

MAR 20 2012

MissouriLawyers WEEKLY

Whether up or down, law school deans decry US News rankings

Published: March 17, 2012

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Water coolers nationwide are abuzz with talk of rankings versus college performance — and some of it isn't about basketball. US News & World Report has released its much-discussed annual rankings of law schools, and Missouri's four programs have made moves big and small.

The biggest leap of any of the 195 ranked schools in the nation came from the University of Missouri School of Law, which moved from 107th last year to 79th this year, almost reversing the effects of a two-year slide. Among the farthest falls was University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law, moving from 113th to 135th.

The deans of both schools say that the rankings don't give a very clear picture of the entire law school experience. Champagne's not popping in Columbia, and tears aren't being shed in Kansas City, they say.

Saint Louis University School of Law made modest gains, moving from the 104th spot to the 101st. Its health law program remains first in the nation.

Washington University Law in St. Louis fell for the first time in seven years, to 28th from 23rd, prompting the school to release a statement on its website noting changes in reporting methodologies.

Despite the tremendous gains his school made, Dean R. Lawrence Dessem of Columbia's University of Missouri gives scant credence to the rankings.

"The hype surrounding these rankings is much overblown," Dessem said in an interview. "I'm getting a little nauseous on the US News roller coaster." He calls the magazine's methodology "unscientific" and meant to sell magazines.

While Dessem said he's certainly aware of Mizzou's rank and happy with it, prospective law students do themselves a disservice by relying on the magazine to make a decision about where they'll matriculate. "Some people want a shortcut. They like the US News numbers."

He recommends students think clearly about the type of program they want and where they'd like to study and practice, as well as spending a little shoe leather visiting campuses.

"That takes time and in some cases money," he said. "If you're going to invest three years and six figures, it's worth it."

Like Dessem, Dean Ellen Suni, of the University of Missouri-Kansas City, thinks the rankings give an incomplete picture of any school. "We're the same law school we were two days before the rankings came out," she said in an interview.

"As I think is true of most people in the academic world, we really don't believe the rankings tell much about the actual quality of the school," Suni said. "They tell mostly of reputation, which is artificially constructed in the first place."

Last year, amid some turnover in the school's career services department, Suni said placement data were reported to the American Bar Association in a way that put UMKC at a disadvantage in the rankings, though it puts UMKC into compliance on more granular reporting methods that will be in place next year for all law schools. The career services director, Suni said, only reported graduates as employed if they were in jobs that required a JD. More accurate, perhaps, but it resulted in lower numbers overall for the school. Going forward, schools will have to distinguish if "employed" graduates are working as associates at firms or if they're pulling your doppio espresso at the corner java joint.

Saint Louis University School of Law's Dean Annette Clark said she's pleased with the direction the school is moving but that rankings don't determine policy at the school.

"We're sitting here and making major decisions," Clark said in an interview. "We work very hard here not to make decisions based on ranking." But, she allowed, "We're pleased."

Washington University School of Law said in a statement that, while the school dropped in the rankings for the first time in seven years, "by measures included in the USN&WR ranking, as well as other assessments, Washington University Law School is one of the top schools in the United States."

The statement said that the rankings, while meaningful, weren't the only measure of a school's success. It left the harsher criticisms, though, to Dessem, Suni and Clark: "We take seriously our standing in the rankings, but we take even more seriously our obligation to our students and graduates to report all data accurately — and most importantly, to get our students onto a solid path for success."

Bob Morse is the director of data and research for US News & World Report. He's been in the job since 1976 and created the law school rankings in 1990. He stands staunchly by the methodologies used to calculate the standings.

"It's definitely wrong to say that our methodology is obscure," Morse said in an interview. "There are people at many law schools who've duplicated our methodology. If our methodology has been duplicated, it's not obscure."

When told that some deans questioned the utility of the rankings, Morse said, "This dean — you wonder, is this person in denial? That dean's views are an outlier. Our rankings of law schools are very widely used. The prospective students think they have some worth."

The rankings are calculated based on data that schools submit to the ABA, as well as surveys from the magazine itself. The magazine, which Morse said has "zero" input on what data the ABA solicits, then calculates schools' rank based on numbers like job placement nine months out from graduation, bar passage rates and surveys of lawyers and judges.

The rankings come amid some scandal. Last year, Villanova University School of Law and University of Illinois College of Law (both of which fell again in the rankings this year) admitted to inflating some of the data reported to the ABA and to the magazine — data which were used to calculate the rankings.

Saint Louis University is among scores of law schools being targeted for a class action suit by three plaintiffs who have already sued more than a dozen schools for what they call fraudulent misrepresentation of their post-graduate employment statistics.

Beginning next year, Morse said, the magazine will use the ABA's newly implemented and much more specific placement data. The new numbers will take into account whether employment is full or part time, long or short term, and requires or prefers a JD.

"The market for new JDs is less robust than it was a few years ago, so being able to more accurately and more granularly measure a school, where the JDs get jobs, is a real big improvement," Morse said. "That's an understatement."

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Higher education funds begin slow recovery

NO MU Mention

By BEN WIEDER/Stateline

March 19, 2012 | 1:53 p.m. CDT

When Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad stumped recently for increased higher education funding to keep tuition down, he was doing so in direct opposition to fellow Republican legislators who control the state House of Representatives. It didn't worry him.

"The state of Iowa has a responsibility to shoulder part of the investment burden," Branstad said of higher education at a news conference. "Student debt is a major concern in our state and the debt load of Iowa graduates is unacceptably high."

The governor is calling for a \$23 million increase to the budget for the state's three public universities, while House Republicans have called for a \$31 million decrease from the previous year. Branstad told Stateline that with revenues currently running above expectations, he thinks his increase isn't a stretch.

"We still have a tight budget," he said, "but we're in a better position. It's not like we're short revenue."

Branstad isn't the only governor calling for increased higher education funding after lean years during the recession.

As tax revenues have started to recover in many states, others around the country have made similar pushes for more money. Last year, only six states increased overall spending on colleges and universities, according to the Grapevine Report, an annual survey of higher education funding.

While higher education typically takes longer to recover from recessionary cuts than other parts of the budget, experts say they expect the number of states with boosted higher education funding to increase this year.

In New Jersey, Gov. Chris Christie has said that with the state's spending under control, "we can begin to prioritize." His priorities include a 6 percent increase in funding to state colleges and universities and more money for scholarships.

Idaho Gov. Butch Otter called for \$17 million in additional state support for public universities, an 8 percent increase, as well as \$4 million in additional state money for community colleges, a nearly 20 percent increase.

Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam has called for more than \$35 million in increased funding for higher education in his budget for next year, a 3 percent increase, along with increased capital support for higher education and a 2.5 percent pay raise for all state employees, including those in colleges and universities.

Performance funding

In some cases, increased funds come with some strings attached. The additional support in Tennessee is intended to pay for the state's outcomes-based performance funding model, which bases state aid on the progress students make toward their degrees.

In Michigan, Gov. Rick Snyder has proposed that the state increase higher education spending by 3 percent and use the additional money to fund colleges based on four performance metrics including degree completion and affordability.

The plan has already occasioned some grumbling among universities. The University of Michigan would receive less than other universities under the new plan, said university spokesman Rick Fitzgerald.

Snyder's proposal would reward improvement, Fitzgerald said, and the University of Michigan, with a six-year graduation rate of 90 percent, has less room for improvement than other colleges and universities in the state.

"We're essentially at capacity," Fitzgerald said.

Chuck Moss, who heads the Michigan House Appropriations Committee, concedes that Fitzgerald has a point but says that he and other House Republicans back Snyder's measure.

"We support higher education," Moss said, "but we can't just give more and more money."

In Michigan, a 3 percent increase won't replace all of the funds lost last year, when higher education saw a 15 percent decrease in funding. Nationally, most states have a lot of ground

to make up in terms of higher education funding, said Daniel Hurley, director of state relations and policy analysis for the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

“We’re starting at just the worst base that we possibly can,” he said.

Cuts to higher education were particularly deep during the recession. With the expiration of federal stimulus dollars last year, funding was cut nationally by nearly \$6 billion, or 7.6 percent, according to the Grapevine Report.

Another report last week by the State Higher Education Executive Officers found that per-pupil funding from states to public institutions was \$6,290 in fiscal year 2011, the lowest level in more than 25 years when adjusted for inflation. Tuition, which has increased dramatically during the recession, now accounts for more than 40 percent of the operating revenue at public colleges and universities, according to the report.

Rising student debt

Those increases in tuition have led to rising levels of student debt. Nationally, the average student debt for graduates in 2010 was \$25,250, according to the Project on Student Debt.

Among those who have sounded the alarm about growing debt is President Barack Obama, who has mentioned college affordability in numerous speeches in recent months. He has proposed shifting some federal aid away from colleges that don’t control rising tuition and called on governors to reverse the trend of declining state support for higher education.

“We can’t allow higher education to be a luxury in this country,” Obama said in a speech to the National Governors Association.

Iowa’s average student debt is third highest in the country, at \$29,598, and Branstad said the issue was on his radar well before Obama drew attention to it nationally. Branstad first served as Iowa governor from 1983 to 1999, and he said he was still paying off his own student loans when he entered office.

“My family didn’t really have a lot of money to send me to college,” he said. “I’m understanding of the financial circumstances that a lot of kids who are going to college have.”

In between his first period in office and his current term, which began in 2011, Branstad served as the president of Des Moines University, a private osteopathic medical school. He

said that one of his major achievements in that position was tripling financial aid and scholarships for students.

But declining state support has impacted more than tuition.

Last week, leaders at the University of Northern Iowa, one of three public universities in the state, proposed eliminating a number of bachelor's degree programs, including those in French and German, and master's degrees in chemistry, computer science and biology, according to The Des Moines Register. The school also offered buyouts to 29 tenured faculty members.

Leaders in Iowa's Senate, which is controlled by Democrats, say that even Branstad's proposal is not enough.

"We are not adequately funding higher education in Iowa," said Bob Dvorsky, chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee. He lays most of the blame at the foot of House Republicans.

"We have funds available," he said. "The House chooses not to spend it."

But while the Senate leaders are calling for more than Branstad's proposal, Dvorsky admits that it's probably unrealistic to hope for a higher level of funding than the governor has offered.

In Iowa, as in many states, it could be years before funding is restored to pre-recessionary levels, said Hurley, of the AASCU. Despite the upward momentum in many places, governors in a number of states, notably Pennsylvania, Missouri and Kentucky, are still calling for further cuts to higher education.

Hurley said the current recovery isn't likely to resemble other post-recessionary periods, when recessionary cuts were quickly followed by extra money as conditions improved.

"The tail is going to be a lot slower," he said. "There's going to be tight state fiscal conditions for years to come."

Stateline.org is a nonpartisan, nonprofit news service of the Pew Center on the States that reports and analyzes trends in state policy.

Report: Missouri lacking in accountability, transparency

Nonprofit gives Missouri a C- as new ethics bill is introduced

Lawmakers are renewing their push for a new ethics law in the light of a report that faults Missouri for not having strong regulations on the financing of elections.

The report was published Monday by the Center for Public Integrity, a nonprofit investigative journalism organization based in Washington. The center gave Missouri an overall grade of "C-" for government accountability and transparency.

The report said Missouri's good internal auditing controls help in preventing corruption. But numerous exemptions to the state's Sunshine Law and the lack of campaign contribution limits hurt Missouri's overall ratings. The state received an "F" in the categories of political financing and public access to information.

The findings were released the same day House Democrats unveiled a new 166-page ethics bill that includes caps on donations.

Transparency

The grade reflects the fact that Missouri is a "mixed bag" on meeting disclosure requirements around the state, said Ken Bunting, executive director of the National Freedom of Information Council. The council is based at the University of Missouri in Columbia.

"I get an awful lot of calls from people in Missouri, and they are for violations that should not be happening," Bunting said.

In 2009, the council partnered with the Better Government Association to conduct a similar study on state Sunshine Law requests. That study also gave Missouri and 37 other states an "F." Bunting noted the Public Integrity study looked at a much broader set of criteria than his study two years ago.

Public Integrity said its report looked at 330 standards for laws, regulations and various other provisions. It also graded states on the accountability of legislators, executive branch and judiciary.

The report highlighted some past problems with transparency in Missouri. That includes the legal battle between former Gov. Matt Blunt and Scott Eckersley, then a staff attorney with Blunt's office.

Eckersley sued Blunt for wrongful termination in 2009 after he claimed he was fired for opposing the destruction of emails that were subject to an open-records request. The Blunt administration claimed Eckersley's termination was related to his performance.

Some government watchdog groups, like the Missouri Budget Project, said the rankings might be harsher than necessary.

Amy Blouin, Missouri Budget Project executive director, said a lot of information can be easily found online. State agencies post the names of the recipients of large tax credits and the quarterly reports of an elected official's campaign donations.

Blouin said that is more information than is available in other states, but there is room for improvement. The budget process, for example, could be designed so it is easier to understand for the average person. One remedy is posting plain-language summaries of appropriations bills online.

"There are ways to make that (process) more accessible for the average Missourian," she said.

Ethics

House Democrats cited the study when introducing their new ethics bill. It replaces a 2010 law that was tossed in February by the state Supreme Court on technical grounds.

Assistant Minority Leader Tishaura Jones, D-St. Louis, said Democrats were not waiting for Republican House leaders to take up an ethics bill. Leaders like House Speaker Steven Tilley said they believe a better bill can be crafted during a non-election year.

"Ensuring integrity and accountability in state government should be a priority for all lawmakers, and if Republicans won't take the lead, then Democrats will," Jones said.

Among the bill's provisions are:

A requirement to report any contribution over \$2,000 within 48 hours to the Missouri Ethics Commission

Limits on campaign donations of \$5,000 for statewide offices

Similar bills have been offered by Rep. Jason Kander, D-Kansas City, and Sen. Chuck Purgason, R-Caulfield.

Tilley argued that transparency in campaign donations is more effective than contribution limits in cleaning up elections. Some Republicans favor reinstating the disclosure requirements instead of caps.

“Before that court action, I would argue our transparency was better than any of the other states,” Tilley said.



Museum celebrates life of a prolific local artist

By CATHY SALTER

Monday, March 19, 2012

The Walters-Boone County Museum, home of the Boone County Historical Society and the Montminy Art Gallery, is a gem in our midst. The society's motto, "preserving the past for the future," aptly describes both exhibits now on display in the museum's history galleries as well as in the Montminy Art Gallery.

The 8,000-square-foot Montminy Art Gallery was made possible by the generous gift of the estate of Tracy and her husband, Pierre Montminy, art professors at the University of Missouri and Stephens College, respectively, as well as donations from county trusts, businesses and individuals. Their paintings are curated and regularly exhibited in the gallery, as is the work of local artists relevant to the Boone County community.

It is fitting then that the March/April exhibit at the Montminy celebrates Robert F. Bussabarger, a prolific local artist who has spent his long and productive life teaching, creating and exhibiting art in the Midwest. A biographical sketch at the State Historical Society of Missouri offers a window into Bussabarger's rich artistic and academic life and career.

Robert Franklin Bussabarger was born Sept. 7, 1922, in Corydon, Ind. After majoring in art at Wittenberg College in Springfield, Ohio, he served in the U.S. Navy during World War II. He then continued his art education at Michigan State University, graduating in 1947 with a Master of Arts degree in art practice and theory. After two years of public school teaching, he studied painting, ceramics and design at Ohio State University from 1949 to 1951 — a period in Bussabarger's academic career when creative design and ceramics, strongly influenced by Asian art, became important elements in his art.

In 1953, Bussabarger joined the art faculty of MU. Until his retirement in 1990, he taught ceramics and painting, chaired the art department from 1970 to 1973 and spent a total of two years on research leave in India. While on a Fulbright research scholarship from 1960 to 1962, he traveled throughout India, photographing terracotta sculpture and temple architecture, and in 1964, he spent three months in England studying Indian ceramic art. In 1968, Bussabarger published "The Everyday Arts of India," co-authored with Betty Dashew Robins.

Bussabarger's own work during this period of his artistic development incorporated elements of everyday Indian village traditions. Later works reflect an attraction to late 19th- and early 20th-century crafts that Bussabarger saw as real art — authentic, everyday inventions.

Collectively, his work demonstrates a remarkable fluency in multiple media, including watercolor, oil and acrylic paint, pastels and pen and ink in his two-dimensional work. He is probably best known for his three-dimensional art, which encompasses ceramic pottery and sculpture work and work with papier-mâché.

Since retiring as an MU art professor, Bussabarger, now almost 90, has continued to work at home most days in his two art studios, studying the art of everyday life. The house in Columbia that he shares with his wife, Mary Lou, is a living gallery — a window into his four decades of teaching and life of travel.

In addition to a vast collection of his own artwork, he has an extensive collection of traditional art collected during his travels — artifacts made by ordinary people from across the world.

An extraordinary retrospective exhibit of Bussabarger's life and work is now at the Montminy Art Gallery through April. This show includes work from all media, and most of his pieces will be available for purchase.

A reception for the artist, open to the public, will take place from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Thursday at the Walters-Boone County Museum and Galleries.

Please join the Bussabarger family, their friends and the Boone County Historical Society in celebrating the astonishing life of a man whose collected work is truly a reflection of a life lived through art.