Emails show indecision, lack of communication plagued MU graduate student insurance decision

AUSTIN HUGUELET, 5 hrs ago

COLUMBIA — On July 21, Leona Rubin got an email saying MU could no longer offer health insurance subsidies to its graduate student employees.

The next day, she sent an email to Ed Knollmeyer, the University of Missouri System's director for risk and insurance management.

"(Subsidy program coordinator) Karen Gruen informed me that you believe we can no longer offer student insurance to graduate students. That will be VERY BAD," Rubin, MU's associate vice chancellor for graduate studies, wrote. "We will need a solution fast (really fast) or begin notifying students and programs if this is going to change."

On July 31, Hank Foley, then MU's senior vice chancellor for research, graduate studies and economic development, looked over alternatives to the subsidies and offered Rubin a frank assessment of the situation: "OK — this sucks."

But graduate students had no knowledge of the scramble going on within the university's upper echelon late last summer. Emails to the students would come without warning two weeks later, kicking off a semester of protest and breathing life into an effort to unionize graduate student employees.

Tensions between graduate student assistants and administration reached new heights Friday, when an attorney for the UM System informed the Coalition of Graduate Workers that it would not be recognized in contract negotiations. The coalition, which students approved as their collective bargaining representative in an election last month, is planning a lawsuit to challenge the system's position, which holds that graduate students are not employees.
Emails obtained through an open records request shed some light on the days leading up to Rubin's Aug. 14 announcement that the health insurance subsidies would end. While faculty and graduate students were in the dark, Rubin was struggling to get opinions and direction from Foley and Provost Garnett Stokes.

In interviews with the Missourian, faculty members and MU's previous Graduate School dean blamed the fiasco on former MU Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin’s structural changes to graduate studies administration and faulted university leaders for not pushing back on controversial legal advice from an outside law firm.

Neither Stokes nor Foley responded to inquiries for this article. In a recent email to the Missourian, Rubin said top administrators have worked to improve communication among themselves since last fall, but she acknowledged busy schedules can slow administrators' decision-making process.

“Clearly, the three or so weeks we had between notification and the start of school was not enough for this process to happen,” Rubin wrote.

'I don't think they want to make a decision'

Less than an hour after Rubin's July 22 email to Knollmeyer, Rubin emailed Stokes, Foley and MU Vice Chancellor for Finance Rhonda Gibler about the impending cuts.

At issue was an IRS ruling on the Affordable Care Act that prohibits employers from giving money to their employees for health insurance, an evasion of the ACA’s push for companies to provide full coverage for their workers.

If the IRS had enforced the ruling, fines could have run MU $100 per employee per day.

Knollmeyer sent out a notice of the opinion to graduate studies officials on all four campuses on July 23. The University of Missouri-St. Louis announced the next day that it would end subsidies.

But the process moved slowly on the Columbia campus, where roughly 2,600 graduate assistants enrolled for the fall semester. Foley, Stokes and Gibler hadn't responded to Rubin's email by the following Monday.
"So far there has been no response from our budget office to my email so I may go and camp on (Gibler's) doorstep," Rubin wrote to then-UMSL Graduate School Dean Judith Walker de Félix. She added a smiley face to the end of the sentence.

On July 29, after a meeting with UM System General Counsel and top graduate studies officials from two other system campuses, Rubin tried again, this time adding the following officials to the conversation:

- Loftin
- Ellen de Graffenreid, vice chancellor for marketing and communications
- Mary Jo Banken, MU News Bureau executive director
- Kelley Stuck, UM System assistant vice president of human resources
- Kenneth Dean and Pat Okker, senior associate provosts

Again, no one replied.

In a recent email, Loftin said Rubin's message was his "first real indication that there was a serious issue at play," but he was also busy at the time working on boosting research and MU's status in the Association of American Universities.

On July 31, two weeks before frustrated faculty, politicians and student began pelting her inbox with questions and catharsis, Rubin shared cost estimates for subsidy alternatives and a draft of the email she would send Aug. 14 to graduate students and directors of graduate programs with Foley, Gibler and Banken.

They could cancel the subsidy and not replace it — the university could get around promises made in offer letters if providing the subsidy violated federal law — “and have everyone hate us (more),” Rubin wrote. They could also go the other away, paying all graduate students 100 percent of the subsidy to the tune of about $7.5 million.

Rubin recommended a middle ground, giving all students on waivers 60 percent of the subsidy in the fall at a cost of about $4.5 million.
However, “decisions about how to spend $4.5 million are beyond my pay grade and not in my budget (though they are in Rhonda’s),” she wrote.

Foley added Stokes to the email conversation and lamented the situation that afternoon, but he deferred to Gibler to evaluate the financials.

Foley, who had just returned to work after open heart surgery, and Stokes weren't oblivious. Foley reached out to Regina Vasilatos-Youken, a former colleague at Pennsylvania State who runs its graduate school, to see if she had an answer to the IRS ruling. Stokes sent a similar missive to Nancy Marcus, the graduate school dean at Florida State, which was in the middle of bargaining a new agreement with the graduate student union.

Neither school could offer concrete advice; they were wrestling with the same questions as MU. Rubin also heard from Alabama, Auburn and Louisiana State, where subsidies were eliminated.

Rubin’s growing frustration with indecision shows in messages to Karen Gruen, the subsidy program coordinator.

On Aug. 3, Gruen told Rubin that students were asking why their promised subsidy money hadn’t shown up in their accounts — they had payments due Aug. 15 — and Rubin lamented the dysfunction above her.

“I have the provost thinking we are moving too fast and legal saying we are moving too slow,” Rubin wrote in reply. “The outcome is we do nothing for a few more days.”

Two days later, she emailed Stokes and Gibler new cost estimates on one-time fellowship payments for the fall. Rubin also emailed Loftin’s assistant, Ann McGruder, asking to meet with the chancellor that Friday, Aug. 7, or the following Monday.

On Friday, Gruen checked in to see if there was any news.
“No,” Rubin replied. “I have request (sic) time with the chancellor-no answer. I sent (Senior Associate Provost Ken Dean) and the Provost new costs, no answer. I’ll keep trying but I don’t think they want to make a decision.”

Her frustration was even more pronounced in an Aug. 12 email to Banken after she spoke with Loftin.

"Drives me crazy that I had this pretty much ready to go last Wednesday and have been waiting for someone at a higher pay range than mine to say ok about spending the $3 million (on one-time fellowship payments),” Rubin wrote.

Graduate School shuffle

MU astrophysics professor Angela Speck, a member of MU Faculty Council's executive committee who spoke at graduate student rallies in the fall, blamed the indecision on Loftin’s 2014 shakeup of graduate studies.

Rubin’s predecessor, former Graduate School Dean George Justice, reported to the provost, MU’s chief academic official. But Loftin made Rubin an associate vice chancellor under the umbrella of the Office of Research, Graduate Studies and Economic Development.

Placing graduate studies under Foley, who was in charge of research and economic development in addition to graduate studies, made responsibility for decision-making unclear in August, Speck said.

Justice agreed. “Moving the former Graduate School under the office of research made graduate education (in my view) a part of the research mission of the institution rather than where it rightly should be: at the heart of the university's efforts in education," he wrote in a email to the Missourian.

"Dr. Rubin is just as strong an advocate for students as I was. She didn't have the place in the institution for her deep commitment to be registered in the most effective way.”

In 2014, Loftin said he was making the change to let faculty make more curriculum decisions while the new office of graduate studies handled administrative duties.
He stood by the move in a May email to the Missourian.

“Dr. Rubin reported to a Vice Chancellor level leader (the Provost) as Interim Dean of the Graduate School and to a Vice Chancellor as Associate Vice Chancellor for Graduate Studies,” he wrote in the email. “Thus, I saw no diminution of her 'administrative' ability to 'advocate for graduate students.'”

Judith Walker de Félix, the former graduate school dean at UMSL — where students learned of canceled subsidies July 24 — said the confusion at MU also complicated coordinating pushback against the UM System’s legal opinion.

“To us on the outside, (the dissolution of the graduate school) seemed to have left a gap in graduate leadership at MU, slowed decision-making on that campus, and made it difficult for UMSL and MU to issue a joint response to the UM decision,” she wrote in a recent email.

Ben Trachtenberg, MU Faculty Council chair and an associate professor of law, also zeroed in on the failure to push back against a legal opinion that would clearly harm graduate students.

“Outside counsel correctly diagnosed a potential risk,” he said, referring to hefty IRS fines MU could have faced. “But the job of an attorney is to give advice. That does not remove the need for us to consider how that opinion affects the values of the university.”

Legal leaps

Top administrators did question the opinion of Jefferson City law firm Stinson Leonard Street, emails show.

In her July 22 email to Ed Knollmeyer, Rubin expressed disbelief that the Affordable Care Act would actually deprive students of coverage.

“I read the document,” she wrote, referring to a notice about the IRS ruling sent out by the industry group College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, “and really don’t understand why it impacts students or why the ACA would want to throw tens of thousands of graduate students from across the country out of their coverage.”
Stein Bloom, the director of federal relations at the American Council on Education, has been working with regulators in Washington, D.C., on the issue since last spring. He said he was similarly baffled when the IRS advisory, largely ignored by most education lobbyists when it was issued in 2013, began wreaking havoc on campuses last summer.

“When you read the notice, it sort of takes a leap of faith to see how it applies to what we’re doing,” Bloom said.

But when Rubin suggested stalling any decision to allow lobbying efforts to run their course, legal shot her down, she wrote in an email Aug. 2.

Bloom sympathized with university lawyers’ worries about the hefty fines but said it would have been “kind of astonishing” if the IRS had started collecting them while negotiating with higher education lobbyists.

And ultimately, Trachtenberg said, conversations with faculty and graduate students would have made the eventual blowback of canceling subsidies clear to administrators.

“If there had been consultation, there could have been a conversation with Rubin, Loftin, faculty leaders and leaders of the graduate students,” Trachtenberg said. “And it would have quickly become apparent that taking away subsidies was not going to go over well.”

Rubin reached out to Trachtenberg in an email July 31, but he wrote back that he would be out of town from Aug. 1 to Aug. 10.

"I'll keep you informed by email," she replied, "but changes in the student health program are being driven by the ACA, IRS and legal and is time sensitive so it can't wait till you return. I'll try to touch base with (MU Faculty Council's academic affairs committee chair Art Jago) and (Faculty Council student affairs committee chair Tim Evans) next week."

Trachtenberg said he didn't hear more until Aug. 13, the day before the announcement, in an email from Rubin laying out the scale of the problem.
Rubin met with leaders of the Graduate Professional Council, the university-recognized graduate student government, the day of the announcement.

Pointing fingers, pointed questions

She didn't have to wait long for a response to her mass email Aug. 14.

"You should feel ashamed of yourselves," one student wrote to Rubin and other administrators. "By stripping graduate students of their health insurance benefits, you diminish our quality of life and make it even more challenging to complete our degrees."

"And the law allows for literally no advance notice of the termination of employee benefits (current Aetna plans expire at midnight tonight)?" another student asked.

State Reps. Stephen Webber and Kip Kendrick, Columbia Democrats, weighed in, too. They wanted to know why they heard about the cuts from angry students instead of MU leaders.

The day after the announcement, Loftin barred Rubin from making any additional statements on the insurance issue without de Graffenreid's approval. (De Graffenreid has since left MU for Duke University).

Loftin's announcement of a task force charged with finding a solution the subsidy problem acknowledged a "lack of appropriate notice and prior consultation" before Rubin's announcement.

"The students are tweeting that they can no longer trust me or the office because I sat on this information rather than tell them," Rubin wrote to Foley Aug. 17. "The Chancellor's letter about the task force clearly puts the blame on me in a very public way ... I think when you get back we need to talk about a transition plan so you have someone here that can help you."

Ultimately, after a week of talks with Democratic U.S. Sen. Claire McCaskill and UM System officials, Loftin announced subsidies would be paid as promised, and Foley took responsibility for the gaffe with students and faculty.
The day after Loftin's announcement, he sent a letter to Trachtenberg shouldering responsibility for Rubin's call.

"Fear of breaking an IRS advisory with the apparent risk of huge financial penalties looming over us led to an expedient decision that trumped our academic values," Foley wrote. "Had I been able to give Dr. Rubin more of my time last month to work through this properly the outcome would have been different."

"Thank you for the detail and candor of your letter," Trachtenberg wrote back. "Leona has taken a lot of fire over the past week, and your willingness to shoulder some of the responsibility is laudable."

"Thank you!!" Tim Evans wrote. "I am tired of the blame game. Leona is great, but some of her communications needed another view."

But Rubin was unmoved.

"Sorry you did that Hank," she wrote. "It wasn’t all you and I’m not that green."

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**ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH**

**Mizzou graduate assistants sue the university, want recognition for union**

By Koran Addo St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 20 hrs ago

University of Missouri-Columbia graduate assistants have filed a lawsuit against the school's Board of Curators in an attempt to be recognized as employees under state law.

Graduate assistants are students pursuing advanced degrees. They are either paid or compensated through benefits to teach classes, grade papers and conduct research.

In April, graduate assistants voted 668-127 in favor of forming a union.
The vote set up a legal fight between the board and the Coalition of Graduate Workers because the University of Missouri System does not recognize graduate assistants as employees.

Graduate assistants have been protesting on campus since last fall in response to being stripped of their health insurance subsidies on the eve of the school year.

The university eventually restored the subsidies on a limited basis, but graduate assistants continued to protest what they describe as the gradual erosion of their benefits going back several years.

The friction between the two sides led to the union vote.

Connor Lewis, a graduate assistant in Mizzou’s history department, said the lawsuit could have been avoided. The two sides have been in talks since the winter of 2015.

“My impression is that (human resources) and the university’s general counsel were committed to forcing us down this legal road from day one,” he said.

The lawsuit asserts that Mizzou’s more than 2,600 graduate assistants should be classified as public employees. “Public employees have a constitutional right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing,” the suit says.

Christian Basi, a spokesman for the Columbia campus, did not comment specifically on the lawsuit but called graduate assistants “an integral part” of the university community.

“Given this invaluable role, the university has continued to work collaboratively with graduate students to address many of their ongoing concerns,” he said.

Since the uproar last fall, Mizzou has increased the minimum pay for some graduate assistants, restored health subsidies through the 2016-17 school year and entered into talks to provide graduate assistants with affordable housing.
Coalition for grad students sues University of Missouri

The group says MU is violating grad students the right to union representation.

In April, 84 percent of the graduate assistants voted to support a union.

Mizzou again denied recognition of the union May 6.

COLUMBIA, Mo. – A coalition elected to represent graduate students in collective bargaining at the University of Missouri filed a lawsuit Wednesday asking university officials to recognize it as a bargaining unit.

In a lawsuit filed in Boone County Circuit Court, the Coalition of Graduate Workers, which is affiliated with the Missouri National Education Association, argued the university is violating about 2,700 graduate assistants' constitutional right to be represented by a union.

The coalition has been seeking recognition since December but school officials contend graduate assistants are students, not employees, and have no right to form a union, the Columbia Daily Tribune reported.

In an April election, 84 percent of the graduate assistants who voted supported the union. The university again denied recognition of the union on May 6.

Michael Kaemmerer, a university lawyer, says no legal precedent exists to settle the question.

“To resolve this substantial legal issue, the CGW at the very least must establish legal authority to bargain collectively, through the applicable appeals process,” Kaemmerer said.

The effort to form a union for graduate assistants began in August when the university announced, with little prior notice, that it would replace individual health insurance for the assistants with stipends to cover some insurance costs. The decision drew immediate criticism, prompting the university to reinstate their health insurance.
Since then, the university has increased stipends, worked to provide affordable housing and changed the date when fees are due. But coalition leaders say the graduate assistants need a union because the university did nothing to help them until pressure to form a union began.

**Graduate assistants sue University of Missouri for recognition of union**

By Rudi Keller

Thursday, May 12, 2016 at 2:00 pm

A long-threatened lawsuit to determine whether graduate assistants at the University of Missouri qualify as employees under state labor law was filed Wednesday in Boone County Circuit Court.

The Coalition of Graduate Workers, a local union affiliated with the Missouri National Education Association, sued the university for recognition as the bargaining representative for 2,600 graduate students employed as teaching and research assistants, instructors, library assistants and graduate fellows.

In the complaint, attorney Sally Barker of St. Louis wrote that by refusing to recognize the union, the university is violating the graduate assistants’ right to collectively bargain secured by the Missouri Constitution.

Barker was the attorney who represented the MNEA when it won a 2012 Missouri Supreme Court ruling recognizing that public employees have the same collective bargaining rights as workers in private industry.

The coalition has been seeking recognition from the university since December, Barker wrote. The university has refused to recognize an election to determine whether the graduate assistants wanted union representation.

“One of the things I have been thinking about the past couple of days is how unnecessary this whole thing is,” said Connor Lewis, co-chairman of the coalition. “I certainly never wanted it to come to this and hoped at every juncture that the university would be more reasonable and more cooperative.”
The university has better things to do with its money than fight the lawsuit, MNEA President Charles Smith said in a news release.

“Public universities in other states bargain with graduate workers,” Smith said. “It is troubling that this university will not do so, particularly because, unlike elsewhere, the rights of all employees to collectively bargain are guaranteed by our state constitution.”

UM System spokesman John Fougere wrote in an email that university administrators would not comment on the lawsuit.

Lewis, a doctoral student in history, and five other graduate assistants are listed as individual plaintiffs in the case. The university will not be able to undermine the unionization effort by extending the court case, Lewis said.

“Whether I see the end of this lawsuit while I am at the university, I think we will have people who are committed to see it through,” he said.

In an election held April 18 and 19 — organized by the coalition and supervised by the League of Women Voters — about 30 percent of graduate assistants voted; 84 percent supported forming the union. On May 6, the university again rejected a request for recognition of the vote.

Michael Kaemmerer, a lawyer hired by the university, wrote that graduate assistants are students rather than employees and have no right to bargain collectively. Kaemmerer claimed there is no legal precedent for either the university or the graduate assistants’ position.

“To resolve this substantial legal issue, the CGW at the very least must establish legal authority to bargain collectively, through the applicable appeals process,” Kaemmerer wrote.

Agitation for a union began after MU leaders said last August that the university no longer would provide individual health insurance plans for graduate assistants, replacing the plan with a stipend designed to cover some insurance costs. The university quickly reversed that decision, which was based on IRS interpretations of federal health care law.

The university has attempted to soothe the discontented graduate assistants with increased stipends, efforts to provide affordable housing and changing dates when fees are due.

“It is certainly mistaken to think that just because the university, under pressure, is paying more attention to graduate student employees that they will continue to do so,” Lewis said.

**MISSOURIAN**

**Graduate students sue MU in search of union recognition**
COLUMBIA — The Coalition of Graduate Workers sued the University of Missouri System Board of Curators on Wednesday, extending its months-long effort to be recognized by MU as a union in collective bargaining.

In its lawsuit filed in the 13th Circuit Court for Boone County, the coalition asked for a ruling directing the curators to acknowledge graduate student assistants as employees and collectively bargain with them or organize an MU-sanctioned election for graduate students to vote whether to unionize.

On April 18 and 19, in an election organized by the League of Women Voters, graduate students overwhelmingly approved the Coalition of Graduate Workers as their sole representative in collective bargaining. The measure was approved by 84 percent of the 795 students who voted — a turnout rate of about 30 percent.

According to Article 1 of the Missouri Constitution's Bill of Rights, employees have a right to organize and bargain collectively with their employer, but MU has repeatedly stated that graduate workers are not employees.

The goal of the lawsuit is to force the university to recognize graduate workers’ employee status, coalition outreach officer Joseph Moore said. “We want a legally binding contract that guarantees security and stability so nothing like the insurance crisis that happened at the beginning of last year can happen again.”

The Coalition of Graduate Workers organized last fall in response to an announcement from MU that graduate student employees would no longer receive health insurance subsidies. The subsidies were restored, but the coalition continued its efforts to advocate for graduate students with assistantships.
On Dec. 21, the Coalition of Graduate Workers formally requested that the university hold an election for the nearly 2,600 graduate workers to vote on whether to unionize. A second request was filed on Jan. 6, according to the lawsuit. The university denied the request on Feb. 10.

On May 6, MU’s attorneys notified the coalition’s lawyers that its request to be recognized as a union local would be denied. The coalition has affiliated itself with the Missouri National Education Association, a state education union.

In an email to the Missourian, MU spokesman Christian Basi cited increases to minimum stipends and continuation of health insurance subsidies for graduate student assistants as well as progress on reviving housing on the former site of University Village as "good-faith efforts" to address graduate students' concerns.

"It is our belief that unionizing is unnecessary for Mizzou’s graduate students," Basi wrote. "We believe that graduate students are fundamentally students and are part of our campus communities to learn."

**THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Graduate Students Sue Mizzou Over Right to Form a Union**

Graduate students at the University of Missouri have sued the institution, demanding that it recognize their affirmative vote to form a union, the *Columbia Daily Tribune* reports. Listed as plaintiffs in the suit, filed on Wednesday, are the Coalition of Graduate Workers and six individual graduate students.

The suit represents the latest agitation between the university and its graduate students, which was touched off by the university’s sudden decision last year to revoke graduate assistants’ health-insurance subsidies (it later backtracked). Emails obtained by *The Columbia Missourian* and published on Thursday chronicle the
communication failure that resulted in that fiasco, summarized aptly by an email from Henry C. (Hank) Foley, who is now the interim chancellor: “OK — this sucks.”

Last month Mizzou’s grad students voted in favor of forming a union. The university has said the students are not employees and don’t have a right to bargain collectively. A spokesman for the university system declined to comment on the lawsuit to the Daily Tribune.

The lawsuit argues that the Missouri Constitution grants graduate assistants the right to bargain collectively because they are paid for their work.

Mizzou Grad Student Workers Sue for Union Recognition

University of Missouri at Columbia graduate employees are suing the university system’s Board of Curators for union recognition, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported. Graduate assistants voted last month 668-127 to form a union affiliated with the National Education Association. But Hank Foley, interim campus chancellor, reportedly called the vote a “straw poll more than an official tally,” and said that formal union recognition and students' employee status was a matter to be settled by the courts.

The lawsuit asserts that graduate assistants are public employees, and that such workers “have a constitutional right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing.” Christian Basi, a spokesperson for the Columbia campus, didn’t comment on the legal issue but told the Post-Dispatch that graduate employees are “an integral part” of the university, and that administrators have “continued to work collaboratively with graduate students to address many of their ongoing concerns.”

The university’s sudden -- and almost as suddenly revoked -- announcement last year that it was cutting health insurance subsidies for graduate students built on-campus momentum for a union. Emails recently obtained via open records requests by the Missourian, Columbia’s student newspaper, show how administrators scrambled days before students arrived on campus last summer to understand whether and how
new federal guidance on the Affordable Care Act conflicted with health insurance subsidies for graduate student employees.

Leona Rubin, associate vice chancellor for graduate studies, proposed a series of options for dealing with the problem in one email, including, “We can just eliminate the subsidy program, save $4.5 million, and have everyone hate us (more). Legally we can do that since providing the subsidy is breaking federal law and we don’t need to adhere to our offer letters.” She added, “We need to move pretty quick on this as students are arriving and some may be enrolling in the insurance thinking it will be 100 percent paid. Also, our currently enrolled students with health care will lose it in 15 days.”

**MU Graduate Students File Lawsuit Against UM Board of Curators over Union Recognition**

The Coalition of Graduate Workers, a union representing MU graduate student employees, filed a lawsuit against the University Of Missouri Board Of Curators on Wednesday.

The Coalition is suing to have graduate students classified as employees and to have the Coalition of Graduate Workers be recognized as the collective bargaining representative for MU graduate student employees.

Eric Scott, one of the co-chairs of the Coalition of Graduate Workers, said he was disappointed that the university failed to recognize the Coalition as a bargaining agent following a graduate student election in April.

“It’s been our position all along that we believe that a union is the best way to move forward for the university and to make the university a better and more sustainable environment,” Scott said. “I was extremely disappointed that the university is refusing to work with us, when that's all we've ever wanted to do with them.”
But he adds that many graduate students were not surprised by the University’s decision.

“After all of the things that we have gone through this year, it's not really that surprising that the university is choosing to be obstructionist,” Scott said. “Which is unfortunate. We would all like to have more faith in our university than this, but, that’s the situation that they have set up.”

Scott said that the lawsuit is a way for the Coalition of Graduate Workers to once and for all prove that graduate student employees are employees and have the standing to unionize.

He added that the union was hoping to avoid a costly legal battle, but, he said, “at the same time we're willing to fight for our rights.”

It is uncertain when the case will be decided, but Scott said that the union is hoping it can be resolved in a matter of months, rather than years.

Representatives of the UM System have not responded to requests for comment.

Coalition of Graduate Workers files lawsuit against UM

COLUMBIA - The Coalition of Graduate Workers at the University of Missouri filed a lawsuit Thursday against the University of Missouri Board of Curators stating they are employees of the university and want to be allowed to unionize.

The lawsuit states that CGW believes “graduate workers” are public employees. The lawsuit said graduate workers include graduate assistants, graduate teaching assistants, graduate research assistants, graduate instructors, graduate library assistants and graduate fellows.

In December 2015 and January 2016, CGW requested that the university allow them to hold an election for graduate workers to vote on whether they wanted to be represented exclusively by CGW. In February, the university rejected this request.
In the lawsuit, CGW claimed the University denying CGW the right to unionize violates Article I, Section (?) 29 of the Missouri Constitution of 1945.

In April, CGW held an election with the help of the League of Women Voters. Thirty percent of graduate workers voted in the election. Of that 30 percent, 84 percent of the voters voted for CGW to be their exclusive collective bargaining representative. On May 6, an attorney told the plaintiffs that the university had denied their request for recognition.

In an email to KOMU 8 News, MU Spokesperson Christian Basi said the university and graduate students need "legal clarity" before recognizing graduate students’ right to organize. Basi said "graduate students are fundamentally students."

According to the lawsuit, one plaintiff tried wrote to the university’s Chief of Staff so there would be communication between Interim UM System President Mike Middleton.

The plaintiffs representing CGW are Connor Lewis, Eric Scott, David L. Elliott, Mark Nicholais, Joseph Dean Moore and Doug Valentine. They all fall under their definition of “graduate workers.”

"Accordingly, the University of Missouri will not consider the graduate students’ vote binding and requires legal guidance through the applicable appeals process," Basi said.

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**Mizzou graduate students sue over unionization**

COLUMBIA, Mo. - After a school year of protests, negotiations and voting, a graduate student group sued the University of Missouri to recognize their union.

The Coalition of Graduate Workers filed suit Wednesday in Boone County circuit court against the school system's Board of Curators. The group, aiming to represent the 2,692 graduate assistants on the Columbia campus, wants the University to recognize those student workers as employees, and grant them to right to collectively bargain with school administration.

CGW held a vote in April on the issue of unionization. 84 percent of those that cast a vote favored the plan, but Mizzou administration has yet to formally recognize the union. At issue is the question of whether graduate students qualify as "employees" under state law.
Joe Moore called last August's decision to end graduate student health insurance subsidies a "callous" one by the school's administration. Graduate assistants pay taxes on the money they make, work as Title IX reporters and perform a variety of duties similar to that of employees. That should allow the graduate assistants to collectively bargain for a contract, similar to what public employees like school teachers are allowed.

"When somebody, one particular group gets denied their rights, it makes it that much easier for other people to have their rights denied," Moore said about the importance of the case. "And we feel that our constitutional right to collectively bargain is being denied."

Attorney Sally Barker of St. Louis represents the graduate workers in the case. The petition cites state constitution's guarantee for public employees "to 'organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing,'" along with a 2007 state Supreme Court case involving teachers in Independence. Graduate students receive a stipend for their work as well as subsidized health insurance, among other benefits. The petition said University administration denied CGW's "request for recognition and commencement of bargaining" on May 6.

School spokesman Christian Basi told ABC 17 News the school would raise stipends for graduate workers and doctoral students the next two years. He also mentioned that the school was working on different fronts to provide new graduate student housing, two years after the loss of University Village and the Student Parent Center.

Moore, though, felt promises would best be left to a signed contract, calling the entire situation "unnecessary."

"The University could have voluntarily chosen to recognize the results of a democratic election and recognize our union and began the process of collective bargaining. They chose not to, under the pretext that they're not sure we're workers."

UM System spokesman John Fougere did not return a message seeking comment. However, the system often does not comment on pending litigation.

**MISSOURIAN**

**MU administrators stand by decisions boosting AAU status**

JILL DEUTSCH, 1 hr ago

COLUMBIA — College of Arts and Science Dean Michael O’Brien calls himself the No. 1 champion of the Association of American Universities at MU.
He came to the university in 1980, and in his 35 years, he’s seen MU decline by AAU standards. Still, he said he couldn’t get people to care about the association — at least not until the University of Nebraska got the boot.

When it happened in May 2011, O’Brien sat in his Lowry Hall office and thought about how the same thing could happen to MU: “Does anybody understand how bad that is for us?”

“I’d been concerned for years,” he said. "Administrators say, ‘Oh, all you’re doing is putting a target on our back,’ and it’s like, are you kidding me? The target’s been on our back for 40 years. Let’s do something about it.”

O’Brien began a journey to do just that.

He and others in Arts and Science dedicated the winter 2014 issue of Mosaics, a publication of the College of Arts and Science, to the AAU. It was this magazine — loaded with charts showing MU at the bottom of key AAU standards — that thrust the AAU before the eyes of administrators, according to O’Brien.

With improving MU’s status in the association in mind, administrators reshuffled money, hired new faculty and improved buildings.

Five years later, deans including O’Brien, Patrice Delafontaine of the School of Medicine and Judith Miller of the Sinclair School of Nursing, think those were the right decisions. They say membership in the AAU maintains the university’s reputation and keeps it competitive.

Those less enthused about the AAU don’t deny that nor do they want to see MU make national headlines again, this time for academic performance. They don’t want to be another Nebraska.

“Overall, we’re not much different from them, and that’s what scares me to death,” O’Brien said.

The push to focus on the AAU
The AAU is an invitation-only association made up of 62 public and private universities considered the best research institutions in the U.S. Two are in Canada. MU is one of four AAU members in the 14-school Southeastern Conference, along with Vanderbilt, Texas A&M and the University of Florida.

Members are assessed based on two tiers of indicators. The most valued indicators are federally funded research dollars, membership in the national academies, citations in scholarly journals and faculty awards. Still important, but of less importance, are other forms of research funding, the number of Ph.D.s awarded annually, the number of postdoctoral appointees and the strength of undergraduate education.

Mardy Eimers, MU vice provost for institutional research and quality improvement, wrote in an email that it can be difficult to calculate an institution’s exact position because the AAU does not share the weights it places on each indicator. The AAU also considers other factors such as the variety of academic programs and whether indicators are increasing or decreasing over time when reviewing membership.

“Although the AAU identifies the key indicators, institutional researchers and higher education experts cannot replicate with certainty how the AAU does things,” Eimers wrote.

From the scant publicly available information, MU clearly lags behind its peers. Almost all other AAU schools outdo MU when it comes to securing federal funding, retaining premier faculty and hiring postdoctoral fellows.

In October 2013, O’Brien brought the pre-publication mockups of the AAU-themed Mosaics to a deans 'retreat. Hank Foley was there and had just begun his position as senior vice chancellor for research and graduate studies.

In the magazine, graphs show where AAU institutions sit for each AAU indicator. Lines show those at the top 75th percentile, 50th, 25th and lowest. MU consistently hovers above the lowest line.
“I remember, I called back to Carla, my assistant, to see if she could run some copies of the text (of the magazine), not published yet, and I said, ‘This is what we need to do, guys,’” O’Brien said. “We’re way off the mark.”

O’Brien said the deans voted to pool 2 percent of each college’s budget to making “signature hires,” who would increase MU’s standing with important AAU standards such as federal research expenditures and prestigious awards.

After this, he said, Foley became the No. 2 champion of the AAU. Foley, now MU’s interim chancellor, told the Columbia Tribune two years ago that MU was at No. 32 out of 34 public universities. He hoped to boost MU’s ranking to No. 28.

After the magazine published in January 2014, it landed on the desk of former UM System President Tim Wolfe, who then took it to the UM System Board of Curators, who then took it to Missouri legislators.

To O’Brien, the change in the system’s attitude was like “night and day.”

When former Chancellor Brady Deaton announced his resignation in June 2013, the search for a new chancellor focused on someone who knew the AAU well. O’Brien said it was the No. 1 reason for hiring R. Bowen Loftin, who’d come from Texas A&M, a premier AAU institution.

O’Brien also credits the AAU focus on hiring Delafontaine, the former chief of cardiology at AAU-member Tulane University.

As O’Brien put it: “We need people who get it.”

There seem to be many who do. Of the seven administrators interviewed for this article, everyone reflected on how AAU membership affirms MU’s reputation as one of the best.

Delafontaine called it a “stamp of excellence,” and Miller said having that membership means administrators can “flaunt our greatness and attract other high achieving scholars.”
When you ask O’Brien about it, he points to a pyramid on the second page of Mosaics. It shows the 1,920 community colleges at the base; 1,536 four-year colleges in the next level up; 851 specialized, religious and technical colleges one step higher; and, at the peak, the U.S. research institutions comprising the AAU.

“It tells you that you’re different,” O’Brien said. “Everybody knows where you are.”

**Focusing on what the AAU cares about**

The AAU indicators look a lot at money. The first indicator, and one of great focus at MU, is federal research expenditures. Specifically, the AAU looks at money granted by the National Science Foundation.

No one, even those not in the STEM fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, seems to argue about the importance of this research.

“It should be a priority of the federal government to help pay for that research, and it should be a priority of the universities themselves to keep that up as part of their missions,” MU Faculty Council chair and law professor Ben Trachtenberg said. “That I don’t dispute for a second.”

To do this kind of research requires faculty who are good researchers, and the money pooled from the 2 percent of college budgets allows the university to make related hires. In the past two years, the university hired three signature hires — two in chemistry and one in physics.

Nursing and medicine require large research expenditures, and the deans of those schools at MU are keeping that in mind.

For Miller, having AAU membership means her faculty are motivated to stay within it. They need to keep working to get federal grants, have ample citations in prestigious journals and be members in national academies.

“What it means is you work hard to keep that type of productivity up, and, in that way, we’re only helping each other move forward,” Miller said.
Research expenditures within the School of Medicine have “lagged” in recent years, according to Delafontaine, but he’s working to fix that. The school hired three new chairs of large departments — medicine, radiology and surgery — with important research and National Institutes of Health funding.

Delafontaine and Medical School administrators hope to increase federal research expenditures by 10 percent in the next year and 100 percent in the next five, according to the Medical School’s strategic plan. The plan also includes adding 7,000 to 10,000 square feet to the Medical Sciences Building on Hospital Drive and constructing a 60,000-square-foot medical research building by 2020.

This research focus, Delafontaine said, doesn’t take away from clinical or educational excellence but, rather, adds to them. Better research means that patients receive cutting-edge care and that students learn from the newest and best in the field, he said. This is what the Medical School should be doing anyway, and if it does, AAU membership should come naturally, he said.

“What matters more than just the AAU stamp is what does it require to be competitive in the AAU,” Delafontaine said. “It requires excellence in many areas that are very important for a medical school and for a health system. That’s really why it’s so important.”

**What gets overlooked**

The AAU’s reputation of prestige has been questioned and dismissed by some. The association has been called “a country club,” an “old boys club,” “a fraternity” and “a retro old-boy network,” according to critics who’ve written to the Chronicle of Higher Education and previous Missourian reporting.

This doesn’t faze O’Brien. Does he think the AAU is elitist? Yes. Too elitist? No.

He likened it to high school when someone says they wouldn’t be a member of an exclusive clique.
“Yes, you would!” he said. “They just didn’t ask you. If someone once said it’s just an ‘old boys club,’ ‘old girls club,’ it’s like, yep, it sure is, and it’s one I want to be a member of.”

But some take issue with how the AAU places different levels of importance on different types of research. Agricultural research, for example, is regarded less highly than other types of research. AAU indicators also overlook research that requires little money, such as those in the humanities.

“Philosophy costs less than physics,” Trachtenberg said. “That doesn’t make it less important, but if one of your criteria is cash, then it will look less important.”

Trachtenberg said there’s a real danger of leaving behind the humanities in pursuit of the AAU’s indicators.

“It would be a big mistake to say, ‘I care so much about lab money that I’m going to pull out the money from English 1000 and make that program weaker, so that I can get a few more research dollar expenditures,’” he said.

The rest of the AAU’s phase one indicators include membership in the national academies, faculty awards and citations in specific journals, all of which skew toward the STEM fields.

English chair David Read pointed out that the most important publication in the English Department, the PMLA or publication of the Modern Language Association, isn’t counted in the AAU’s list of publications.

O’Brien said, though, that if the AAU isn’t counting those books for MU, then they’re not counting them at Harvard, either.

“That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be fighting within the AAU to make the measuring stick more appropriate for what the AAU should be measuring,” Trachtenberg said.
But what the AAU might be missing by focusing so much on STEM research is creating the well-rounded citizen, which historically was the purpose of attending a university, Read said. Now, if he asks an undergraduate, “Why are you here?” They would answer, “To get a job.”

“I would be so surprised to have a student say it’s to be a better citizen of my city, state and country,” Read said.

Trachtenberg said he doesn’t want the university to only care about the measuring stick rather than the measurement.

“What I think we want to do is be the kind of university that the AAU is supposed to recognize and hope for the best,” Trachtenberg said. “And while we’re doing that, we don’t want to get our mission distorted by the measuring stick.”

The cost of caring about the AAU

To avoid becoming another Nebraska, O’Brien said MU needs to hire world-class faculty and put them in the right areas.

“It’s easy to say that’s what we gotta do, but when the campus is faced with — it’s horrendous,” O’Brien stopped and sighed.

What attracts prestigious faculty varies. For some, it might be the college-town atmosphere downtown; for others, it might be a welcoming community or having ties to Missouri. Often, though, it comes down to money.

MU was the second lowest-paying university in the AAU in fiscal year 2014, only behind the University of Wisconsin-Madison, according to data compiled by the Chronicle of Higher Education.

O’Brien said the problem often isn’t bringing faculty in, though. It’s keeping them.
Read said he’s lost great faculty when another university swooped in and offered them a salary that MU just can’t match. He thinks the university should focus on that.

Read said he used to be on board for reallocating 2 percent of each college’s budget. Now, it seems like the reallocation of money chasing this “abstract thing” comes at too high a cost.

“I’m not sure the pursuit is worth the struggle,” he said.

Being better in the AAU requires money. Right now, MU doesn’t have a lot.

“I think given the current financial situation of the university, everyone’s asking about every pile of money,” Trachtenberg said.

O’Brien believes it’s worth it. When he explains why the AAU matters, he points — literally, repeatedly and forcefully, his forefinger thumping the desk — at the last AAU indicator. It’s the most difficult to quantify, and it’s the one O’Brien swears is the reason MU is still in the AAU. It’s the strength of the undergraduate education.

This relies heavily on schools with national reputations such as the Missouri School of Journalism, which consistently ranks as one of the best in the country; faculty in the humanities who’ve been awarded large grants such as J. Brian Houston, an assistant professor in the Communication Department, and Stephen Karian, an associate professor of English.

This work counts — both to the AAU and the undergraduate education — just as much as the work in the STEM fields, O’Brien said. Although the AAU puts STEM first, O’Brien believes being in the AAU requires that everyone get better at what they’re already doing, STEM or not.

“We don’t have to do anything different to be in the AAU other than just doing what we’re expected to do,” Delafontaine said.

Miller said the Nursing School would continue to work on research, citations and awards with or without the AAU membership. To lose it wouldn’t change the focus of the school but rather its reputation, she said.
“There would be some negative press about it, and we don’t want to have any more press that misconstrues what goes on in this great university,” Miller said. “Whether it would dampen our spirits in terms of our own research and energy to be in the national academies and continue to be in wonderful journals and citations in recognized journals? We’d still do that in our School of Nursing.”

O’Brien believes it’s his job to care about staying in and getting better within the AAU.

“My job is to protect the value of your degree, whether you or anybody else believes that AAU is important,” O’Brien said. “It is. Sometimes it’s like your parents tell you, ‘Just do what I tell you to do.’ Well, that’s my job … to protect the value of your degree.

“Your degree means more and will mean more if it’s from the university that has a world-class journalism school and is a member of the AAU.”

Rhoades continues investigation into Mizzou softball

By Dave Matter St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 8 hrs ago

COLUMBIA, MO. • In his first public comments since the Missouri softball team announced a protest against him and his administration, MU athletics director Mack Rhoades said his ongoing investigation into coach Ehren Earleywine’s program has been fair and thorough. About a month ago, the athletics department launched an internal investigation into allegations involving personnel matters within the team.

“It’s been hard for everybody involved,” Rhoades said Thursday on Columbia radio station KTGR 1580 AM, the school’s local flagship channel. “We have fans out there who are upset, et cetera. I hope people understand allegations of a severe gravity were brought to our attention.
In our initial statement we talked about (allegations) both from internal to the program and external to the program. We have an obligation to look into those."

Earlier Thursday, the softball team’s unity council doubled down on its harsh criticism of Rhoades and what it called his “long road of lies and hidden agendas” in a statement released to some local media outlets. The unity council, made up of four players each representing a different class, issued new statements to clarify the timeline of events that led to their protest. The player statement repeatedly describes the interviews Mizzou athletics administration had with players as “interrogations.”

On April 3, after a win over Tennessee, executive associate AD Tim Hickman told the players they’d have to take part in mandatory interviews, which were conducted April 5. Three university administrators “interrogated” the players individually. On April 7, the unity council wrote a letter to Rhoades to express concern over those meetings. On April 12, Rhoades met with the unity council to express his disapproval of their letter and said the investigation would be completed in a week.

On May 4, according to the unity council, a lawyer representing the team sent a letter to Rhoades on the players’ behalf asking if Earleywine would be back for next season. Another athletics official answered the letter saying the players would be notified at an appropriate time.

On Monday, two days after the team announced its protest of Rhoades, Rhoades met with the players, according to the unity council, and denied their requests to record the meeting and have their attorney listen to the meeting over the phone. “He continued his tactics of deception and intimidation,” the team’s statement said.

On Tuesday, players met with Hickman and continued to express concerns that Rhoades and executive associate AD for compliance Mary Ann Austin were not listening to their statements and only pursuing their own agenda and “personal attack on Earleywine.” (Earleywine’s last name is misspelled throughout the unity council’s statement.)
The unity council also released its letter to Rhoades from last month. The letter addresses the complaints filed by players about Earleywine’s coaching style but insists the intent of the complaints was to get the coach fired because the players were upset with their performance this season.

In Thursday’s radio interview, Rhoades said he’s unsure when the investigation will be complete.

The Tigers were eliminated from the SEC tournament with Wednesday’s loss and will learn Sunday if they’re hosting an NCAA regional next week.

MAY 12, 2016 4:41 PM

Mizzou softball team expands on protest of athletic department’s handling of investigation into coach

Team’s unity council releases two documents

One was a letter sent to athletic director Mack Rhoades

Council says players faced “intimidation and manipulation”

The Missouri softball team continues to play hard ball with Tigers athletic director Mack Rhoades.

The softball team’s four-player unity council, which announced a protest of the university’s investigation into coach Ehren Earleywine last weekend, released a second statement Thursday that clarifies and expands on its actions.

“There is a motto here at MU known as ‘See it, Hear it, Own it,’” the statement read, in part. “Student-athletes are expected to speak up when they see someone being treated unfairly. We
believe the administration should be held to the same standard, and should take action to put an end to Mack Rhoades’s long road of lies and hidden agendas.

“It is not fair to our coaches, players, and anyone that supports MU to let Mack Rhoades continue to undermine our athletic department and university.”

Meanwhile, Rhoades defended his investigation Thursday during an interview with KTGR (103.1 FM) in Columbia. He reiterated that serious allegations were made from persons inside and outside the program.

“We have a responsibility to investigate to us what was brought to us ... not by just one person, not just two people but several,” he said.

In addition to its tough talk against Rhoades, the softball team’s unity council provided new details of the investigation from its perspective.

The unity council says it consulted an attorney after a series of university-mandated interviews of softball players in early April. The attorney drafted a May 4 letter to Rhoades that sought clarification of Earleywine’s future with the program.

According to the unity council, the athletic department responded by saying players would be notified at the appropriate time. The softball team moved forward with a public protest before a May 7 game.

“Publicly exposing Mack Rhoades’s attack ... on Coach Earlywine and our program was our last resort, but it has become clear to us that it is one-hundred percent necessary,” the unity council’s statement read.

The statements were included in an email sent by the unity council to The Star, which contained a timeline of events from the players’ perspective regarding the investigation and a copy of a letter signed by the “University of Missouri Softball Unity Council” that was sent to Rhoades on April 7. Earleywine’s last name is misspelled throughout the two documents.

According to the timeline, two MU executive associate athletic directors — Tim Hickman, who is the administrator in charge of softball, and Mary Ann Austin, who oversees compliance — told players after an April 3 game against Tennessee that the university would be conducting mandatory player interviews.

Those interviews, which the unity council referred to as “interrogations,” took place April 5 with three members of the university staff, who were not identified in the documents. The members of the unity council also did not identify themselves in the documents, but Earleywine has
publicly identified them as senior shortstop Sami Fagan, junior left fielder Natalie Fleming, sophomore infielder Paige Bange and freshman infielder Jolie Duffner.

“Unless someone was in the room being badgered by University staff or experienced the intimidation and manipulation that has been constantly forced upon our players and staff, it will be hard to truly understand,” the unity council’s statement read.

Two days later, the unity council sent a letter to Rhoades, “expressing the player’s concerns after being interrogated by the Athletic Department.”

That letter, dated April 7, acknowledged complaints filed by at least one teammate about Earleywine and his coaching style, but urged Rhoades to “consider the sources of these complaints and take note that while these individuals may claim that they were somehow offended by Coach E’s actions, it is our understanding that these claims are being made not out of true concern, but with the motivation of getting Coach terminated.”

The letter also acknowledged a complaint that Earleywine “is sexist or disrespectful to women,” an allegation the unity council called “absolutely absurd.”

In the letter, the unity council claims that the allegations of abuse were made by players disgruntled with their performance and playing time.

It recounts a “blatantly disrespectful” encounter with an unnamed Tigers player — identified to The Star as Staley graduate Sara Harvey — during a team meeting Earleywine had called to allow players to voice concerns about his coaching style.

Earleywine didn’t dismiss the player after the heated exchange, according to the letter, but did after she failed to comply with a recommendation from the unity council to issue an apology in writing.

Reached by The Star on Wednesday, Harvey declined to comment about her dismissal or the investigation.

According to the timeline, the unity council met with Rhoades on April 12 and he met with the entire team May 9, after the team’s protest went public.

The unity council’s timeline also includes an item that says Tigers pitching coach Doug Gillis was briefly suspended before the team’s SEC Tournament game in Starkville, Miss. It’s unclear if he traveled with the team, but he was at Wednesday’s game — a 7-4, eight-inning loss — according to a team source.
Rhoades wouldn’t speculate when it the investigation would be finished and said he’s performed three other investigations of coaches during 10 years as an athletic director and Akron, Houston and now Mizzou.

“You don’t do them just to do them,” he said. “There’s a lot at stake. There’s a lot of people involved. We don’t take it lightly. When you do them, you do them for good reason.”

MU softball team's unity council ups protests of Rhoades, internal review; players working with lawyer

By Blake Toppmeyer

Thursday, May 12, 2016 at 5:52 pm

The Missouri softball team’s unity council upped its protests of Athletic Director Mack Rhoades and MU’s internal review of Coach Ehren Earleywine and his softball program in a second letter of protest emailed to the Tribune and other media outlets on Thursday afternoon.

In addition to Thursday’s letter of protest, the unity council released a letter of support for Earleywine that the unity council stated had been sent to Rhoades on April 7.

Thursday’s protest letter indicated that the unity council consulted with an attorney on May 4 to represent its interests.

“There is a motto here at MU known as ‘See it, Hear it, Own it.’ ” the unity council’s protest stated. “Student-athletes are expected to speak up when they see someone being treated unfairly. We believe the administration should be held to the same standard, and should take action to put an end to Mack Rhoades’s long road of lies and hidden agendas.”

A representative of the unity council confirmed to the Tribune that Thursday’s emailed documents were distributed by the unity council.

Earleywine said Sunday that the internal review of him and his program has been ongoing for about a month. The investigation was publicly revealed in an initial letter of protest that blasted
Rhoades and the investigation. That letter was distributed in the University Field press box by a 
Missouri softball player about 45 minutes before Saturday’s game against South Carolina. 

Earleywine said Sunday that he didn’t know about Saturday’s protest until after the game ended 
and that he learned the protest was organized by the team’s unity council.

Earleywine said Sunday that the unity council consists of four team members, one from each 
class, and said the unity council was a team-elected group chosen to be the voice of the team. He 
said the unity council members are senior Sami Fagan, junior Natalie Fleming, sophomore Paige 
Bange and freshman Jolie Duffner.

The athletic department, in a news release issued two hours after Saturday’s protest was 
announced, confirmed the internal review and said it had launched the review after receiving 
complaints “from both inside and outside the program.” In an interview on 1580 AM on 
Thursday afternoon, Rhoades reiterated that and said the complaints came from several people.

“All Allegations of a severe gravity were brought to our attention,” Rhoades told the radio station. 
… “We have an obligation to look into those. That’s our responsibility, and we’re going to do 
that. I’m not going to apologize for doing that. … There’s been a very thorough and fair process. 
That process is still ongoing. I know that people want more information, want detailed specifics. 
We’re prohibited from providing them. But again, just know, we wouldn’t be going through this 
process unless some serious things were brought to our attention.”

Thursday’s protest letter stated that every member of the team was interviewed by three 
university employees on April 5 after being informed after a game two days earlier by Tim 
Hickman and Mary Ann Austin that players were required to participate in interviews. The unity 
council, in Thursday’s protest letter, labeled the interviews as “interrogations.”

“Unless someone was in the room being badgered by University staff or experienced the 
imimidation and manipulation that has been constantly forced upon our players and staff, it will 
be hard to truly understand,” Thursday’s protest letter stated.

Hickman is MU’s executive associate athletic director who oversees the softball program, and 
Austin is MU’s executive associate athletic director for compliance. The Tribune’s attempt to 
reach Hickman on Thursday was unsuccessful.

The unity council, in its April 7 letter to Rhoades, addressed the complaints about Earleywine 
that it believes set the investigation in motion.

“Recently, some of our teammates have filed complaints about Coach” Earleywine “and his 
coaching style,” the unity council’s letter to Rhoades stated. “However, we request that you 
strongly consider the sources of these complaints and take note that while these individuals may 
claim that they were somehow offended by Coach E’s actions, it is our understanding that these 
claims are being made not out of true concern, but with the motivation of getting Coach 
terminated.”
Thursday’s protest letter states that Rhoades met with the unity council on April 12 to express disapproval of the April 7 letter he received. Players had a lengthy player meeting before practice on April 12, and Earleywine on Sunday said he learned after Saturday’s game that players’ talks of a protest originated from that April 12 player meeting.

The unity council letter states that Rhoades told the unity council in his meeting with them on April 12 that he would deliver the results of the investigation in approximately one week. On Monday, Rhoades told players that the investigation was ongoing, according to Thursday’s protest letter.

Rhoades and other administrators met with players in a meeting Monday afternoon in which Earleywine and his coaching staff were not present, sources told the Tribune.

The unity council stated in its Thursday protest letter that it requested its lawyer be present, via telephone, at that Monday meeting. Rhoades denied that request, according to the unity council’s protest letter.

The unity council also requested to record Monday’s meeting, another request that Rhoades denied, according to the unity council’s letter. According to Missouri’s one-party consent law, the players did not require Rhoades’ permission to record the conversation.

Oral, wire or electronic conversations may lawfully be recorded in Missouri as long as one party involved in the conversation who is acting within the law consents to having the conversation recorded. This is contrary to some other states, which have two-party consent laws that require every party involved in the conversation consent to having the conversation recorded.

Mark Smith, a professor of communication at Truman State University in Kirksville who teaches communications law, said that although Rhoades would not have violated Missouri’s one-party consent law if he denied the players’ request to record the meeting, any player who was a party to the conversation did not need permission to record the conversation and did not need to even ask for Rhoades’ permission, according to Missouri law.

“Whether one should” record a conversation without the other party’s consent “becomes a question of ethics,” Smith added, “but legally, the one-party consent law should probably be applied here.”

Earleywine is in his 10th season at Missouri and has a 450-152 all-time record at MU.

Earleywine has ruffled feathers in the past and was publicly reprimanded last August by the National Fastpitch Coaches Association for four instances over the years that the NFCA said
violated its code of ethics. Most notable among the instances the NFCA cited was an email exchange between Earleywine and Missouri State Coach Holly Hesse last spring in which the two coaches exchanged barbs. The emails were revealed in an espnW.com story.

Earleywine describes himself as a demanding, but not demeaning, coach and compared his coaching style to that of Norm Stewart, the former Missouri men’s basketball coach who won 731 games across four decades. Earleywine acknowledged using profanity in some exchanges with players.

Earleywine on Sunday described himself as a throwback coach coaching in a millennial world.

“It’s not easy changing who you are and your instincts,” Earleywine said Sunday. “I know there are things I can do better, but at the same time, I’m very proud of all that we’ve built and accomplished and achieved here, and my staff as well. I’m not ashamed of anything.”

Earleywine, via text message, declined comment on Thursday.

The unity council’s April 7 letter to Rhoades waged support for MU’s coach.

“A complaint that has recently come to surface is that Coach” Earleywine “is sexist or disrespectful to women,” the letter stated. “This is absolutely absurd, as Coach has gone above and beyond this year to prove that he values us as people, not just as players. Coach has never assaulted a player in any way. While comments he has made in the heat of competition could be misconstrued to seem offensive, it is very important to note these comments were never made directly to an individual. He has never made us feel degraded as women and has treated each player with respect.

“Furthermore, it is not our desire to be treated different from other athletes simply because we are females. Asking a coach to coddle us out of the interest of political correctness would not only insult us, but would keep Coach E or any other coach from properly instructing us. If you terminate Coach E on the grounds that he is disrespectful or degrading to his players, know that you are not doing so on our behalf, but out of your own interests of public relations.

“The Unity Council feels very strongly that Ehren” Earleywine “is the person we want coaching our team, and we are voicing that opinion on behalf of all players. To go against these wishes would be to set a precedent that all it takes is a few disgruntled athletes to force a professional out of his or her position. If you set this precedent, then how secure do you feel about maintaining your position?”

The unity council’s latest protest letter also stated that Doug Gillis, MU’s volunteer pitching coach, was suspended for about a 24-hour period before MU's Southeastern Conference Tournament game Wednesday in Starkville, Miss. Gillis was reinstated before Wednesday’s game, the letter states. The letter described Gillis’ brief suspension as “another stunt to impact our team.”
Gillis, in a phone interview with the Tribune on Thursday night, said the events described in the protest letter are true. He said Hickman informed him Tuesday morning that he was suspended due to an allegation against him and told him not to travel with the team to Starkville. Gillis said Hickman did not tell him what the allegation entailed but told Gillis that Gillis could possibly get the situation resolved Tuesday.

Gillis said he contacted his attorney, Scott Combs, on Tuesday. He said Combs contacted a university attorney. Gillis drove to Starkville in his vehicle. He said the attorneys conversed throughout Tuesday and Wednesday morning, and the issue was resolved Wednesday morning before the game. Gillis said his attorney informed him he was cleared to perform his coaching duties Wednesday, and Gillis said Hickman also passed along the go-ahead to MU’s coaching staff.

Gillis said he never learned what the allegation entailed.

Andy Oldenburg, the softball team’s spokesman, was unable to confirm Gillis’ brief suspension but confirmed that Gillis did not travel to Starkville on the team buses.

Letters about Missouri softball investigation expand complaint against AD Rhoades

KEVIN GRAELER, 9 hrs ago

COLUMBIA — Members of the Missouri softball team continued to protest Thursday against athletics director Mack Rhoades and the internal review of the athletics department that he initiated several weeks ago.

The department has been investigating softball coach Ehren Earleywine’s coaching style, among other issues, angering some players.

A letter released to media outlets Thursday included a timeline of events since April 3 and indicated that the softball unity council is frustrated with the investigation and has consulted an attorney. The unity council is made up of one player from each class: senior Sami Fagan, junior Natalie Fleming, sophomore Paige Bange and freshman Jolie Duffner.
None of the four players returned calls or emails from the Missourian on Thursday. It was unclear who wrote the letter.

"Student-athletes are expected to speak up when they see someone being treated unfairly," the letter said. "We believe the administration should be held to the same standard, and should take action to put an end to Mack Rhoade's long road of lies and hidden agendas."

The letter claimed that executive associate athletics director Tim Hickman, who oversees the softball program, came onto the field with another university official after an April 3 game to notify players that they would be interviewed as part of the department's review. Two days later, each player was individually interviewed by three university officials.

The letter said the interviews were "intimidating."

Bringing it to the top

A different letter, that was also released Thursday, addressed Rhoades directly.

"Recently, some of our teammates have filed complaints about Coach Earleywine and his coaching style," the letter said. "However, we request that you strongly consider the sources of these complaints and take note that while these individuals may claim they were somehow offended by Coach E's actions, it is our understanding that these claims are being made not out of true concern, but with the motivation of getting Coach E terminated."

Other recent events also suggest unrest in the program.

Freshman Chase Nelson and sophomore Morgan Walters quit the softball team this week, days before the Southeastern Conference tournament. Sophomore Sara Harvey was dismissed from the team in April for a "violation of team rules." Earleywine was not more specific about what the violations were.

Sophomore Erin Gilliland left the team early in the season. Earleywine said at the time it was because of minimal playing time.
One of the letters said Rhoades met with the unity council April 12. Andy Oldenburg, a spokesperson for the athletics department, could not immediately confirm that the meeting had happened.

"We wouldn't be going through this process unless some serious things have been brought to our attention," Rhoades said Thursday to KTGR, a local radio station. He said the complaints about the program were both internal and external and came from several different sources.

Earleywine is known as a fiery competitor. He was publicly reprimanded in July by the National Fastpitch Coaches Association for four instances in which the NFCA said he violated its code of ethics. On Sunday, he said the only thing he would change about his coaching style would be to discontinue using inappropriate language with his players.

His coaching style, though, has produced positive results on the field. The Jefferson City native has a 450-152 career record with the Tigers, leading the team to the NCAA regional round, or further, every season since 2007.

Continued unrest

The unity council's protest became public Saturday, when a Missouri player delivered a press release to the University Field press box approximately 45 minutes before first pitch. The press release said the team was playing in "protest" because of the department's investigation.

Within two hours, the athletics department released a statement of its own, publicly acknowledging the investigation for the first time.

Earleywine said Sunday he didn't know about the unity council's protest until after Saturday's game.

The letter released to media outlets also said that Rhoades called a meeting Monday with Missouri players but would not allow the conversation to be recorded or for them to have a lawyer on the phone.
"(Rhoades) has proven time and time again that our opinions mean nothing," the letter said.

On Tuesday evening, Hickman met with MU players and coaches. Players expressed concerns about the interviews and accused the athletics department of repeating the same questions because players weren't "giving them the answers they wanted," the letter said.

Hickman could not be reached for comment Thursday.

The letter also claimed pitching coach Doug Gillis was briefly suspended between Sunday and Wednesday's first-round tournament contest against South Carolina. Gillis was reinstated before Wednesday's game, the letter said, but it was "another stunt to impact our team."

Oldenburg could not confirm the suspension but said Gillis was not seen on either of the team buses that traveled to Starkville, Mississippi. He said Gillis arrived in the dugout moments before the first pitch for Wednesday's game.

The Tigers lost that game, after leading by four runs with two outs in the seventh inning. The team will have to wait until Sunday to learn how it will be seeded in the NCAA regional round that begins next weekend.

"The Unity Council feels very strongly that Ehren Earleywine is the person we want coaching our team, and we are voicing that opinion on behalf of all players," said the letter to Rhoades.

"To go against these wishes would be to set a precedent that all it takes is a few disgruntled athletes to force a professional out of his or her position. If you set this precedent, then how secure do you feel about maintaining your position?"
New documents detail concerns of Mizzou softball team

COLUMBIA, Mo. - After days of tension between the Mizzou softball team and the school's athletic department, new documents ABC 17 News obtained Thursday afternoon have revealed more details about what has prompted recent actions like the team's playing under protest in a recent game.

One document is a letter sent by the team's Unity Council to Mizzou Athletic Director Mack Rhoades on April 7. In the letter, the council says some recent complaints filed against head coach Ehren Earleywine were not, in the council's opinion, made with the intention of "true concern, but with the motivation of getting [Earleywine] fired." The council cites as suspected motivation for the complaints the competition by the team's twenty players for nine playing positions, and the players making the complaints "have had issues coping with either lack of playing time or poor individual performances."

The council's letter further describes a team meeting during which one player reportedly turned what was to be a time for constructive criticism into a "clearly disrespectful" situation. As a result of this and other instances in which the player in question "has attempted to compromise the structure of [the] team and undermine [the] coaches' authority."

The letter closes with the council's defense of Earleywine as a coach, refuting an alleged complaint that he is "sexist or disrespectful to women" by stating Earleywine never made the players "feel degraded as women" and "treated each player with respect." The letter then reaffirms the council's wish that Earleywine remain in his position as head coach.

The second document ABC 17 News obtained gives a timeline of events related to the athletic department's involvement in the Earleywine situation.

Among the claims made in the timeline are that Athletic Director Mack Rhoades, if allowed to stay, "will single-handedly ruin not only [the softball] program, but the reputation of [the] University." The council describes what it calls "interrogations" by university staff on April 3, following a win against the University of Tennessee.

The timeline then describes a meeting between Rhoades and the Unity Council after his receipt of the letter mentioned above, in which Rhoades "expressed his disapproval of the letter." At a later meeting, Rhoades apparently failed to address the concerns of the council, telling them their "opinion mattered" but stating the council has "no say."

On May 10, Doug Gillis, the team's pitching coach, was told before leaving for the SEC tournament he would be suspended due to an unspecified allegation against him. The Unity Council claims Gillis was never told the nature of the allegation, even when it was dropped the next day.
At a meeting Tuesday evening, players and coaches met with Executive Associate Athletic Director Tim Hickman, during which the former told Hickman what they had dealt with the previous month. Players addressed the so-called "interrogations" mentioned above, claiming those doing the questioning were after certain answers and pressured players "to say things that would support Mack Rhoades's [sic] personal attack on Coach Earleywine."

ABC 17 News has reached out to the softball team and Mizzou administrators for comments on these documents and the claims made in them.

Innovative Traffic Interchanges Help Drivers Avoid Crashes, Save Lives

Missouri civil engineers say diverging diamond interchanges work. The University of Missouri says five years of data has shown a 50 percent drop in crashes where diverging diamonds were added. Missouri was the first states to construct them and we have several in the metro in both Missouri and Kansas.


GEORGE KENNEDY: Bleak budget reality at MU comes with dose of optimism

GEORGE KENNEDY, 16 hrs ago
Like everybody who has been around the university for a few decades, I’ve endured a great many budget presentations. I don’t recall one as clear and candid as the explanation and prognostication provided this week by Interim Chancellor Hank Foley and Deputy Chancellor Rhonda Gibler.

Jesse Wrench Auditorium was nearly full Wednesday. As they showed the numbers and discussed the implications, I found myself alternating among reactions of amazement, anger and, toward the end of the hour, even just a bit of optimism.

The amazement came from the numbers themselves. I’ve tried to pay attention, but I hadn’t really grasped that, for example, this year’s MU budget totals nearly $2.3 billion.

A little more than half of that, $1.3 billion, comes from what are called the “enterprise” operations. The “operating fund,” the money that pays most faculty and staff salaries, covers maintenance, etc., is $618 million. The third-largest fund, $165 million, is grants and contracts, for specific projects.

Of those enterprises, the one most talked about – and asked about Wednesday – is athletics. This year, athletics is a $68 million business. That’s second, by a vast distance, to the budget of our medical industry (hospitals and clinics and university physicians), which is $968 million. In response to a question, Chancellor Foley said that the Athletics Department gets only $400,000 from the operating fund, to pay for non-athletic uses of facilities such as the Hearnes Center.

The most publicized number, of course, is 2,630. That’s the expected enrollment decline come August. And that’s what has triggered the 5 percent across-the-campus budget cut for next year and the predicted 2 percent additional cut for at least the year after.

Chancellor Foley and Vice Chancellor Gibler said analysis so far attributes the decline to a mix of demographics (a smaller cohort of 18-year-olds); policy changes in neighboring states, especially Illinois, that have encouraged more of their students to stay at home; last fall’s campus turmoil and even the improved job market for young people.
My anger also arose in large part from the numbers. One that’s especially galling is 44. That’s where Missouri ranks in per capita support of higher education. For perspective, consider that Illinois ranks sixth, Nebraska seventh, Arkansas 10th and Kansas 18th.

Then consider this: The legislature funded 71 percent of the university budget in 1990. Now it funds 36 percent.

And this: The legislature’s appropriation for next year, after the statesmen in Jefferson City finished punishing us for toppling an under-performing chancellor and an unaware president and beginning to respond to long-festering systemic racism, is almost exactly what it was 15 years ago. In that time, both the Consumer Price Index and enrollment have increased by more than 30 percent.

So tuition accounted for $362 million of this year’s operating fund and state support $220 million.

Of course, the chancellor and the budget director, who have to deal with them, couldn’t say that the way the people’s representatives are treating what is arguably the state’s most important institution is not only ideological but idiotic.

In response to a question, the chancellor did let slip that he regards the legislature’s attitude as “preposterous.”

And they did say a few things that suggested, at least to a congenital optimist, that we just might survive this trauma and maybe even come out stronger.

Plans are underway to recruit students more aggressively and more diversely. There’s a recognition that we must tell the story of the university’s importance more effectively to the public and the legislature. Faculty members will be teaching more and will get more help from technology.
“Strategic investments” will continue to be made in improving graduate student stipends and hiring minority faculty.

“We will get through this,” Dr. Foley said. “We will get better.”

He seemed to believe both statements.

**Drop in enrollment may cost Mizzou $36 million**

COLUMBIA - Enrollment at the University of Missouri is expected to decline by 2,600 students in the fall, causing tuition revenue to drop by more than $36 million.

Officials say that will hurt an already poor budget situation and make it likely that the financial challenges would continue for several years as the smaller class makes its way to graduation.

“It is not just a one-time hit,” said Neil Olson, dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine. “It is a recurring hit for the deficit you get in one year, unless you magically get 1,500 more sophomores, and that is just not going to happen.”

Rhonda Gibler, vice chancellor of finance, laid out the budget difficulties at a meeting with the university’s Council of Deans on Friday.

“We will have several years in a row we have to do some reduction in our budget,” Gibler told the Columbia Daily Tribune (http://bit.ly/1rIolww ). “It is impossible to predict how much we will rebound in the next fall. We can’t take this as a small bump in the road and that we will be back to business as usual.”

Gibler said campus departments have been told to plan for 5 percent cuts to general fund budgets for the fiscal year beginning July 1 as well as 2 percent cuts ordered for fiscal years 2018 and 2019.

“We won’t know for some time if 2 percent is a solid number,” Gibler said. “It is probably not; it will probably be something different from 2 percent.”
The tuition revenue decline is estimated to be $36.3 million, up from an earlier projection of about $20 million. The total budget shortfall is more than $46 million, up from $32 million when interim Chancellor Hank Foley ordered the 5 percent cut in February.

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**University of Missouri curators hear advice on presidential search, board conduct**

By Rudi Keller

Thursday, May 12, 2016 at 2:00 pm

NEW HAVEN — **The next University of Missouri president needs to know he or she will be given confidence, authority and trust by the Board of Curators, a consultant advised the curators Wednesday during a four-hour discussion of how the board functions.**

Rick Legon, president of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, led the discussion and sparked some friction between curators as the six board members closely examined their own recent actions.

Legon praised the board for the way it handled the leadership crisis that removed the heads of the system administration and the Columbia campus on Nov. 9. He also pushed them to spend more time discussing the university’s future and their roles in it.

“I’m not even here saying you guys loused up November,” Legon said. “You all may think you did, and you know more about what you did than I know. But the truth is, you rose to the occasion. You did some crisis governance work. What you are doing now … is you are preparing for the back end of how to address what is a reputational hit.”

The curators are in the midst of seeking a permanent replacement for Tim Wolfe, who resigned as pressures from campus protests and administrative turmoil peaked. Search firm Isaacson, Miller Inc. has prepared recruiting documents and started to identify potential candidates.

The meeting was the board’s 11th special session since the start of the academic year. It was held at the Cedar Creek Conference Center in western Franklin County.
Legon has been president of the association since 2006 and is a member of the governing boards of Spelman College and the American University of Iraq. He previously served on the governing boards of Virginia State University and the University of Charleston in West Virginia. He urged the curators to focus on their proper role in the university or risk being overwhelmed by criticism and distractions.

“In many ways, Missouri has been the piñata for higher education since last fall,” Legon said.

When looking for a president, Legon said, reject candidates who seem too eager to please. The candidate to hire is the one who wants an objective evaluation of the system, what has happened and what he or she is expected to do.

“I wouldn’t even think about hiring a president until you are able to impress your candidates with the ability to tell the story,” Legon said. “It is not them impressing you; it is you impressing them.”

One way to impress candidates, he said, is by telling them they will be the sole conduit of information to the board. He reminded them that the bylaws governing their actions explicitly state that no individual board member has legal standing to act on behalf of the board or the university.

“You have no legal authority to do a darn thing,” Legon said. “And so anybody who contacts you to try to advance a particular agenda that that person has, or any of you who may individually reach out to somebody to find out what somebody is thinking, you are operating on a false predicate.”

Curator Donald Cupps asked whether that would apply in all cases, including benign inquiries for information from a dean or staff member. When Legon said it would apply, Cupps asked why the president should be the gatekeeper for information to the board.

“How do you govern in that situation?” Cupps asked.

“It actually makes governance easier, Legon said.

“The upside of the system is you have one point of accountability — the president,” he said.

The friction came between Cupps and Curator David Steelman of Rolla when the board discussed how it handles issues as well as the ability of members to talk about public matters before the board to the press and others.

“This board has been too concerned with secrecy and not concerned enough with transparency,” Steelman said. “That is a fundamental reason why the public doesn’t understand us.”

Cupps objected to Steelman’s assessment. The board does not operate in secrecy except for matters legally allowed for closed sessions, he said.
“I take offense to an insinuation that when you got on the board that we were doing things in secret because I don’t think we were,” Cupps said.

At one point in the discussions, Chairwoman Pam Henrickson said she wanted the board to focus on what it can do and stop trying to be the university’s managers.

Her daughter, she said, uses a phrase she has adopted.

“Find your chill, know your lane,” Henrickson said. “I want us to understand what our relative roles and responsibilities are and how we can use those.”

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Missouri Legislature sends photo ID amendment to voters

BY ADAM ATON Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, MO. - A constitutional amendment that would allow lawmakers to tighten voter ID requirements passed the Legislature on Thursday, setting up a months-long public relations campaign before the measure appears on the ballot in November.

The proposed amendment continues a decade-long Republican effort to require photo identification to vote in Missouri, a condition 17 other states have already imposed.

If voters approve the amendment, photo ID requirements the Legislature passed earlier this session could go into place for elections after June 2017. Under that proposal, people without photo identification could still cast a ballot after signing a statement saying, under penalty of perjury, they don't have the required identification and can show some other form of identifying document, such as a utility bill or paycheck.

That photo ID legislation is still awaiting action by Democratic Gov. Jay Nixon, who vetoed such a requirement in 2011. In a press conference last week he said he remains skeptical of the measure, but it passed both chambers earlier this year with enough votes to overcome a veto.
The House approved the constitutional amendment 110-39, one day after the Senate passed it on a 24-8 party-line vote.

Because the Missouri Supreme Court struck down a photo ID requirement in 2006, lawmakers asked voters to change the Constitution to give the Legislature the power to institute the requirement.

Democrats say requiring a photo ID to vote would discourage thousands of people from voting, especially minorities, seniors and young people — groups that typically support Democratic candidates. But Republicans point out that their proposal would allow people to get free identification, and the measure still allows people without an ID to cast a ballot.

"There is no way I would be supporting this if it disenfranchised one voter. There is no way I would be supporting this if disenfranchised people who look like me," said Rep. Shamed Dogan, a Republican from Ballwin who is black.

But changing the Constitution could allow lawmakers to pass more restrictive measures in the future, said Rep. Lauren Arthur, a Kansas City Democrat.

"We're opening a Pandora's box," she said.

Richard Reuben, a law professor and voting rights expert at the University of Missouri, predicted the amendment would be approved.

"The simple argument, 'Well, people should have an ID,' is about all people can handle," Reuben said. "And they'll say, 'Well, of course we should.'"

"Nobody's going to read the details. Nobody's going to think about the implications. It will take a long and concerted effort to raise public awareness of the problems of it," he said.

Voters have recently approved photo ID requirements in two states — Mississippi and Oklahoma — and rejected them in one state, Minnesota, said Wendy Underhill, the program director for elections at the nonpartisan National Conference of State Legislatures.

Republican Sen. Will Kraus, the Lee's Summit Republican who handled the photo ID proposals in the Senate, said he will advocate for the constitutional amendment while he travels the state on his campaign for Secretary of State.

Meanwhile, opponents are also making preparations. The amendment will be a top priority for Progress Missouri, communications director Kevin Garner said.
In a statement, American Civil Liberties Union of Missouri Executive Director Jeffery Mittman said the group will "do everything we can to ensure that eligible voters have their voices heard at the polls."

"A lot of people may think that we're sleeping, but we have awakened," Kathy Walker Steele, the central regional director of Alpha Kappa Alpha, a historically black sorority, said during an April rally in the Capitol. "We are astute, educated and ready to do what's necessary."