Are the days of cheap college in Missouri ending? Budget crisis will test it

By Ashley Jost and Celeste Bott St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 2 hrs ago

ST. LOUIS • Missouri’s four-year universities had a deal with the state that started about 10 years ago.

In exchange for steady state revenue — or a small increase even, during some years — colleges agreed to not raise tuition, or raise it nominally based on the rate of inflation.

It has paid off in that Missouri has led the nation in keeping the cost of tuition down. The average cost of tuition statewide has gone up by less than $750 from 2008-16, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, less than half the increase seen by most of Missouri’s neighboring states.

But a state budget crisis could test how much longer that deal, a 2007 tuition cap law, with higher education will continue.

On Monday, Gov. Eric Greitens announced he was withholding almost $67 million in core funding alone from Missouri’s two- and four-year colleges and universities. The figure represents about 8 percent of such funding, but does not include an additional hold on $15 million for specific programs.

The withholdings probably won’t immediately affect tuition rates, though they do void an agreement made last year for colleges to freeze tuition in order to receive a 6 percent increase in core funding.
Going forward, higher education officials anticipate a rocky future as the governor figures out how to address the looming budget crisis.

“We all still believe in affordability, and we’re all going to work to limit tuition increases, but market forces are going to come into play that will prevent us from getting out of hand,” Missouri State University President Clif Smart told the Post-Dispatch.

Missouri State stands to lose $6.3 million in withholdings, or about 7 percent of the Springfield school’s core funding.

It’s a jarring figure, but it’s not unexpected to Smart nor other college leaders.

That doesn’t make it any easier, particularly on schools such as the University of Missouri-St. Louis and St. Louis Community College campuses, already in the process of recovering from previous budget woes that led to layoffs.

St. Louis Community College Chancellor Jeff Pittman said that while he doesn’t expect layoffs, his campus could see a 3 percent to 4 percent operating budget reduction collegewide. It’s still too early to tell.

At UMSL, Chancellor Tom George said he hopes for no layoffs, but that the $4.3 million withholding adds to the last bit of a $15 million budget reduction the north St. Louis County school is battling already.

Like other public four-year university leaders, he’s intrigued by the idea about the state’s tuition cap going away.

That cap is tied to a 10-year-old statute that limits tuition increases to no more than the Consumer Price Index gauge of inflation, which has hovered around 1.8 percent in recent years.

*Now that Missouri is slashing funding to higher education, political pressure to do away with the cap could build. Already, a recent legislative report analyzing the University of Missouri System suggested doing just that.*
“That would give us flexibility, not that we’d go haywire,” said George of the possibility of raising tuition at a higher rate.

George said UMSL has conducted studies on how much tuition could go up while allowing the school to remain marketable to its students and that they have “room for flexibility.”

Affordability is still key though, he said, considering the average income for an UMSL student’s family is $50,000.

‘The needs remain’

In a hearing that was supposed to focus on degree programs at the Missouri Capitol on Tuesday, the cuts were, as one St. Louis lawmaker put it, “the elephant in the room.”

“This is appalling, for the cuts to be so hard with higher ed … I couldn’t sleep last night because of that,” said Sen. Jamilah Nasheed, a Democrat, to a joint legislative panel on education. “That’s the discussion we need to be having right now.”

But Zora Mulligan, the state Department of Higher Education commissioner, could offer few immediate answers about the effect of the withheld funds on the state’s four-year universities and community colleges.

“Obviously we just received that news yesterday, so we’re still processing the way those cuts will impact our institutions,” Mulligan said. “The needs remain. The needs of Missourians remain and the needs of the workforce remain, and it really will be the job of the institutions to continue to meet those needs.”

Republicans on the panel raised similar concerns.

“Nobody was more disappointed by what happened yesterday than I was,” said Sen. Caleb Rowden, R-Columbia, whose district encompasses the University of Missouri’s flagship campus.
Sen. Gary Romine, R-Farmington, who chairs the education panel, said he hoped cuts could be restored down the line.

“We had a little bit of a heads-up the cuts were coming, we just didn’t know how much it was going to be,” Romine said. “Higher ed is doing their part, the institutions are doing their part to save money. We just hope the state can find a way to make sure we’re not looking at forcing tuition raises to offset the costs of higher ed.”

He didn’t rule out the possibility of lifting the tuition cap but predicted some tough conversations ahead for lawmakers and Greitens.

“The money will have to come from somewhere. … We have caps in place, so that’s going be frustrating to process. So we have to come to the table and discuss what avenue can we take to get affordable education in the state,” Romine said.

**MISSOURIAN**

**State: UM must cut $38 million, including almost $18 to MU**

ANDREW KESSEL AND ELLEN CAGLE, 10 hrs ago

COLUMBIA — **The University of Missouri System faces more than $38 million in budget cuts by the end of June, with almost $18 million of that coming from MU, according to the Missouri Office of Administration.**

MU spokesman Christian Basi said he could not confirm the state's numbers.

"We are currently working with leadership to determine where we need to trim the budget, but no specific decisions have been made," he said.
“We certainly understand that our state leaders have to make difficult decisions in challenging budgetary times,” UM System spokesman John Fougere said in an emailed statement from the system. “We are committed to working closely with our new governor and General Assembly in making the case for the University of Missouri System’s enormous positive impact on all of Missouri’s citizens and economy.”

He later added, “We will be having discussions with our leadership over the next few weeks to develop a strategy going forward to address the decrease in funding.”

On Monday, Gov. Eric Greitens announced he will withhold more than $80 million in higher education funding over the next six months. The cuts come as part of an effort to address an estimated $456 million gap for fiscal 2017 and adds to the approximately $200 million in holds made by former Gov. Jay Nixon shortly before he left office, according to previous Missourian reporting.

Educators and lawmakers alike acknowledged that cuts needed to be made, but Columbia-area lawmakers aren’t pleased that higher education is bearing the brunt.

"Obviously I was disappointed," said State Sen. Caleb Rowden, R-Columbia. "I think at this point, our objective is to figure out ways to grow the economy and figure out ways to make sure we’re not back in this spot again next year."

Rowden said Greitens has tough decisions to make because cuts must be made to the budget, something he hopes Missourians understand.

"I hope that they know we still have their backs, and we’re going to do everything we can do to reverse these withholds as quickly as possible."

Other area lawmakers shared Rowden’s sentiments.

“It’s troubling,” state Rep. Chuck Basye, R-Rocheport, said. "I know it’s not good news for MU, especially. It’s something we’re going to look into and hopefully make some corrections.”
The operating budgets of each of the four UM System campuses will be cut, totaling $38.3 million. The cuts will happen between February and June 30, the end of the state's fiscal year, said Missouri Acting Budget Director Dan Haug.

Here are the cuts to the four campuses operating budgets:

• $13.7 million to MU

• $5.7 million to the University of Missouri-Kansas City

• $3.9 million to the Missouri Institute of Science and Technology

• $4.3 million to the University of Missouri-St. Louis

MU Extension will be cut $1.9 million. Systemwide operations and system administration will be cut a total of $1.3 million.

Funding was also cut for several special projects affiliated with the UM System. At MU, the Cooperative Medical School will be cut $4 million and the MU Telehealth Network will be cut $121,250.

Out of the $80 million in cuts, close to $12 million will come from state aid to community colleges.

Jeff Lashley, president of Moberly Area Community College, said the college will lose roughly $500,000 in expected revenue. State aid makes up nearly a quarter of the college’s revenue, he said, so losing that funding is a major blow.

"It’d be like you kind of suddenly just getting a reduction to your salary, and then you just have to figure out what that means to your budget,” Lashley said.
Maggie Kost, communications manager for the Missouri Community College Association, said the cuts are proportional to the amount of state aid received, but where the individual schools make cuts is up to them. That leaves people like Lashley with some difficult choices.

The cuts aren’t necessarily done coming, either. He said more reductions could be looming but hopes MACC and higher education aren’t hit again.

"I’m certainly hopeful that we’re not included in any additional cuts, because it would just be difficult to absorb more,” Lashley said. “I’m sure the governor will do his best not to cut higher education any more, but he has hard decisions to make."

Despite the cuts to higher education, Greitens pledged “not a single penny will be coming out of our K-12 classrooms” in a video posted to his Twitter account on Monday. However, the cuts do include $8.6 million in busing to K-12 districts and $194,000 in teacher training and development, according to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

Cheri Toalson Reisch, R-Hallsville, said the state must live within its means. “Although I fully support higher education, I was pleased to hear (Greitens’) recommendation will be to not cut K-12” funding, she said.

Reisch said she could not say at this point whether she agrees with the governor’s proposed cuts. “We’ll we working very hard to do the best we can with what we have,” she said.

Rowden said it's impossible to meet all needs when making tough budget choices.

"I think the reality of his situation is that you withhold money from high education and you upset one constituency, or you withhold money from K through 12 and higher education and you upset two constituencies," Rowden said. "I think the governor is committed to higher education, and I’ve had conversations with him that would indicated that is true."

This week's announcement by Greitens comes on the heels of previous reductions to MU's budget.
These cuts follow a previously announced $3.8 million cut to the UM System budget for this fiscal year. During the last legislative session, legislators said the cuts served as punishment for poor system leadership during campus protests about racism that culminated in the resignation of former UM System President Tim Wolfe.

Cuts targeted to specific campuses within the UM System were unprecedented before 2016. In the past, the legislature appropriated money to the UM System as a lump sum. During the past session, the legislature appropriated money to each campus individually.

A specific budget plan likely will not be announced until early February, according to previous Missourian reporting.

In addition, in March, Interim MU Chancellor Hank Foley announced a 5 percent cut to MU’s general revenue budget for fiscal year 2017 and a hiring freeze due to a drop in enrollment.

**Governor Greitens cuts millions in higher education funding**


COLUMBIA – Higher education institutions have concern over the impact of Governor Greitens' announced budget cuts that will largely decrease funding.

On Monday, the newly elected Governor Greitens announced $146.4 million in cuts in an effort to balance Missouri's budget.
Higher education will be greatly affected with cuts including almost $56 million from the core funding of four-year institutions, nearly $12 million in core funding from community colleges and close to $9 million in transportation from public K-12 school districts.

The Missouri Department of Higher Education will see around $80 million in cuts, which is more than half of the total amount announced.

**Pilar Mendoza, an associate professor in higher education at MU, said tuition and fees will likely increase because of the cuts.**

"We have more adjunct faculty, less full time faculty, students are being taught by grad students, by part timers," Mendoza said. "So the quality of education decreases as well as the services we can provide to students such as tutoring, counseling. So basically, families and students are paying a lot more for a lot less."

The UM System said it is working on a plan to address the withholdings.

"We certainly understand that our state leaders have to make difficult decisions in challenging budgetary times," Chief Communications Officer John Fougere said. "We are committed to working closely with our new Governor and General Assembly in making the case for the University of Missouri System’s enormous positive impact on all of Missouri’s citizens and economy."

Moberly Area Community College President Jeff Lashley said his goal is for the students and campus locations not to notice any impact from the cuts, which he said is about $500,000 or more.

"A big part of our mission is obviously to be affordable," Lashley said. "We are affordable for our students, and that's really important. So, it could impact tuition and fees. Theoretically, I mean, I don't want it to. I don't want to raise tuition and fees as a result of this, I just don't know yet what's going to happen. Those are a couple of the areas though that you always have to look at."

More than $700 million in budget cuts will occur over the next 18 months to balance the budget retain Missouri's AAA credit rating, according to a news release Monday.
The release also said Missouri’s budget is suffering from reduced revenue due to poor economic growth, which is further drained by special interest tax credits and the growth in healthcare expenditures.

Greitens said he is committed to funding K-12 education and public safety.

"Not a single penny will be taken out of K-12 classrooms," Greitens said in a video posted on his Twitter account.

The announcement includes no cuts to the Foundation Formula that funds K-12 classroom education, programs needed for public safety, or pension and health care.

The release stated that the restrictions were targeted at “rolling back earmarks, new spending items, programs with no established track record of success, and services that are duplicated elsewhere in government.”

"You elected me because I’ll always tell it like it is, and the fact is more hard choices lie ahead," said Greitens said in the social media video. “But as Missourians, I believe that we must come together, tighten our belts, and be smart and wise with our tax dollars, and work our way out of this hole by creating a thriving and prosperous economy again here in Missouri.”

Greitens also said he would not be willing to raise taxes, and his focus is more jobs and higher pay for Missourians.

The governor plans to provide more information about these cuts during his State of the State address Tuesday night.
Columbia Chamber of Commerce to focus on airport, university funding


COLUMBIA, Mo. - Despite an anticipated $80 million in budget cuts to higher education, the Columbia Chamber of Commerce will continue ahead with a list of six priorities that it will work on at the state level this year.

Chamber of Commerce president Matt McCormick said Tuesday that the chamber anticipated there could be cuts but they didn't know where they would eventually land.

"These are issues that are near and dear to Columbia and the betterment of Columbia as we continue to move forward so they're items that we need to have on there," said McCormick. "As budget numbers continue to solidify and state revenues continue to solidify and fluctuate we need to make sure that these issues are on the forefront of the legislator's brains as they're looking at the issues."

Listed below are the priorities:

- **Support $10 appropriate for FY 2018 to fund Columbia Regional Airport Terminal Project**
  "In August, city voters approved the city portion [of funding] and we need to really put in place the state portion or additional funding to match the $20 million we're going after for federal government," said Jerry Dowell, the director of the chamber's government affairs committee.

- **Support the release of the withhold of $2 million appropriation in FY 2017 and $8 appropriation in FY 2018 to expand education and training for the University of Missouri Research Reactor.**
  Last year, chamber members were able to successfully make sure $2 million was appropriated to the reactor, but it was withheld at the end of last year.
Members are hoping to get the $2 million back and then secure the other $8 million needed to expand the reactor.

"We may have area legislators that didn't know about the MU research reactor and we were able to educate them," said Dowell.

- **Support a sustainable funding plan for a comprehensive transportation system to better support Missouri’s economic growth with a focus of advocating on rebuilding Interstate 70.**

- **Support state funding requests for $491 million in core funding to help ensure the University can carry out their Mission.**

- **Support the Mizzou Stewardship Model by dedicating reoccurring funding of $15 million to address the backlog of renovation and repair projects totaling $748 million on the University of Missouri campus.**

"Here at the University of Missouri we have $748 million in deferred maintenance," said Dowell.

Dowell said when you're not maintaining a building, it deteriorates over time until it’s cheaper to replace the building.

"We have a lot of historic buildings on campus and that's not something we're going to do," he said.

The chamber said it is hoping it can convince legislators to appropriate some of that money if they understand the importance of maintaining those historic buildings.

- **Support funding of $53 million for the Waters Hall and plant growth facilities on the University of Missouri campus.**

Dowell said it will be a challenge to ask for funding with the restricted budget as well as get to know the dozens of new legislators in Jefferson City.

"That's problematic for us but I think with education we can kind of move the needle," he said.

McCormick said they can also focus on priorities in different areas as well as make adjustments to funding requests if need be.

For the first time, the Chamber of Commerce unveiled a [local agenda](#) this year.
First MU chancellor forum set for next week
TOM COULTER, 15 hrs ago

COLUMBIA — An open forum for MU faculty, staff, students and retirees about the search for the next MU chancellor will be held from 10 to 11:30 a.m. Jan. 26 in the Reynolds Alumni Center.

The goal is to gather information about the characteristics and qualifications desired in a new campus leader.

Last month, Mike Middleton, interim president of the University of Missouri System, announced the names of the 22-member search committee that will identify potential candidates for the top job at MU.

Elizabeth Loboa, dean of the MU College of Engineering, and Leo Morton, chancellor of the University of Missouri-Kansas City, are co-chairing the committee.

Search firm Isaacson, Miller Inc. will help guide the search process.

Hank Foley has served as interim chancellor since R. Bowen Loftin stepped down in November 2015.
In leadership positions women and minorities face pay gap, MU study finds

MIKE KREBS, 14 hrs ago

 Generated from a News Bureau release: Minorities, Females Serving on Boards of Directors Receive Less Compensation, Less Likely to Serve in Leadership Roles, Study Finds

COLUMBIA — Researchers from MU and University of Delaware found that women and minorities serving on boards of directors receive less compensation and are less likely to hold leadership positions.

MU Assistant Professors Adam Yore and Matthew Souther and University of Delaware professor Laura Field coauthored a study that reviewed more than 1,800 companies and 70,000 board members and their compensation. They found that there is a 3 to 9 percent pay gap for women and minorities who serve on boards of directors compared to other members of those boards.

"We stumbled on this result kind of by accident," Souther said. "We were just testing different things and happened to have a variable in there for minorities and noticed that they got paid a little bit less. Then we started asking why they were getting paid less and found out a lot of it was driven by these opportunities."

On average, across all boards, the study found that women and minorities are actually paid more than the average board member. But there's a caveat.
"When those boards and leadership opportunities are scrutinized more closely, this higher pay is driven by minorities and females being more likely to serve on boards of higher-paying, more visible firms," Souther said in a statement. "Within these boards, they actually earn less on average than their peers."

Yore said that they tried to find explanations for the pay gap. These included how qualified the women and minorities were, their levels of experience, their academic degrees and the profitability of their firms.

Their study found that women and minorities are less likely to hold leadership positions on boards of directors, which control how directors are paid.

Souther said that this study is different from numerous other studies that have found pay gaps because it looks at a group that has few differences in qualifications.

Having women and minorities represented on boards of directors seems to be a priority right now, but there is little focus on how they serve on the board, Souther said.

"Once they get representation, this is the next step — making sure that there is equality there in opportunities," he said.

The professors will present their study — "Does Diversity Pay in the Boardroom?" — at the 2017 Financial Institutions, Regulation & Corporate Governance Conference and the 2017 Annual Meeting of the Eastern Finance Association, according to an MU news release.
Rep. Kendrick files two bills to help reduce student debt
No MU Mention

JEFFERSON CITY - Rep. Kip Kendrick, D-Columbia, filed two bills on Tuesday addressing the rise of student debt.

The bills have been named the Student Debt Relief Act and the Student Loan Bill of Rights. The average student in Missouri who uses loans to pay for education owes over $26,000, and nationwide student debt totals $1.3 trillion. Kendrick called student debt "a nonpartisan issue (that) requires a nonpartisan solution."

According to Kendrick's office, the Student Debt Relief Act would create a longer student loan repayment period, limit monthly payments to a reasonable percentage of income and allow borrowers to refinance their loans with lower interest rates.

The Student Loan Bill of Rights would create an ombudsman office in the Missouri Department of Higher Education to oversee student loan servicers. Kendrick's office says it's also designed to provide reliable information, customer service and access to repayment options for borrowers.

Kendrick filed the bills a day after Republican Gov. Eric Greitens announced he would cut over $83 million in public higher education funding from Missouri's fiscal year 2017 state budget.
"Make no mistake, these budget cuts will ultimately mean higher tuition and increased student debt in Missouri," Kendrick said. “The Missouri General Assembly has a moral and constitutional obligation to adequately fund higher education. Until that time, the very least we can do is offer students relief in paying back their student loans.”

First steps

Building local health care

Hard on the heels of Sunday’s push in this column and elsewhere on these pages for a more collaborative, stronger local health care community, let us consider more carefully the suggestion for getting started by Lenard Politte, an institutional member of the Central Missouri health care community.

Politte wrote a powerful column proposing serious collaboration between University of Missouri Health Care and Boone Hospital Center with the goal of making Columbia a widely attractive destination for people seeking top-quality health care. He said collaboration could create synergism that could put local health care more in the league of the Mayo Clinic or the Cleveland Clinic.

No one will suddenly hatch a Mayo Clinic, but Politte emphasized we have the raw materials here in the two good local hospitals, an academic medical center and outstanding medical practitioners. To move toward that exciting goal, we need a serious communitywide commitment. “We need to tear down the walls and turfs that protect special interests,” he wrote.

He went on: “We need to assess what physical facilities we have and what technical capabilities are available in Columbia and the surrounding area. These facilities in Columbia should then be available to all who are qualified to use them. This would require that both hospitals have open staff privileges. There needs to be a seamless line of communication regarding medical records so when patients move from one facility to another for special procedures or care, their records are immediately available without delay.”

The whole medical complex in Columbia needs to move forward as a unit, he wrote. An advisory committee composed of leaders from the community and the two hospitals would help, and perhaps an unbiased consulting firm could advise on organizational and legal matters.
This general idea received lip service in the past, but back then the separate interests of competing institutions kept progress at bay. Today the case for tearing down walls and building a more powerful whole has become overwhelming.

On the most granular level, getting started will depend on adoption of the idea by the governing bodies involved: the Boone Hospital Board of Trustees, the administrations of MU Health Care and University Hospital, the University of Missouri Board of Curators and the Boone County Commission. Pray these worthy groups will quickly see why the extraordinary opportunity lying ahead warrants bold action, not handwringing.

We have a great chance. Let’s not blow it.

HJW III

Medical tourism task force discusses recommendations for city council

No MU Mention

Columbia – The Mayor's Task Force on Medical Tourism met Tuesday to discuss possible recommendations to the Columbia City Council.

The task force plans to focus on a 25-county area that surrounds Columbia in its initial outreach to possible new patients. Members on the task force, who include local area hospital administrators, medical providers and hotel owners, spent much of the meeting discussing the logistics of transportation and lodging.
The discussions included the ability to provide greater access to transportation services to bring patients and their families to Columbia, and local transportation during their stay. The task force also discussed the possible costs of long-term lodging for patients and their families.

Representatives from the Mid-Missouri Ronald McDonald House charities were in attendance to provide advice on a possible role their organization could play in providing lodging for long-term patients and their families.

"Given the fact that we have such good providers, both health care providers and hospitality providers in Columbia, and that we are centrally located and very accessible and affordable, that we want to do a little more focused job and a little better job at getting people from outlying areas to come to Columbia for their care," task force chair Guy Collier said.

Collier said they want to emphasize the quality of health care providers and hospitality options to try to steer potential patients toward getting their care in Columbia instead of St. Louis or Kansas City.

When asked about expanding the task force's outreach beyond the 25-county area surrounding Columbia, Collier said they want to "walk before running" and expanding their outreach beyond the local area.

Mayor Brian Treece created the task force in 2016 with the idea of local hospitals and health care providers working together with hospitality providers to turn Columbia into a medical tourism destination.

According to Collier, the city council will hear the initiatives the task force puts forward in early February.
NO MENTION

Elizabeth D. (Betsy) DeVos, President-elect Donald J. Trump’s pick for U.S. secretary of education, was on Capitol Hill Tuesday evening for nearly four hours of questions from members of the U.S. Senate’s education committee.

While several former nominees have breezed through the process with little contention, Democrats and Republicans began drawing battle lines over Ms. DeVos’s nomination weeks ago. Those conflicts were obvious at the hearing, where Democrats complained frequently over a five-minute limit for questions and the fact that the Office of Government Ethics had not finished a review of Ms. DeVos’s financial investments and possible conflicts of interest.

Sen. Lamar Alexander, the Republican chairman, said most previous education secretaries had gone through a similar process and said those precedents would guide the current nomination.

But the real fight over the current nominee is due to her support of using public-school dollars for charter schools and vouchers for students to attend private schools. Such policies are usually opposed, in particular, by teachers unions, who charge that they undercut support for traditional public schools.

While Ms. DeVos is well-known nationally as a supporter of school choice, the hearing was the first opportunity for most to hear some of her positions on higher education. She has no professional experience in a school or college, and has said very little about the federal government’s role in regulating postsecondary education.

Some of her clearest answers came in response to questions from U.S. Sen. Johnny Isakson, Republican of Georgia, who asked about her commitment to paring higher-education regulations broadly and simplifying the form students must complete for access to federal aid, called the Fafsa.

"I don’t think we should make it any more difficult than necessary" for students to complete the forms, she said.

But as senators from both parties pressed her to support precise positions, Ms. DeVos avoided specifics and instead promised instead to work with lawmakers toward common goals.

The committee could vote on sending her nomination to the full Senate for confirmation as soon as next week if the details of her federal ethics compliance are finalized, Mr. Alexander said.
Following are three higher-education issues on which committee members and Ms. DeVos had significant exchanges.

Student Debt

Rising amounts of student debt are, arguably, the topic that has driven the vast majority of higher-education policy discussion in recent years. Ms. DeVos raised this issue in her prepared remarks, saying: "Escalating tuition is pricing aspiring and talented students out of college. Others are burdened with debts that will take years — or even decades — to pay off."

She then appeared to criticize the Obama administration’s actions to forgive loans that students have accumulated while attending for-profit colleges that the Education Department says has defrauded them. "There is no magic wand to make the debt go away, but we do need to take action. It would be a mistake to shift that burden to struggling taxpayers without first addressing why tuition has gotten so high," she said in her opening statement.

The solution, Ms. DeVos suggested, is for more students to choose less-expensive forms of postsecondary education or pursue work as in a skilled trade.

"For too long a college degree has been pushed as the only avenue for a better life. The old and expensive brick-mortar-and-ivy model is not the only one that will lead to a prosperous future," she said.

"President-elect Trump and I agree we need to support all postsecondary avenues, including trade and vocational schools, and community colleges."

But when Sen. Bernie Sanders, the former presidential candidate and independent of Vermont, asked about supporting his proposal for tuition-free college, Ms. DeVos said only that it was "an interesting idea."

"Nothing in life is truly free," Ms. DeVos said.

Sen. Al Franken, Democrat of Minnesota, challenged Ms. DeVos’s grasp of the details of college debt, pointing out that total student-loan debt had more than doubled during the past eight years, rather than rising nearly 1,000 percent, as Ms. DeVos had said earlier in the hearing.

For-Profit Regulation

Ms. DeVos was in many ways even less specific about what she would do with the host of regulations that the Obama administration has enacted to rein in abuses by for-profit colleges.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren, Democrat of Massachusetts, asked Ms. DeVos if she would, for example, hold colleges accountable under regulations that measure student earnings after graduating compared to the amount of loans they have — the Obama administration’s controversial "gainful-employment rule."

"Do you support protecting federal tax dollars from waste, fraud and abuse?" asked Senator Warren, who questioned the nominee’s qualifications to run an agency that lends hundreds of millions of dollars to students every year.

Ms. DeVos answered only that she would review the rule to make sure it was achieving its intended goal.
"Swindlers and crooks are out there doing back flip," over that answer, Senator Warren said. "If confirmed, you will be the cop on the beat and if you can’t enforce the existing rules then you shouldn’t be secretary of education."

**Title IX Enforcement**

Some of the most charged questioning of the evening related to whether Ms. DeVos would protect sexual minorities on campuses and uphold the Obama administration’s guidance on how colleges should handle allegations of sexual assault.

Several Democrats charged that the nominee or her family members had directed donations to organizations, such as the Family Research Council, that oppose gay rights and support "conversion therapy," which seeks to change the sexual orientation of people who are gay.

"Do you still support conversion therapy?" Senator Franken asked.

"I’ve never believed in that," said Ms. DeVos.

Later, in response to questions from Sen. Tammy Baldwin, Democrat of Wisconsin, she said: "I embrace equality and firmly believe in the intrinsic value of every individual" and supporting a safe environment for all students. "As a mom, I couldn’t stand the idea of my child being discriminated against for any reason."

Ms. DeVos was, however, less resolute when pressed about the specifics of enforcing guidance on sexual assault.

Sen. Robert P. Casey Jr., Democrat of Pennsylvania, asked Ms. DeVos if she would uphold the current administration’s 2011 "Dear Colleague" letter, which lays out a host of demands for campuses to crack down on sexual harassment and assault.

Ms. DeVos said there were "a lot of conflicting ideas" about how to enforce the rules under Title IX, which prohibits gender discrimination in education. "I look forward to working with you" to understand those conflicts and find resolutions, she said.

Senator Casey then asked: "You’re not going to give me a yes or no answer, are you?"

Ms. DeVos said only that "It would be premature for me to do that."

"Assault in any form is never OK," she added. "If confirmed, I look forward to understanding the past actions and the current situation," she said, in order to carry out the law as it was intended.
Petition seeks to cancel show featuring Bengal tigers

A Columbia man on Monday started an online petition urging the cancellation of a show featuring Bengal tigers this weekend on the University of Missouri’s campus, alleging mistreatment of the animals.

Jay Owenhouse, magician and self-avowed tiger conservationist, said in a phone interview Tuesday that he has no plans to cancel his show at Jesse Hall on MU’s campus, slated for 7 p.m. Saturday, or any future performances. The petition’s creator, Alfredo Martin, said Owenhouse is known for keeping his animals in substandard conditions and for exploiting them, but Owenhouse said the claim is false.

Owenhouse, 52, said while on tour he travels with two tigers and he is careful to only schedule shows on weekends and not more than 12 shows in a month. That way they can spend as much time as possible at his tiger sanctuary in Montana, he said.

“What I find kind of frustrating at times is I think that people will get passionate about a cause and then create a smear campaign and not realize the truth,” Owenhouse said.

Martin, who has lived in Columbia since 2011, said he started the petition after hearing about the show over the weekend. The petition, which as of Tuesday afternoon had 66 supporters, asks John Murray, the director of University Concert Series, to cancel the show. The allegations against Owenhouse, Martin said, stem from a 2012 claim from the Washington, D.C. Humane Society that
calls his show “substandard” and that he got his tigers from a South Carolina organization known for abusing exotic animals for profit.

“I find this extremely cruel and we don’t need that in Columbia,” Martin said.

Legislation has been proposed and passed in some jurisdictions in the country banning exotic animal shows, something Martin said should be done in Missouri. Using exotic animals for performances for profit amounts to exploitation, he said.

“I don’t think that exotic animals such as Bengal tigers should be in contact with human beings,” Martin said. “They should be in the wild.”

Christian Basi, a spokesman for MU, said the show is not part of the University Concert Series but is featured on its website. MU agreed to rent out Jesse Hall’s auditorium for the show and is not responsible for its content, Basi said.

“We don’t have anything to do with presenting the show or running the show,” he said, declining to comment further.

Owenhouse began performing as a magician in high school and for the last 25 years has cared for and performed with tigers, he said. His show, called “Dare to Believe,” combines illusions and Bengal tigers. He and his family have toured and performed around the country and world.

When he trains his tigers, Owenhouse said, he uses positive reinforcement and his tigers probably live more comfortably than some people. He said it’s “very important to not paint everybody with a broad brush.”

“Is there animal abuse in this country? Absolutely,” he said. “Does that mean all people who work with animals are abusers? Of course not.”