Mizzou Suspends Plan to End Grad Student Insurance

August 24, 2015

Facing a planned graduate student worker walkout over its decision to drop health insurance subsidies for teaching and research assistants, the University of Missouri at Columbia on Friday announced it will reinstate the subsidies indefinitely. Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin and other senior administrators said in a statement that the university consulted external experts and peer institutions in trying to “navigate a complex health insurance regulatory environment,” and ultimately decided to “defer implementation” of its plan. “As a result, the university will pay for health insurance for eligible graduate students,” they said.

The university told graduate student workers earlier this month, with one day's notice, that it had to stop providing health care subsidies to the workers because their Aetna health care plan was a market plan, not an employer-sponsored plan as other, unaffected university employees at Missouri and graduate student workers on many other campuses have. A recent Internal Revenue Service interpretation of the Affordable Care Act prohibits large employers from giving workers subsidies specifically to buy health insurance on the individual market, the university said. It planned to give student workers stipends to close the coverage gap in the fall, but graduate student workers would have had to seek coverage on their own after that.

The university faced intense criticism for its approach and the late notice it afforded students. Graduate student workers planned a walkout over this issue, among others they outlined in a letter delivered to the university last week, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported. The university said Friday that “continuing the previous practice will allow time for a clearer understanding of federal guidelines and consideration of options and incorporation of input” from a new task force that includes students.

Senator Claire McCaskill, a Democrat from Missouri and a graduate of the university, reportedly intervened on behalf of the graduate students, asking the chancellor to change course. She is also asking policy makers in Washington to find ways for graduate student workers to be covered that are in compliance with the Affordable Care Act. In a letter to the Treasury Department sent before Missouri announced its reversal, McCaskill said there are graduate students who aren’t eligible for Medicaid under Missouri law but who don't make enough money to qualify for federal subsidies under the health care act. “These students are now in danger of losing access to affordable, quality health care without a viable alternative,” she wrote.
“Therefore, I request that you act expeditiously and come up with a solution to allow universities to comply with IRS regulations and the Affordable Care Act, while ensuring that health care is accessible for all students.”

Louisiana State University reportedly sent similar notices to their graduate students in late July. But several other universities that provide health insurance subsidies to graduate students haven't moved to revoke them.

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION
Aug. 21, 2015
After Backlash, U. of Missouri Reinstates Grad Students’ Insurance Subsidies — for Now

The University of Missouri has reversed course on a decision to strip graduate students’ health-insurance subsidies, at least for now. R. Bowen Loftin, the chancellor, said in a statement on Friday that the college would “defer implementation” of the change after consulting “peer institutions, compliance experts, and internal constituents.”

One week ago, the university suddenly announced it would no longer subsidize graduate students’ health insurance in order to comply with guidance from the Internal Revenue Service on interpreting a provision of the Affordable Care Act.

Loud protests from graduate students at the college prompted an apology from Mr. Loftin for how the change was handled, and the creation of a task force to “research and propose solutions for providing affordable insurance to our graduate students.”

A group of graduate students calling itself the Forum on Graduate Rights delivered a letter to campus leaders this week threatening to walk out of class next week if the administration did not meet its demands. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reports that those demands included more affordable housing and child-care facilities.

In his statement, Mr. Loftin said he had received the letter, and that many of the issues raised were “closely linked to the university’s budget.” He went on: “MU’s budget priorities are addressed through shared governance, primarily through the Budget Allocation and Advisory Committee, in which graduate students have ongoing representation.”
University of Missouri backtracks, restores graduate insurance subsidy

August 21, 2015 11:45 pm • By Samantha Liss

University of Missouri administrators will offer insurance subsidies to graduate students working at Mizzou, backtracking from last week’s decision to cut the funding.

The move comes after intense criticism, the threat of a graduate student walkout and pressure from Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo.

Last week, university officials told graduate students employed as teaching assistants and research assistants that Mizzou could no longer provide money specifically to help the students pay for health insurance.

University officials said the subsidies violated rules under the Affordable Care Act that penalize employers who give money to workers to purchase individual health insurance plans.

Mizzou, however, has now decided to “defer” this decision until next year, according to a statement sent Friday to students. But deferring the issue gives students only a temporary reprieve before potentially losing access to affordable health care coverage again.

Mike Horton, a graduate instructor in the English Department, was relieved to hear the news.

He is currently uninsured, holding out in hope that the university would reverse its decision. His gamble worked. But he’s still skeptical of the university’s original decision.

“Why didn’t they just do that in first place?” Horton asked. “It’s even more obvious that this was a budget decision,” he said of the university’s decision to restore subsidies for health insurance coverage.

Removing this benefit in the first place shows just how little the university values graduate students, Horton said.

“The university does not function without us,” Horton said. “We do a ton of the research, we do a ton of the teaching. We’re not just TAs; we don’t just go to class.”

The decision to backtrack is particularly important for international students such as Kristofferson Culmer who are required to have insurance coverage. He came to Mizzou from the Bahamas to study for a doctorate in computer science.

“It’s a step in the right direction but ultimately … students need to see a long-term solution for this issue,” Culmer said.

McCaskill, an MU graduate, agrees.

“It’s clear from the confusion over the last few days that a long-term policy is needed to provide certainty to these students,” McCaskill said in a statement Friday.
She also is pleased with the university’s decision to “correct this mistake,” she added in the statement, which was released one day after she spoke with UM Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin about potential solutions.

McCaskill already is urging the Treasury Department to figure out a solution that would allow the University of Missouri to continue to provide affordable health insurance for its working graduate students without running afoul of the Affordable Care Act.

In a letter to the Treasury Department, McCaskill pointed out that there are graduate students who aren’t eligible for Medicaid under Missouri law and don’t make enough money to qualify for federal subsidies available under the Affordable Care Act.

“These students are now in danger of losing access to affordable, quality healthcare without a viable alternative,” she said in the letter sent before Mizzou reversed its decision. “Therefore, I request that you act expeditiously and come up with a solution to allow universities to comply with IRS regulations and the Affordable Care Act, while ensuring that healthcare is accessible for all students.”

Students making between 100 percent and 400 percent of the federal poverty level would qualify for federally subsidized coverage on HealthCare.gov. The poverty level is $11,770.

Graduate students were threatening to walk out if a list of demands, including restoring the subsidized coverage, were not addressed by next week, the first week of school.

There’s nothing stopping the university from adding the graduate students to the university’s group health plan for faculty and staff, said Christina Postolowski, health policy manager, attorney for Young Invincibles, a health care advocacy group focused on young adults.

Not extending funding to graduate students, however, could have saved the university millions of dollars next year.

In 2014, the university says it spent about $4 million on stipends for health insurance coverage for 3,100 graduate students.

At the University of Missouri-St. Louis, the size of the subsidy program was much smaller. Roughly 100 graduate students received the money, and they got only a 25 percent reimbursement.

UMSL is not reversing its decision to end the subsidies but will follow through with the previously announced one-time $103 credit to all eligible graduate students this semester, according to spokesman Bob Samples.

University of Missouri-Kansas City and the Missouri University of Science and Technology in Rolla do not offer insurance to graduate students, according to university officials. However, about nine graduate students were offered paid coverage at MUST. Those students were part of a special international program, spokesman Andrew Careaga said.

Other schools are looking to get rid of subsidies. Louisiana State University sent out a similar notice to its graduate students on July 24, according to Tara Kistler, a spokeswoman for the university.

However, Mississippi State officials said they still provided subsidies for graduate health insurance, while Auburn says it is examining how to comply with ACA guidelines.

Washington University and St. Louis University say they are looking into the issue but haven’t disclosed their current arrangements.

Koran Addo of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.
MU Reverses Decision, will offer Health Insurance to Graduate Students

University of Missouri Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin announced Friday that the University will “defer implementation” of its decision last week that would have stopped graduate student health insurance subsidies.

The University will continue to pay health insurance subsidies to eligible graduate students.

When asked what had changed between last Friday and this Friday, Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin said simply “time.”

“Clearly we did not give people appropriate notice about this,” Loftin said. “And it weighed heavily on us over the weekend and the early part of this week.”

Loftin said the reversal of the decision comes after many conversations with people both inside and outside the University including “external experts and leadership, along with consultation with peer institutions, compliance experts and internal constituents.”

After these conversations, the University decided to take on the risk of the IRS fines, as Loftin said other universities have done. But he was sure to add that eliminating healthcare subsidies is still not off the table.

“We're not saying we won't do this,” Loftin said. “We’re simply saying give us the time to work through this as a group, as a family, and figure out the best possible answer.”

Loftin said the elimination of subsidies is not the ideal situation and added that he hopes the University can find a creative solution that simultaneously meets the IRS standards, is financially possible for the university and provides support for graduate students.
In an attempt to achieve this goal, he has created a task force that will study the issue of graduate student health insurance subsidies and give him recommendations by the end of November. And a decision on the subject will hopefully be made by January 2016.

“So if we were, for example, to come back to the original choice to end the insurance payments we have made in the past, we would give eight months notice, not one day notice in that process,” Loftin said.

Loftin acknowledged that the notice given to students before the announcement last week was “insufficient,” but he now hopes the University will have the time to properly examine the issue and engage campus in the decision – even at the risk of high IRS fines.

“The risk we're taking now is in part because I want us to go back and really think about how we engage with our students and others - faculty and staff here about these kinds of decisions,” Loftin said.

When asked how the University will handle the fines if the IRS were to enforce them he joked “perhaps a garage sale.”

“Seriously if the IRS were to impose the full penalty for an entire year, which I suppose they could,” Loftin said. “The cost would probably bring the university down. It would be over a $100 million of liability.”

But he added, at this point, there have been no examples of either investigations or fines levied by the IRS when it comes to this interpretation.

Loftin also fielded a question about graduate students who have already purchased other insurance. He said those who purchased Aetna will be refunded and those who purchased plans from other insurers will be worked with “on a case-by-case basis.”

GRADUATE STUDENT RESPONSE

Kristofferson Culmer is the President of the National Association of Graduate-Professional Students and a computer science Ph.D. candidate at MU. He said the Association was still working on their official statement Friday, but it is pleased to see the University will be providing health insurance for the next year.

“But,” Culmer added. “There needs to be a long term fix in plan.”

Culmer said the Association will continue to work toward engaging the IRS about changing its interpretations of the Affordable Care Act and the Department of Health and Human Services about changing its definition of student health insurance plans as individual health insurance.

“We're going to continue to advocate nationally on that because everything is still up in the air and this could potentially affect thousands of grad students across the country negatively,” Culmer said.
Culmer said he was uncertain if the walkout next Wednesday would continue as planned, but he believes graduate students are still concerned about a long-term solution to their insurance issues and their other demands issued earlier this week, which were not addressed directly in the Chancellor’s announcement.

Hallie Thompson is a plant science Ph.D. candidate and the President of the Graduate Professional Council, the official student government for graduate students at MU.

She said the Council will have an official response soon, but shared her personal response in this written statement:

“It is a victory that graduate students have been restored to the status quo. However, this movement has been a chance to bring other issues to light and to, more importantly, bring students together.

We truly hope this will be an opportunity to work on some longstanding issues going forward, and to make meaningful change for the graduate students at MU.”

Faculty Shows Support For Graduate Students Following Loss of Subsidies

University of Missouri- Columbia graduate students are considering walking out of classes next week, after finding out the university would stop providing health insurance subsidies. And some departments across campus are standing with those students.

It wasn’t just graduate students who were shocked by the announcement last Friday – which came just 14 hours before health insurance coverage lapsed.

Bill Kerwin is the director of graduate studies for the English Department. He said he was driving back to MU when he received the email.
“This is the single most disparaging event in my 18 years at the University of Missouri. It’s a betrayal of some of the University's core values and it's a continuation of disregard for the core educational mission of the university,” Kerwin said.

Kerwin said he began to receive feedback from students and just days later the leadership of the department – himself, the Department chair and the director of graduate admissions for English – released a statement of support for their graduate students.

While Kerwin said all of the faculty he has spoken with is in support of the graduate students, the English department does not plan to take an official all-faculty vote on the matter until next week.

Other departments across campus - the Classics and Journalism graduate departments - have issued formal public statements of support on their websites. These departments have said there will be no action taken against students who participate in the walkout next Wednesday.

But graduate students are reporting that more than 15 departments have expressed support through emails to students.

Kerwin says he supports the graduate students because they are essential to the mission of the university.

“We couldn’t do our research without them especially in the sciences. We couldn’t do our teaching without them especially in the humanities,” Kerwin said. “They are central to serving undergraduates. They’re central to serving the research mission of the university.”

The University has said it intends to issue a one-time fellowship to graduate students to help offset costs.

MU chancellor speaks on reinstating graduate student subsidies

Watch story: http://www.komu.com/player/?video_id=30142&zone=2,5&categories=2,5
COLUMBIA - Following a week of turmoil, University of Missouri’s chancellor broke his silence Friday after MU decided to reinstate graduate student health insurance subsidies.

Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin apologized, saying the university's sudden announcement it was going to drop the subsidies was 'insufficient.'

Loftin said the university will reinstate the subsidies for the upcoming school year, and it will be working with students who switched to other insurance plans to ensure they are properly compensated.

By reinstating the subsidies, the university is going directly against a provision in the Affordable Care Act that states employers cannot fund its employees' insurance.

By violating that provision, Loftin said the IRS could charge the university $100 per student per day, totalling more than $100 million if it decides to take action.

"If the IRS were to impose the full penalty for the entire year, the cost would probably bring the university down," Loftin said.

However, Loftin said the IRS hasn't investigated any cases related to universities violating the provision in the ACA.

While still providing subsidies to students, Loftin said the university is also looking to find a long-term solution that provides for the students while also meeting the ACA.

"We're not saying we won't do this, but just give us the time to work through this as a group, as a family, and figure out the best possible answer," Loftin said.

Loftin said he is going to continue forward with the task force of students and faculty he assigned Monday after a forum of more than 500 graduate students came together to discuss how they would move forward without the subsidies.

Loftin said he extended the deadline for the task force to present ideas by November 30.

"The risk we are taking now is because I want us to go back and really rethink how we engage with our students, as well as our faculty and staff," Loftin said. "This is how we do business typically, so we will continue to go back and make sure we continue to follow the principles of governance we've used here for many, many years."
MU Reinstates Grad Insurance

Watch story: http://mms.tveyes.com/PlaybackPortal.aspx?SavedEditID=de435e55-4e2a-4aeb-84bc-e0bccf981445

MU restores health insurance subsidies for graduate students

By Megan Favignano

Saturday, August 22, 2015 at 12:00 am

One week after telling graduate students they would no longer receive money for health insurance, University of Missouri officials backtracked and said they would revive the subsidy.

Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin said Friday that MU would “defer implementation” of a decision regarding health insurance subsidies for graduate student employees and would restore an annual subsidy of about $3,000 per eligible student.

Loftin said he consulted with peer institutions, compliance experts, elected officials and MU students, faculty, staff and administrators throughout the week. It became clear, he said, that MU’s decision to stop providing insurance subsidies was “very disruptive right now with the lack of notice that was provided.”

Eric Scott, a graduate assistant in the English department, said graduate students were relieved to have the insurance subsidy restored for the year. He said there still were numerous graduate student concerns that needed to be addressed.

“It’s a good first step,” Scott said.
MU officials on Aug. 14 informed graduate students that the university could no longer provide subsidies for health insurance because of an IRS interpretation of the Affordable Care Act. The graduate student employees’ insurance coverage ended Aug. 15.

The IRS considers MU’s student health insurance plan — which is open to all students — an individual market plan, which the ACA does not allow employers to subsidize. MU officials said they learned about the IRS interpretation July 21.

Although MU decided to continue insurance subsidies for this school year, Loftin said there’s a risk that the IRS could impose hefty fines of as much as $36,500 per graduate student employee.

When the university told students it could no longer provide the subsidies, officials announced a one-time fellowship to offset students’ health insurance costs for the fall. The university will no longer provide the fellowship in favor of the past subsidy model. Loftin described it as a short-term fix.

A university task force is working to create long-term options for graduate student health insurance that work within the IRS interpretation of the ACA. After receiving task force recommendations this fall, Loftin said, MU will review them with the university’s legal counsel and human resources officials.

“We’re trying to see if we can make it work within the context of those regulations,” Loftin said.

He said university officials plan to make a decision in January regarding graduate students’ health insurance next school year and beyond, which will give students eight months to plan for potential changes.

Graduate students hosted a forum Monday and created the group Forum on Graduate Rights to address a number of concerns, including the elimination of health insurance. The group of more than 1,500 students submitted a letter to MU administrators Tuesday that listed concerns and threatened a walkout next Wednesday if students did not receive an acceptable response from the university.

In addition to subsidies for health insurance coverage, the group demanded affordable graduate student housing, university-sponsored childcare, a full tuition waiver, better compensation and the elimination of auxiliary fees.

Loftin said a separate graduate student task force that was created last spring would be expanded to discuss the new list of graduate student concerns.

As of Friday, Scott said many students still were planning to participate in the Wednesday walkout and that they would hold a rally at noon.
MU graduate students get health insurance

EVAN COBB, EMMA VANDELINDER, MATTHEW MUSACCHIA, GEOFF WEST, Aug 21, 2015

*A change was made to this story to clarify the nature of UM's legal counsel's role in the insurance decision.

COLUMBIA — After a week of uproar and frustration, MU has put off its decision to withdraw subsidies for graduate student health insurance.

In a notice posted early Friday afternoon from his office, MU Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin said the university will continue to pay for health insurance for eligible graduate students.

“Continuing the previous practice will allow time for a clearer understanding of federal guidelines and consideration of options and incorporation of input," reads a letter signed by Loftin and other administrators.

Loftin said he was not heavily involved in the announcement to students prior to Aug. 14. Leona Rubin, MU’s associate vice chancellor for graduate studies, first notified him on July 29 of the issue, he said. He thought she received her information from someone in the provost’s office who was aware of the July 1 "promulgation by Treasury or IRS and their regulatory change or interpretation” of the Affordable Care Act.

Loftin said Rubin came to him two days before the announcement to tell him the university would have to end its subsidies.

Loftin said he received “very little consultation” from Rubin. She came to him, he said, two days earlier to tell him the university would have to end its subsidies, a decision that came after discussions with UM's legal counsel, who consulted with outside attorneys.*

The decision was ultimately a mistake.
"Many mistakes were made," Loftin said, adding that he failed to get clarity on when the insurance subsidies would need to end.

Loftin said that Rubin should have communicated with students earlier.

The Graduate Professional Council at MU expressed its pleasure with the decision on Twitter but indicated it will continue to press the campus to address the other demands it made earlier in the week.

Matt McCune, spokesman for the Graduate Professional Council, also tweeted that the “statement addresses single item (healthcare subsidy).”

The Graduate Professional Council highlighted that point by posting on Twitter the list of demands with a check in the box for health insurance subsidy. The other boxes remain without checks.

Hallie Thompson, president of the Graduate Professional Council, said that the decision reversal was a good thing but that other graduate rights still must be addressed.

“I think that that committee as well as GPC and the Forum on Graduate Rights can really work together in making good positive changes.”

The chancellor’s post said his office had discussed the request letter made by the Forum on Graduate Rights earlier this week and found that the demands — including pay, tuition waivers and on-campus child care — were related to the budget and should be taken up by the Budget Allocation and Advisory Committee, which includes graduate student representatives.

Rubin last Friday morning sent an email notifying graduate students that MU would no longer subsidize health insurance for graduate students, effective the following day. It said an IRS interpretation of the Affordable Care Act prohibited it from doing so without facing stiff fines.

MU provides insurance subsidies for about 3,100 graduate students.
About 500 graduate students protested the decision during a demonstration on Francis Quadrangle last Friday. They later threatened a Wednesday walkout and rally if the administration did not respond to its demands.

Esther Thorson, associate dean for graduate studies and research at the Missouri School of Journalism, voiced her happiness with the chancellor's reversal Friday in an email titled “A Victory.” The journalism school was among 20 campus schools and departments that issued statements supporting graduate students over the past several days.

“I am proud that Journalism Graduate Faculty went to bat for you so strongly on Wednesday — and glad that so many departments on campus followed suit,” Thorson said in her email. “… Further, we as a group pledge to renew our efforts to improve the working and living conditions of graduate students at the University of Missouri.”

"I am relieved the headache of that process is over,” Donald Gilliam, a first year master's student in education, said Friday after finding out that MU had temporarily reinstated graduate insurance subsidies.

Donald Gilliam, a first-year masters student in education, said he just switched from working full time to attend graduate school and expected to receive the insurance coverage MU advertised when he enrolled.

“I am relieved the headache of that process is over,” he said after the announcement.

When accepting graduate assistantships, students sign up to work for the university.

“If they are going to treat us as employees, they should offer insurance,” said Katrina Burch, who is in her fourth year of graduate studies in geological sciences. Burch thought MU was trying to appease graduate students by restoring insurance because of the threatened walkout.

Eric Scott, a doctoral student and instructor in the English Department, agreed on the need for progress on graduate students' demands.
"There are still a number of other issues that we brought up to them that have not been addressed, and we are still pursuing actions,” he said.

Caleb Alexander and Chris Van Leeuwen, both graduate students in the School of Music, were frustrated with the initial decision. Alexander said it was "pretty ludicrous" to tell students 14 hours ahead of time that they would be without insurance.

Alexander said a walkout would be a serious matter for the music school.

"The place would run at half capacity," he said.

Van Leeuwen likened the initial withdrawal of insurance subsidies to a breach of contract.

State Rep. Kip Kendrick, D-Columbia, had earlier condemned the decision to stop health insurance subsidies. He issued a statement Friday applauding graduate students' response as "strong, cohesive and immediate."

"Without a powerful graduate student voice and a clear, unified message, this issue may not have been handled as expeditiously. ... I want to thank Chancellor Loftin for his attention, for the creation of the task force, and the ultimate decision to reverse course on the insurance subsidies. I know the chancellor takes the student voice very seriously, and his actions reflect his dedication to being responsive to student needs."

*Supervising editor is Scott Swafford.*
University of Missouri Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin said in a statement Thursday that MU will “defer implementation” of a decision to stop giving graduate student employees subsidies for health insurance.

The university informed its graduate student employees that it would no longer provide subsidies of about $3,000 per student to pay for health insurance premiums because of an IRS rule interpretation.

MU planned to give those students a one-time stipend to offset the cost of the insurance for the fall semester.

Loftin didn’t elaborate on why the university decided to defer its plan, saying only the decision comes after “consultation with peer institutions, compliance experts and internal constituents.”

SECOND THOUGHTS:

This page has been revised to make the following correction.

Saturday, August 22, 2015

An article Friday should have said University of Missouri Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin said Friday in a statement that MU will “defer implementation” of a decision to stop giving graduate student employees subsidies for health insurance. The article said Loftin made the statement Thursday.
MU graduate students formalize demands and plan one-day walkout

Watch story: [http://www.komu.com/player/?video_id=30172&zone=2,5&categories=2,5](http://www.komu.com/player/?video_id=30172&zone=2,5&categories=2,5)

COLUMBIA - On the heels of MU’s announcement that it would bring back graduate health insurance subsidies for the upcoming school year, the Forum on Graduate Rights has clarified its demands.

The FGR issued a formal statement to the university, saying it would stage a day-long walkout and rally on campus Wednesday if the university does not meet its demands by Aug. 26.

The demands extend beyond promising to continue health insurance subsidies beyond the school year.

The FGR said it wants the university to guarantee it will not pay graduate student employees salaries below the individual poverty line.

The FGR said in its statement as many as 23 percent of graduate students are paid less than $11,770 a year, which is below the individual poverty line, because they are not considered to work at a full-time work load.

The FGR said it wants the university to make all students at a .25 full-time equivalent workload and above eligible for full tuition waivers and full insurance subsidies.

The FRG also said it wanted the university to guarantee subsidies for international students so they can pay for insurance, which is a requirement to keep their visa status.

If the demands are not met, the FGR said it will hold an all-day walkout and rally Wednesday in front of Jesse Hall.
The FGR said more than 40 departments on campus have issued notices supporting graduate students. Those departments include the School of Journalism which is affiliated with KOMU 8 News.

The FGR was formed this month after MU announced it would no longer offer health insurance subsidies to graduate students because it violated a provision in the Affordable Care Act.

The university reversed its decision Friday following the demands set during a forum of more than 500 graduate students. and said it would begin offering the subsidies again.

Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin said the subsidies are only guaranteed for this school year, however, and said he formed a task force to come up with a long-term solution that will follow the law and continue to ease the burden on graduate students.

Loftin said the university could be fined $100 per day per student receiving subsidies if the IRS decides to take action.

Columbia clinic licensed for abortions received exemption

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, 20 hrs ago

COLUMBIA — When the Planned Parenthood clinic in Columbia was granted a license to provide medication-induced abortions, it was exempted from the requirement that it have a doctor on staff with surgical privileges at a hospital in the community.
Gail Vasterling, the director of the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services, discussed the license, which was granted in July, in a letter Friday to Sen. Kurt Schaefer. She is slated to appear Tuesday before an interim Senate committee he leads, The Columbia Daily Tribune reported.

State law defines abortion clinics as ambulatory surgical centers. The law says doctors at such clinics must have privileges to perform surgery at a hospital, or the center must have a written agreement with a hospital to take patients for emergency services.

But health department spokesman Ryan Hobart said no surgical procedures are being performed at the Columbia facility.

**While the doctor performing abortions in Columbia doesn't have admitting privileges, she has something called "refer and follow" privileges at MU Health Care, allowing her to refer patients with complications to physicians that care for hospitalized patients and obtain reports about treatment.**

"In the event that they intend to perform surgical procedures, the department would send a subsequent survey team out to ensure compliance with" the law, Hobart said.

Planned Parenthood officials have said they plan to offer surgical abortions at the Columbia clinic in early 2016.

Schaefer, who is running for attorney general, said he disputes the health department's legal conclusions.

"I don't know who is giving them legal advice on this, but it is bad advice," Schaefer said.

The committee will investigate why MU Health Care is helping Planned Parenthood resume abortions in Columbia, Schaefer said.

"I want the university out of the abortion business," he said.
A Missouri Senate committee is investigating abortion practices in the state after anti-abortion activists recently released undercover videos showing Planned Parenthood leaders discussing procedures for providing fetal body parts to researchers.

EDITORIAL: Missouri office seekers use abortion for political gain

Chris Koster was a Republican when he was elected to the Missouri Senate in 2004. He became a Democrat in 2007 when he saw that would give him a better chance to become Missouri’s next attorney general in 2008. The gamble worked; now Mr. Koster is running for governor.

Kurt Schaefer was a moderate Republican lawyer and former assistant state attorney general when he defeated longtime state Sen. Chuck Graham, D-Columbia, in 2008. He is now running for attorney general as an ultra-conservative as he tries to fend off a primary challenge from Josh Hawley, an elective newcomer with, in some cases, better conservative credentials.

Mssrs. Koster and Schaefer have histories of letting politics, not policy, guide some of their decisions in public office. They’re doing it again with regard to the national controversy that hit Planned Parenthood.

Mr. Koster could have helped put an end to the conservatives’ demonizing of Planned Parenthood, a nonprofit organization that uses federal funding to provide women’s health care and contraception but not to provide abortions.
Instead, the presumptive Democratic nominee for governor is sounding more like the Republican he started out as, fanning the fanatics’ flames. He has agreed to investigate Missouri Planned Parenthood after the release of hidden-camera videos claiming the national organization profits from fetal tissue sales. So what’s taking so long? Similar investigations in Indiana, Georgia, Massachusetts and South Dakota have already determined Planned Parenthood is following the law.

But Mr. Koster’s got nothing on Mr. Schaefer, who was dubbed “the scariest person in Missouri government” this month by Barbara Shelly, an editorial writer and columnist for the Kansas City Star. As she noted, that is “quite a distinction” considering the intern harassers and after-hours miscreants who serve in the state Capitol.

The scariest thing Mr. Schaefer’s done on the record lately is to release the name of a doctor whom he says was identified by the state Department of Health and Senior Services as the person responsible for abortions at the Planned Parenthood clinic in Columbia. That clinic resumed performing abortions last month after stopping them in 2012.

Putting a doctor at risk from anti-abortion activists, merely to serve his own personal ambition, is more than scary. It’s unconscionable. Mr. Schaefer is also threatening to withhold money from MU because he says the doctor he outed has privileges at the university hospital.

Let us remember, abortion is legal in Missouri and the rest of the United States. Using public funding to pay for it is not. Mr. Schaefer went on his tirade without saying whether the doctor’s privileges at the university medical facility have anything to do with abortions. R. Bowen Loftin, chancellor of the university, said the doctor has limited privileges that do not include abortion procedures or admitting patients.

National Planned Parenthood officials have said the originally released videos were edited, the allegations are false and that the organization was set up by a virulent anti-abortion group. The group sent in people posing as representatives of the biomedical industry seeking tissue for medical research.
The group then released videos that make it look as though Planned Parenthood officials were negotiating prices and conditions for trafficking in fetal tissue.

The dubiously obtained videos — and unproven allegations — were enough to energize a campaign to defund Planned Parenthood. They have riled anti-abortion officials mostly in Republican-controlled states, such as Missouri, with GOP majorities in the House and the Senate. They are rushing to investigate, looking for violations that could justify cutting off state funding.

Some states have decided to take no action because they have found no evidence of wrongdoing or because local clinics have no fetal tissue programs. The St. Louis Planned Parenthood clinic — the only one that was providing abortions at the time the videos were made — says it does not have a fetal tissue program.

But the Missouri probe continues, as campaign fodder for unscrupulous politicians who want to further their careers by pandering to single-issue and right-wing voters. No matter that the majority of Americans support legalized abortions.

Efforts to defund Planned Parenthood are misdirected, anyway. Those who really want to reduce the number of abortions, rather than fight about it, should know that Planned Parenthood says only 3 percent of its work involves abortions. The other 97 percent is providing critical and preventive health care to low- and moderate-income women.

Contraception and screening for sexually transmitted diseases account for the largest share of work done by Planned Parenthood. The organization received nearly $530 million in the last fiscal year for these purposes from a combination of federal, state and local funds.

Planned Parenthood acknowledges its participation in fetal tissue donations when a mother who has had an abortion consents, and maintains that it makes no money from the donations. Scientists at major universities and government labs have been using fetal tissue for decades and say it is invaluable for certain types of research, particularly involving eye diseases, diabetes and muscular dystrophy.
Clearly these topics are complex and require moral soul-searching for those on all sides — except for politicians such as Mssrs. Koster and Schaefer. They are exploiting the legitimate concern of others for their own political gain. They know no shame.

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Schaefer: Health department relied on 'bad advice' to license abortion clinic

By Rudi Keller

Saturday, August 22, 2015 at 12:00 am

The Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services in July licensed the Planned Parenthood clinic in Columbia to provide medication-induced abortions, exempting it from provisions in state law requiring the doctor to have surgical privileges at a community hospital, Director Gail Vasterling wrote Friday in a letter to Sen. Kurt Schaefer.

Vasterling is scheduled to appear Tuesday before the Senate Interim Committee on the Sanctity of Life, which is chaired by Schaefer, R-Columbia. She sent the letter to answer questions posed by the committee at its Aug. 13 hearing, when members asked Vasterling about the law requiring surgical privileges to determine whether the clinic’s license was legal.

Two Missouri House committees posed many of the same questions Wednesday during a hearing. Vasterling defended the procedures for issuing the license and told the committees she was satisfied the conditions of state law and regulations had been met.

The doctor, Colleen McNicholas of St. Louis, has “refer and follow” privileges at University of Missouri Health Care, which allow her to refer patients with complications to a hospitalist and obtain reports about treatment. If she was performing surgical abortions, McNicholas would need surgical privileges at a hospital or the clinic would need a written agreement from a hospital to admit patients who need emergency treatment.

“No surgical procedures are being performed at the Columbia facility,” said health department spokesman Ryan Hobart. “In the event that they intend to perform surgical procedures, the
department would send a subsequent survey team out to ensure compliance with” the law requiring surgical privileges.

Planned Parenthood officials have said they plan to offer surgical abortions at the Columbia clinic in early 2016.

Vasterling’s letter answers the committee’s questions, Schaefer said, but he disputes the health department’s legal conclusions.

“I don’t know who is giving them legal advice on this, but it is bad advice,” Schaefer said.

The Columbia clinic, 711 N. Providence Road, was licensed July 15 to offer abortions for the first time since 2012. The license was delayed two days because of videos produced by an anti-abortion group purporting to depict Planned Parenthood officials discussing the sale of tissue from aborted fetuses. The department issued the Columbia license after reviewers were satisfied no tissue from Planned Parenthood’s St. Louis clinic was being used for research. Planned Parenthood has challenged the claims of the videos as Congress has sought to eliminate Planned Parenthood’s federal funding.

A protest calling for Congress to defund Planned Parenthood was planned for 10 a.m. Saturday outside the Columbia clinic.

Schaefer was frustrated by Vasterling’s unwillingness at the Aug. 13 hearing to discuss why the department granted the Columbia license. Schaefer said the letter and other information that had been supplied since the hearing provided the details he wanted.

“We now have that answer, and I need to make sure the committee is satisfied,” he said.

The committee now will focus on investigating why MU Health Care is helping Planned Parenthood resume abortions in Columbia, Schaefer said. “I want the university out of the abortion business,” he said.

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Tiger Walk steeps participants in MU culture

CODY LOHSE, 10 hrs ago

COLUMBIA — Thousands of freshmen streamed through the MU Columns on Francis Quadrangle Sunday in a tradition that marked their symbolic entrance into the university.
The first wave ran past the Columns to grab half-pints of Tiger Stripe ice cream while black and gold balloons floated above their heads.

Although this tradition has been in place for only 20 years, others have been in the making for more than 100.

MU’s mascot is one example. Beginning in the 1890s, when Missouri organized its first football team, it looked to the Civil War for inspiration.

“Legend has it that guerrilla soldiers under the command of the notorious Bill Anderson were set to raid Columbia,” according to MU’s Tigers for Tigers conservation program. "Residents heard about the plan and put together an armed guard, built a blockhouse and fortified the old courthouse. In an attempt to intimidate the army, they called themselves the Missouri Tigers."

Anderson never raided Columbia, and the Tigers never faded from the city's memory. On Sept. 12, 1986, Truman the Tiger, MU's mascot, made his first official appearance. Today, he makes more than 35 appearances a month, including at all MU football and basketball games, according to MU’s website.

Tiger memorabilia and symbolism pervade numerous aspects of Columbia's identity, from the towering Tiger Hotel to textiles and decals that cling to bodies and cars alike.

Supervising editor is T.J. Thomson
MU researchers taking sensor system from lab to marketplace

By MEGAN FAVIGNANO

Saturday, August 22, 2015 at 12:00 am

While some go to the doctor once a year, many residents at the TigerPlace assisted living community in southeast Columbia get a virtual checkup every day.

Wireless sensor systems installed in about half of the community’s living spaces constantly monitor residents’ vitals and calculate their risk of falling.

That monitoring system, created by University of Missouri researchers, is starting to appear in other assisted living homes and hospitals throughout the state. A new program through the Sinclair School of Nursing is helping the technology break into the mass market.

Marilyn Rantz, professor emeritus with the School of Nursing, and Marjorie Skubic, a professor with MU’s College of Engineering, have worked to create the system for more than a decade. Rantz said she and Skubic have a shared passion for predicting health changes and the risk of falls because both have seen the effects one fall can have on the health of an elderly person. Rantz said her mother fell several years ago.

“If my mother’s risk of falling — if we had known that it was going up — we would have known weeks before that there were changes going on,” Rantz said. “She fell, was on the floor for eight hours, and her health declined.”
Rantz’s mother fractured her shoulder in the fall and died within six months. Skubic’s mother-in-law also fell at one point and injured her shoulder. Her mother-in-law’s shoulder never healed properly and caused constant pain the rest of her life, Skubic said.

The sensor system is able to detect changes in health earlier than when individuals notice themselves feeling ill, Rantz said.

“We can actually detect illnesses 10 days, two weeks, sometimes even longer before the resident would typically complain” about not feeling well, Rantz said. “It gives the nurse a heads up that something’s not right with that person.”

THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE SYSTEM

The MU research team developed a suite of sensors during the past decade.

Rantz said the monitoring system has detected numerous health issues, including upper-respiratory infections, pneumonia and urinary tract infections as well as changes in chronic health conditions, congestive heart failure, diabetes, lung disease and cognition.

The monitoring system, Rantz said, works by providing more frequent and detailed vital signs. The movement sensors use silhouettes instead of pictures or video to collect data.

Skubic said people usually only get a thorough update on their vital signs once a year when they visit a doctor. The sensors, she said, constantly are producing data.

“It’s like having a checkup every day,” Skubic said.

The monitoring system includes several different types of sensors placed throughout an individual’s living space in discreet locations. One sensor rests between the mattress and the box spring and monitors pulse and respiration rates to detect restlessness in bed. If someone is not sleeping well, Skubic said, it’s often an early indicator of a health change.

A gate-analysis system observes people as they walk — capturing their walking speed and stride — to detect whether people are at risk for falling. Rantz said many people are not evaluated for fall risk even at their annual checkup.

An individual typically needs a bed sensor, a gate analysis and at least four motion sensors placed in high-traffic areas of their home to get good readings from the monitoring system, Rantz said. The sensors are wireless and connect to the Internet.

TESTING THE TECHNOLOGY

TigerPlace was built with research in mind. When residents move in, they consent to participate in the evaluation and agree to let the researchers access their health information anonymously.

The researchers used grants to purchase the initial motion sensors, which were installed in TigerPlace apartments in October 2005. They have since tested various brands of sensor equipment at TigerPlace, working to establish a sensor system that works while keeping cost in mind.

“We’ve been able to use the infrastructure here to really test out the effectiveness of this equipment,” Skubic said.

About half of the TigerPlace residents have the sensor systems installed in their living space, and the other half act as a control group for the research. The half that does not have the monitoring system receives the same care from the same nursing staff as those who have the sensors. They have served as a control group as the team works to collect data showing how effective the sensors are at predicting health changes.
From their data, Rantz said the care model used at TigerPlace helps people stay healthier about two years longer than in a traditional setting. The monitoring system helped people stay healthier about four years longer than in a traditional setting, she said.

As they tested various brands of equipment, Rantz said they tried to focus on what they thought would be affordable.

“If you were ever going to reach out to the public, you needed to be able to develop a system that was going to be affordable,” Rantz said.

BREAKING OUT OF THE LAB

Skubic and Rantz have teamed with MU alumnus George Chronis for the past couple of years to produce a commercial version of the monitoring system. MU has been encouraging those efforts.

Hank Foley, senior vice chancellor for research and graduate studies at the university, created a five-point plan to improve research efforts at MU and to raise its status in the Association of American Universities. Part of Foley’s plan included encouraging entrepreneurship among researchers.

“It’s much more than understanding science now,” Foley told the Tribune in 2014. “It is understanding the context, and that context is changing. Entrepreneurship, innovation and invention are considered more important today than they were before. The translation of research from the lab to the marketplace is much more crucial.”

Skubic and Rantz have been working to break into the marketplace. Skubic said there is a significant difference between the equipment they produce for research purposes and the products they plan to market to consumers.

“The kind of systems that we build as research prototypes are not the sort of robust systems that you want to be able to sell to people,” Skubic said. Chronis’ company is “turning our research prototypes into really robust, reliable commercial products.”

The technology has been installed in 13 Missouri assisted living facilities and hospitals, including Barnes Jewish hospital in St. Louis. The company producing the monitoring system will be installing the technology in a few locations outside of Missouri this fall.

Skubic and Rantz contacted Chronis about four years ago to discuss commercializing their research. When Chronis was pursuing his doctorate at MU 20 years ago, Skubic was his adviser.

Chronis initially said he did not have time because of a number of other projects demanding his attention. When they contacted him again about a year later, he decided to get involved.

“I always wanted to create something what would help people,” Chronis said. “It’s fascinating to be able to take an application like that, that would help people in such a real way.”

Chronis started Foresite Healthcare, which has a small lab space in Columbia, in May 2013 to commercialize the product.

The company licensed the intellectual property of the monitoring system in August 2013 and has been creating the products in St. Louis. Foresite made its first installation in late 2013 and has expanded to nine full-time and two part-time employees.

HITTING THE MARKET

Those involved in the project hope to make the monitoring system more accessible for residential use. Rantz said they have been piloting the technology in a few homes.

Sinclair@Home, through the Sinclair School of Nursing, became available this summer and installs the system in private residences. The service is available to Columbia-area residents who have
high-speed Internet connections, and it costs about $350 per month after a one-time installation fee and sensor deposit. The Sinclair@Home service includes the sensors, the sensor network and off-site support from Sinclair Home Care nurses.

Home installation has some challenges that health care facilities installing the technology don’t face, Chronis said. The system requires a strong Internet connection and server, which Chronis said can be difficult in some residential locations.

Most hospitals and assisted living communities already have an established network infrastructure, so it there isn’t much cost related to installing the monitoring system in individual rooms. The installation cost rises when one person is paying for the monitoring system and infrastructure for a single-family home.

“A hospital can afford a system like this. They see the benefit immediately,” Chronis said. “If you have a 4.5 percent fall rate, and you reduce that, you’re saving the hospital hundreds of thousands of dollars a year. Whereas at home, a person may say, ‘I’ll take the risk because I can’t afford to pay for that.’ ”

The hope, Chronis said, is that insurance companies will begin covering some of the costs associated with the technology as a preventative measure once they see the health benefits of the system.

The researchers are recommending the government reimburse residents for the cost of the sensors as a cost-saving measure because the system will allow individuals to live in their own homes longer.

Skubic wants to put the monitoring system in her parents’ home. Rantz is eager to see it installed in more homes.

“Sometimes it kind of takes your breath away,” Rantz said. “It’s something that you hope for and you pray for, and I just want to see it … become a reality in people’s homes.”

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Documentary filmmaker Robert Greene joins faculty in new journalism program

KATIE AKIN, 1 hr ago

COLUMBIA — Robert Greene is obsessive — about storytelling, about filmmaking, about the arrangement of art on his wall.

Standing on a chair in his sleek office in Walter Williams Hall on the MU campus, he adjusts a poster from the 2015 True/False film festival above a bookshelf.

“Does that seem off to you now?” he asks. "It’s going to bother me.”
As the first filmmaker-in-chief for the new Jonathan B. Murray Center for Documentary Journalism at the Missouri School of Journalism, Greene brings experience, attention to detail and penchant for perfection to the program, which begins this semester.

He will oversee the documentary film aspect of the program while the program's director, Stacey Woelfel, former news director at KOMU, will guide it as a journalist.

The documentary journalism program was created last year after the School of Journalism received a $6.7 million endowment from alumnus Jonathan Murray, one of the founders of reality TV. Up to five graduate students and 21 undergraduate students are expected to enroll initially.

The program will offer the students undergraduate or graduate degrees in journalism and the opportunity to learn from different industry professionals.

Woelfel calls them "visiting artists," and they will cycle into teaching positions that fit their schedules and skill sets. The artists will hold workshops, meetings and one-on-one time with students to teach them about their area of expertise, he said.

"It might be a terrific editor, it might be a composer, it might be a motion graphics artist," Woelfel said. They will collaborate with Woelfel and Greene to shape the creative and academic climate of the new program.

Greene, 38, has worked on 20 films in his career as a quadruple-threat filmmaker who edits, produces, cinematographs and directs fiction film, documentaries and shorts. He also writes on the subject of nonfiction film for several publications, including a regular column for Sight and Sound Magazine.

In 2014, he was named one of "10 Filmmakers to Watch" by Independent Magazine. His book, “Present Tense: Notes on American Nonfiction Cinema, 1998-2013,” will be released in October.
"Actress," Greene's most recent film, premiered at True/False last year. The film follows Brandy Burre, actress from HBO’s “The Wire,” through the course of a long-term relationship, the rekindling of her acting career and her journey through the roles she has played. Greene filmed over 40 hours of raw footage for the 87-minute film.

“Actress” walks the fine line between being pure art and pure truth, which Greene called one of the most important parts of filmmaking.

“Every decision I make about the art of a film has to be tethered to reality,” he said.

The word “tethered” is an important one for him. Although each scene in his movies reflects the truth of his subjects’ stories, there are subtleties. For instance, a pivotal scene of “Actress” was recreated for the film; it did occur when Greene’s cameras were not filming.

“Truth in cinema is a slippery thing," he said. "You have to strike a balance between the authentically true and the emotionally true.”

Greene said the way he arranges his films to tell his version of the truth could make a traditional journalist cringe.

"If a good news journalist sees the way I put together a timeline, hopefully their eyes would roll into the back of their head, and they would say, 'This is not me,'" he said.

Greene classifies his four full-length films as non-fiction works rather than documentaries. This distinction stems from the artfulness of his films, especially compared to many famous documentaries that lack this quality, Greene said.

Filmmakers often ignore the artful element of cinema when they make movies about “important” causes, Greene said.

“Often ethics (of a film ) get in the way of aesthetics,” he said about mainstream documentaries.
The Jonathan B. Murray Center will explore the complicated relationship that exists between documentary film and journalism. According to Greene, traditional "news" journalists and documentarians tend to have similar personalities but dissimilar goals.

"In news journalism, the goal is to create an awareness of something you urgently need to know, and in documentary it's an art," Greene said. "The idea is to show you something you think you understand but you need to understand better."

Burre, who was Greene's next-door neighbor in suburban New York, said her personal connection with him grew over the course of making the film. Greene, who has major support at the film's production company 4th Row Films, shot "Actress" mostly by himself with a handheld camera in Burre's living room as, what he calls, a "one-man band."

This, she said, made it easy for her to trust him with her story.

"Before filming with him, it was hard to foresee what would come in my career as big as 'The Wire,'" Burre said. "Yet, since its premiere, it's now hard to remember a time before 'Actress.'"

Greene, a native of Charlotte, North Carolina, moved to Columbia last winter with his wife and two children to settle in and begin developing the program. Often there is no division between work and home for him, he said. His wife, Deanna Davis, who is credited on "Actress" as "aider and abettor," is a creative collaborator on his projects.

"I don't write a word that gets published or make a decision about what project to pursue next — nothing gets done without her input," Greene said.

Greene said he looks forward to adding “teacher” to his list of titles. When he was still an undergraduate student at North Carolina State University, he said he wrote mock syllabi for classes he wanted to teach.
He will teach a class called "Editing for Documentaries;" next spring, he teaches "Documentary Theory and Development." He will also teach a course called "History of the Art of Documentary" in MU's Film Studies program.

Greene's university employment will not hinder his filmmaking career. He plans to begin filming his next project — an ambitious work in which he will follow an actress preparing for the role of Christine Chubbuck, the 1970s newscaster who committed suicide on air.

Filmmaking, for Greene, is more than an occupation. He creates his films out of passion, not obligation.

"What happens is you find yourself capturing these great moments that you become slaves to," Greene said.

*Supervising editor is Jeanne Abbott.*

'Billion-Dollar Ball' investigates the world of big-money college football

August 22, 2015 5:15 am • By Harry Levins Special to the Post-Dispatch

'BILLION-DOLLAR BALL'

By Gilbert M. Gaul

Published by Viking, 272 pages, $27.95

On sale Tuesday

Just as the college football season opens, investigative reporter Gilbert M. Gaul blows the whistle with “Billion-Dollar Ball,” subtitled “A Journey Through the Big-Money Culture of College Football.”

Thanks to television contracts, he says, football-power campuses are awash with cash, to the detriment of lesser schools, where student fees pay for sports. One of the power campuses is the University of Texas. There, longtime athletic director DeLoss Dodds told Gaul, “Football is the train that drives everything and pays for everything.”
It also pays big-power coaches handsomely. “Today,” Gaul writes, “seventy-five coaches collect at least \$1 million — and most are paid considerably more . . . Five coaches have pay packages topping \$5 million annually. Another 15 collect between \$3 million and \$5 million. Thirty-five others receive \$2 million or more.” (A Google search shows that among those 35 others are Gary Pinkel of the University of Missouri and Tim Beckman of the University of Illinois.)

“As a rule,” Gaul writes, “college football coaches are now the highest-paid public employees in virtually every state in the nation. They earn far more than governors and chief justices and are generally paid five to ten times what college presidents collect.”

Gaul notes that college athletics were originally designed to enhance the college experience for students, not to swell the coffers of big-power campuses. But as he tours big-power campuses like Texas, Alabama and Oregon, he muses that the lure of big-money has blindsided idealism.

He notes that at Texas, only 0.02 percent of undergrads play varsity sports, while at Amherst, 31 percent of students belong to varsity teams.

Still, who cares to watch Amherst play football on ESPN?

On the other hand, Gaul takes some interesting side trips — for example, to take a look at the women’s rowing team at Kansas State University, paid for by Wildcat football. And he travels to St. Louis to visit Holden Thorp, who left the University of North Carolina as its president after a football scandal.

These days, Thorp’s the provost of Washington University — where, as Gaul notes, “The average SAT score of incoming freshmen is about 1490. ‘There are no special admissions for athletes,’ Thorp said. ‘A lot of our athletes are engineering and premed.’ The football team plays in a stadium that is smaller than those of many high schools.” You can almost hear Thorp sigh with contentment.

When Gaul ponders whether university presidents at big-power schools have the courage to downplay big-money football, he takes a pessimistic tone.

Curiously, he makes no mention of the peril that massive head injuries pose to football’s future. Maybe concussions will solve the scandal by killing off football.

Harry Levins of Manchester retired in 2007 as senior writer of the Post-Dispatch. He is an alumnus of the University of Vermont, whose football team has been undefeated, untied and unscored upon since 1974 — when the school dropped the sport.

‘Billion-Dollar Ball’
By Gilbert M. Gaul

Published by Viking, 272 pages, \$27.95

August 21, 2015 by Andy Thomason
MU play festival races against time

By Amy Wilder

Sunday, August 23, 2015 at 12:00 am

Saturday at 7:59 p.m., for better or worse, six day-old troupes of creative theater types will present six newborn plays, written by six sleep-deprived playwrights.

The seventh annual 23:59 play festival — that is 23 hours and 59 minutes to write, direct and produce six ten-minute plays, props and all — presented by the graduate theater organization at the University of Missouri, kicks off at 8 p.m. Friday, when playwrights are assigned the secret line to be included in their works.

The line will be related to this year’s theme, “Double, double, toil and trouble!” which in turn is a nod to the theater department’s dedication of this season to William Shakespeare in celebration of the 400th anniversary of his death in 1616.

“Five of the productions are Shakespeare or Shakespeare-related plays,” said Carrie Winship, coordinator for this year’s festival. “So we’re trying to tie into that and be part of that conversation.”

Winship has been involved with 23:59 since beginning her doctoral program in 2011. One of the aspects she loves most about the event is “this total acceptance of imminent failure, and how that is central to it as a concept,” she said.

“So I think the theme, and the kind of danger of that, works really well for the environment of 23:59 and the way it pushes our artists and students. For me, it works on a lot of levels.”

The crunched time frame — playwrights get about 12 hours to complete their works, at which point directors and actors begin working out their lines and blocking — and limited resources set up an environment that demands creative problem-solving. And a healthy sense of humor.

“I think that threat of failure is where a lot of great creative moments happen,” Winship said. “You have to think on your feet and sometimes go with ideas that ... may not feel like the right ideas. And sometimes brilliance happens from that, because you take a risk and do something you probably wouldn’t have done if you had more time to think it through.”
“There’s no time to do what a lot of writers do ... which is contemplate and research and pick apart everything,” she added. “You have to make some bold choices and just commit to living in that space of failure and then enjoying the process.”

There are some interesting responses to these challenges. During Winship’s first year, there was a wedding dress created out of coffee filters.

“We have plays that run the gamut in terms of tone,” she said. “But I think everyone has to approach it with a good sense of humor throughout.”

And the writers don’t know how many actors will be involved until the day before the event. Sometimes those actors arrive with a whole new set of challenges — last year, one person expressed difficulty in quickly memorizing lines.

“So when that was communicated, the playwright wrote an entire play with just stage directions — it was the first time I got to see someone direct a play where there were no lines,” Winship said. “Seeing that a playwright took a live and realistic response to something ... was really exciting to me.”

Graduate student and fellow coordinator Natalie McCabe agreed. This will be her second year of involvement with 23:59; for her, the draw also lies in waiting to see how playwrights will respond to the theme and lines.

“Figuring out where that line” given to the playwrights when the festival kicks off “comes in, I think, is one of my favorite parts,” McCabe said. “Like last year’s festival, the theme was ‘sex and death.’ One of our playwrights was given a line about ‘being elbow deep,’ and somehow turned it into something about piranhas in a fish tank; the owner ends up elbow deep in the fish tank and passing out and falling over — which is very unexpected, given what you immediately think of with the theme.”

Potential playwrights are selected by organizers ahead of time. In addition to four graduate playwrights and one undergraduate writer, for the second year, the group has asked a community member to participate. Last year, Ed Hanson of Talking Horse Productions participated. This year’s guest playwright will be Meg Phillips Crespy.

The event is a good chance for undergraduate and graduate students to dive into the program and learn about their fellow students. But it is not limited to students.

“We really do want it to be an event that everyone in the community feels welcome to be a part of,” Winship said.

There will be an open informational meeting at 5 p.m. Thursday in the Fine Arts Annex, Room 116, for any students or community members interested in participating or finding out more about the event.