Despite a year of turmoil, University of Missouri is making progress

Fiscal year 2016 brought in a record $171 million in contributions for the University of Missouri.

Even though a year of turmoil has damaged MU's reputation, alumni support proved to be resilient.

Adversity can compel people and institutions to accomplish great things. That apparently has been the case at the University of Missouri.

Despite a year of racial tension, campus unrest, the resignation of top academic officials and threats from the Missouri legislature, MU raised a record $171 million in fiscal year 2016, running through June 30.

That amount eclipses the 2014 record of $164.5 million and helped swell the Mizzou: Our Time to Lead campaign to $762 million toward a goal of $1.3 billion.

“It was a great show of support by our alumni,” said Todd McCubbin, executive director of the Mizzou Alumni Association and its 44,000 members.

That’s quite a turnaround considering that the university in October feared it might lose $5 million in gifts after months of turmoil on campus — which continued this week when Mack Rhoades abruptly resigned as athletic director.
After a tumultuous year at the University of Missouri, state legislators haven’t kept quiet.

Even before protests rocked the Columbia campus last fall, Republican lawmakers had targeted its relationship with Planned Parenthood, prompting the cancellation of 10 agreements with the organization. After the protests, legislators threatened to withhold university funding if Melissa Click, the professor caught on camera obstructing student journalists, was not fired. (She eventually was.)

Friday marks the start of yet another effort by state legislators to tell the system how it should be run, with the convening of a newly formed review commission.

The University of Missouri Review Commission, a product of Senate Concurrent Resolution 66, has been given a broad mandate by the legislature: Examine the university system and recommend changes in its operations by December 31. There are no discernible limits on what the eight-member panel can review or recommend.

Ron Richard, the Senate leader, and Todd Richardson, the speaker of the House, both Republicans, each appointed four members, including a former University of Missouri president and a soybean farmer. Many of the members have no background in higher education.

In a statement, the university system said it routinely reviews its actions and looks forward to working with the commission.

"The Board of Curators and the leadership of the university are committed to transparency and intend to cooperate with the commission as it goes forward, as established by SCR66," the statement says.
Dustin Weeden, a senior policy specialist with the National Conference of State Legislatures, said review commissions are common, but he hasn’t seen one appointed to audit a public university.

Typically, such commissions study a specific issue and write a report, but not too much happens immediately after the report is presented, Mr. Weeden said. Sometimes legislation arises from problems a commission identifies in its report, but that takes time.

"Part of it is just gathering information, getting a better understanding of what happened, what’s going on," Mr. Weeden said.

Its broad mandate isn’t the commission’s only challenge. Last week Gov. Jay Nixon, a Democrat, announced a $115.5-million budget reduction, withholding the review panel’s $750,000 in funding. Despite the absence of that money, members said they would still work to deliver their report by December.

The commission also has its critics. Jake Hummel, the House Democratic leader, said in a June 29 news release that some of the notably conservative appointees would advance a Republican agenda and not encourage a fair review of the university system.

The group’s first official meeting is Friday. But the specifics of what members want to accomplish are still unclear.

Neal Bredehoeft, a commission member and president of Bredehoeft Farms Inc., said he has no agenda. His only goal, he said, is to produce a good report for the General Assembly.
Dave Spence, a St. Louis businessman who was the Republican nominee for governor in 2012 (losing to Mr. Nixon), said that before members can decide what ought to change, they should figure out what the university needs.

"I think you look at best practices at other universities, you listen, you learn, and then come up with, in cooperation with the chancellor, the administration, and the curators. I don’t think you should be outside those people," Mr. Spence said. "I think you should be working with those people."

Even as many committee members deny having a specific agenda, one objective is clear: They want to prevent a repetition of last fall’s turmoil.

In November, when student activists protested racial tensions, the confrontation sparked a systemwide panic. Within six days, Mizzou’s football team said it would boycott games as a way to show solidarity with a graduate student on a hunger strike, and two of the system’s top administrators resigned.

"There is a feeling amongst some people that what happened at Mizzou in the fall of last year could have been avoided with better leadership," Mr. Spence said. "It should have never escalated to that point."

For Renee Hulshof, a commission member and co-host of a conservative radio talk show who lives about half a mile from the Columbia campus, the protests hit too close to home.

While student were protesting and national news outlets flocked to the campus, Ms. Hulshof criticized the university’s administration, saying officials had mishandled the situation.
"To watch the coverage was sort of like an out-of-body experience," Ms. Hulshof said. "It was, ‘Really? That’s how our town is being portrayed? That’s how our campus is being portrayed?’"

In retrospect, she said, it’s "dangerous" to tell someone what they should have done. Instead, she wants to find out what went awry and how the campus can improve.

"If they want to protest, it's fine," Ms. Hulshof said, "but what avenues can we provide to them so we don’t have to get to that point again?"

Another commission member, Robert V. Duncan, vice president for strategic research initiatives at Texas Tech University, said he was disappointed at how the news media had portrayed the student protests.

Mr. Duncan was the University of Missouri’s vice chancellor for research from 2008 to 2013, and he said the college had gone through two cycles of administration since he left — an indication, he said, that there are issues that need to be addressed.

Ultimately, commission members say, they can’t control whether the university takes their recommendations, but they pledged to carry out their assignment anyway.

"All we can do," Ms. Hulshof said, "is take our responsibility very seriously."

MU graduates and supporters would have had to live in one of Missouri’s deepest limestone caves with no cellphone or internet service to miss the national news the university made in the 2015-2016 school year.

At the start of it, graduate students and the university administration were at odds over health care benefits.
Later in the fall, black students protested ongoing incidents of racism on campus, the need for more black faculty members and the inaction of university officials. Black football players threatened to boycott a regular season game.

That broke the logjam, resulting in the resignations of the MU system president and Columbia campus chancellor. An interim president and chancellor have been appointed.

Piling on, the Missouri General Assembly threatened to cut MU’s funding over its handling of the disputes but correctly backed away from doing so.

The turbulence has contributed to an alarming 2,600-student drop in enrollment this fall, ending at a projected 32,400. University officials proactively have cut budgets and frozen hiring and wages to offset the tuition revenue decline of more than $36 million.

Republican candidates for Missouri governor also have made criticism of MU part of their campaigns.

Businessman John Brunner said at a debate this week that the board of curators should end the search for a new MU system president until the next governor can appoint a new board. But that could postpone such a hiring until early 2017, at least another six to nine months.

Former House speaker Catherine Hanaway added her voice to calls for MU football players’ scholarships to be revoked for their threatened boycott.

That is political nonsense. College students are supposed to learn and be fully engaged on campus, and that includes social activism.

Even with all the strife on campus, university officials were right to turn to loyal donors for more support of MU’s goal to continue its role as a first-class institution of higher education.

The alumni came through, providing donations ranging from $1 to a $25 million gift from the Kinder Foundation to create the Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy.

The spring Mizzou alumni association magazine also openly explained the campus controversies to MU graduates receiving the publication. It notes that the
university has a lot of work to do to meet the challenges that the increasing diversity of students raised.

In one recent success, summer enrollment was up 2.2 percent to 13,697 students, an all-time high.

With the alumni’s help and a more responsive and inclusive administration and faculty, the University of Missouri can overcome its many challenges and better serve its students.

University review commission to hold first meeting Friday at Missouri Capitol

The commission created by Republican lawmakers to review the University of Missouri System is about to hold its first meeting.

The commission was created by GOP leaders following last fall's unrest on the system's main campus in Columbia. Protests centered on accusations that university officials, in particular former UM System president Tim Wolfe, were ignoring a series of racial incidents.

Wolfe resigned as system president at the height of the unrest. That news was followed hours later by a confrontation between former Mizzou communications professor Melissa Click and a photojournalist covering the protests.

As a result of the protests, the university's response and the incident involving Click, state Sen. Kurt Schaefer, R-Columbia, sponsored a measure creating the review commission.

Renee Hulshof, who hosts a radio show in Columbia, is one of eight people appointed to serve on the commission. She is also the wife of former U.S. Rep. Kenny Hulshof, the Republican nominee for Missouri governor in 2008. Other than getting organized and electing a chair and vice chair, she says she doesn't know what's going to happen yet.

"It's a pretty long list of things that the legislature wanted us to look at and issue a report on, and the way in which we do that is entirely up to us," Hulshof said. "We can request reports, we can hold hearings, we can do campus visits."
But they'll have to do all that without any money. Gov. Jay Nixon, a Democrat, is withholding the commission's funding as part of a long list of temporary cuts to the new state budget. Hulshof said House and Senate leaders are looking at ways commission members' expenses can be covered without breaking any laws.

"We discussed this very thing, and leadership made it pretty clear to us that we should move forward, and that they were examining the legal ways in which our expenses could be covered until, and unless, or it may never happen, those funds are released," she said.

The list of items the commission will examine include the university system's diversity program, hiring procedures, academic programs and academic policies.

"You could take anyone of those items and spend six months looking at just (that) one thing," Hulshof said. "I'm kind of anxious to know how we're going to, as they say ... 'eat the elephant one bite at a time.' It's a pretty large task what we're about to take on."

The commission has until the end of the year to gather information and make recommendations for the 2017 legislative session. The organizational meeting is scheduled Friday for 10 a.m. at the state Capitol.

According to the Columbia Daily Tribune, the members of the commission are:

Selected by Speaker Todd Richardson:

- former UM System President Gary Forsee
- Jeanne Sinquefield
- Pamela Washington, adjunct professor at Maryville University
- Robert Duncan, former MU vice chancellor for research

Selected by Senate President Pro Tem Ron Richard:

- Dave Spence, 2012 Republican candidate for governor and CEO of Legacy Pharmaceutical Packaging
- Neal Bredehoef, president of Bredehoef Farms Inc.
- Michael Williams, an attorney
- Renee Hulshoff
COLUMBIA — Several dozen people gathered at Daniel Boone Regional Library on Thursday to hear candidates vying for a seat to represent the 46th District in the Missouri House of Representatives speak in a forum.

The forum, co-sponsored by the League of Women Voters and the library, featured the two Democratic candidates on the Aug. 2 primary ballot. KFRU/1400 AM Columbia broadcast the forum live.

Cathy Richards and Martha Stevens, the two candidates, answered questions from David Lile, a host with KFRU, and handwritten submissions from members of the audience. Topics included strategies for working as a Democrat in a Republican dominated legislature to descriptions of the candidates’ qualifications. The candidates also discussed Medicaid expansion and fostering a cooperative environment in the legislature.

The night’s first question came as response to the legislature’s recent treatment of the University of Missouri. In April, lawmakers cut $3.8 million from the University System, which was intended as a punitive action after the turmoil at MU last fall, according to previous Missourian reporting.

Stevens expressed her support for the university.

“I will always advocate that we fully fund higher education here in our community," she said. "I think the University of Missouri is a critical institution in our town."
Richards had a few criticisms of the legislature. In terms of its relationship to MU, Richards said there needs to be better communication between the two.

She also raised concerns about the legislature's ability to expand Medicaid.

Richards said the Republican-dominated legislature makes passing expansion less likely “How far do you think anybody’s going to get with Medicaid expansion?”

Instead of trying to expand Medicaid, Richards supports coming up with an alternative solution to close the health care gap in Missouri.

Stevens, who has spent time working with the Missouri Medicaid Coalition, said she believes that Medicaid expansion is a critical issue for Missouri. She also said she thinks there is already a high amount of support for it in the state.

“It’s going to happen eventually,” she said.

Lile asked how the candidates planned to work to further their goals for Boone County in the House, which is 70 percent Republicans.

Richards said that as a moderate Democrat, she would be better able to cross over party lines to work with Republican legislators.

“I’ve found some really good people to work with, and they have a passion for the same things we do,” she said.

Stevens said relationship building is fundamental, and that she wants to work on issues that have bipartisan support. She said she had worked with Republicans on Medicaid expansion who believe it is a good thing but weren’t in a position to push it forward.

Aside from the political issues, the candidates also spoke about their qualifications to become a state representative.
“I believe that my years of being a social worker have provided me with great perspective,” Stevens said.

She also referenced her experiences as a community organizer and as an advocate for Medicaid expansion, and she stressed her ability to work with both Democrats and Republicans.

Richards called herself a moderate Democrat, not a progressive. In terms of her professional and educational experience, Richards cited her eight years as Boone County Public Administrator, presidency of the Missouri Association of Public Administrators and her education at Columbia College, William Woods University, Stephen’s College and MU.

“I decided to run for state representative because I wanted the people to have another choice,” Richards said.