,000 budget. The residence hall has 331 beds.

Residential Life Director Frankie Minor said he was excited about the university applying for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification for Gateway Hall. LEED certification recognizes sustainable building practices.

Gateway’s sustainability features, Minor said, include solar-thermal water heating. Energy from solar panels on the building help preheat water residents use. Additionally, the building recycled materials such as old closet doors from Johnston Hall, which builders used as artistic elements throughout the building.
Gateway also has several green roofs — small landings with beds of native plants — and a rain garden in front of the building.

Hall said she can see one of the green roofs through the windows in the shared lounge space on her floor. She said she liked the building’s sustainable features.

“The solar panels are a cool thing,” Hall said.

Wolpers has some suitability features as well, including dual-flush toilets — different water levels can be selected when flushing — and energy-efficient lighting. Minor said it is more difficult to include sustainable building practices in a renovated space.

“When you’re trying to retrofit a facility, it’s harder to build that in,” Minor said.

The two recently renovated halls and one new hall are all community-style residence halls, meaning multiple rooms share a common bathroom as well as lounges, study rooms and kitchens.

Minor said all new MU residence halls will use the design as it encourages socialization among students living in the same space.

“The students didn’t know each other as well” with suite-style halls, Minor said. “They could isolate themselves more.”

Although Wednesday was the university’s official move-in day, Minor said 51 percent of students moved in beforehand. Students involved in certain academic programs, athletics and freshman interest groups were able to move in Sunday and Tuesday.
College Avenue work finishes in time for school year

By Megan Favignano

Thursday, August 20, 2015 at 2:00 pm

**Contractors are on schedule to complete the College Avenue median-and-crosswalk project Friday, in time for the start of classes at the University of Missouri on Monday.**

Crews started working on the project after school ended in May and were on a tight schedule to complete the barrier before classes began this fall, Columbia Public Works spokesman Steven Sapp said.

The project was proposed because of a large number of pedestrians who cross mid-block on the stretch of College Avenue between University Avenue and Rollins Street, according to a 2014 engineering report.

The report said most of the pedestrians crossing College Avenue were MU students living or parking in the East Campus neighborhood.

Karlan Seville, an MU spokeswoman, said the new median and crosswalks should slow everyone down in the area.

“It’s important that people be able to cross safely,” Seville said. Drivers also will be able to navigate the area “without dodging students, faculty and staff running across.”

The Missouri Department of Transportation gave the city a $750,000 grant for the project. MU and the city split the rest of the project’s cost, each paying about $35,000, Sapp said.

To make the area safer for pedestrians and drivers, the city installed a median and new high-intensity activated crosswalk, or HAWK, signals.

The median limits where pedestrians can cross to two mid-block crosswalks. Studies have shown the HAWK crosswalks and signals are more effective than crosswalks without signals, Sapp said.
The push of a button at the crosswalk will signal yellow lights to flash, alerting drivers to slow down; the light eventually will turn red. At that time, pedestrians will see the typical stick figure signal informing them it is safe to cross the street.

The only work left to complete the project was to get power to the crosswalk signals, Sapp said, which he expected to happen Thursday or Friday.

Even though the crosswalk signals did not have power this week, Sapp said, pedestrians have been using the crosswalks successfully, and motorists have been slowing down near the area.

“We’ve noticed people are already using the new crossing points,” Sapp said.

Sapp said the city hopes the median and crosswalks will make pedestrians feel safer and drivers more comfortable. For drivers, Sapp said not knowing when someone might step out to cross can be nerve-racking.

The median, Sapp said, “makes it virtually impossible to cross anywhere except the crosswalks.”

College Avenue Crosswalk Opens

Watch story: http://mms.tveyses.com/PlaybackPortal.aspx?SavedEditID=3e845588-3f83-46b6-8994-963ad9a4972f