

POINTS OF VIEW

Ignoring differences in universities is irresponsible

So June has rolled around and, regular as clockwork, the annual tussle over state funding for Michigan's 16 public universities is reaching a climax.

This year's thrash is over a formula funding scheme. Last month, the House Appropriations Higher Education Subcommittee voted to classify universities by mission and program as a way to determine per-student funding.

This would give MSU an appropriation increase of around 10 percent, far above U-M or WSU, which produces screams from Ann Arbor and Detroit.

These radically differing versions are on their way to a joint conference committee to hammer out the differ-

ences. Sen. John Schwarz, chairman of the Senate Appropriations Higher Education Subcommittee, figures there will be lots of preliminary sound and fury. But he adds, "There is no doubt in my mind that we can work out something between the Senate, the House and the governor."

For anybody who's confused by all this, here's what's really going on behind the scenes.

An old buddy of Gov. John Engler's (they're both MSU alums), M. Peter McPherson was Engler's hand-picked candidate to run MSU. By all accounts, McPherson has done a first-class job. He got a lot of favorable publicity when in 1995 he announced that MSU tuition increases would be indexed to the rate of inflation.

That sounded great to Michigan families dismayed at steadily increasing tuition bills, but it also put MSU's revenue, much of which comes from tuition fees, in a self-imposed straight jacket.

Worse, salaries for Michigan State faculty members are low. Pay for full professors ranks last in the Big Ten, while associate professors are eighth and assistants come in ninth. Faculty morale is not exactly high in East



PHILIP POWER

Lansing, especially when it is explained that salaries are so low because MSU decided to link university income to a low inflation rate.

So McPherson has been scrambling to win extra money from the Legislature to get the faculty off his back and get MSU out of its self-inflicted budgetary bind.

So enter - how convenient! - the idea of classifying various universities in tiers according to role and mission, thus equalizing per-student appropriations to schools within a given tier. That's how MSU came up with such a big increase in the House version of the spending bill.

The big problem is that merely

calling MSU, WSU and U-M all "research universities" doesn't overcome the fact that they are all very different:

The six year graduation rate for undergraduates at U-M is 83 percent, as contrasted with 67 percent for MSU and 42 percent for Wayne State. Basing state funding on incoming enrollments ignores the issue of disparity in graduation outcomes. Universities incur heavy costs in supporting students all the way through to graduation, so state support should not be based solely on how many students enroll from year to year.

Everybody recognizes that programs for graduate and professional students are much more expensive than for undergraduates. MSU's enrollment mix is 72.6 percent undergraduate and 27.4 graduate, while U-M's is 65.1 percent undergraduate and 34.9 percent graduate. Interestingly, Wayne State's enrollments are 40.3 percent undergraduate and 59.7 percent graduate. It's unrealistic to ignore such large differences in student types when figuring out how to fund universities fairly.

Moreover, it just might be that MSU is a lot better off than it seems.

The school has two important core programs - the Agricultural Experimental Station and the Cooperative Extension Service - that are not included in the base funding totals. If state appropriations for both (they come to \$69.5 million) are added back into MSU's base funding, state support per MSU student total turns out to be virtually identical with U-M's.

The device for funding universities by a formula based on a classification system is superficially appealing. But it masks the very great differences between each of the fine research universities in our state. It would be unrealistic and irresponsible for the Legislature to ignore these differences in reaching a final appropriations decision.

Phil Power is the chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. He is a veteran observer of university funding wars, having served as a regent of U-M and as a member of the 1982 Commission on the Future of Higher Education. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@homecomm.net

Citizens can still be heard about special ed underfunding

Unfortunately, some problems never go away!

Despite almost 20 years of lawsuits and despite victories in both the Michigan Court of Appeals and the Michigan Supreme Court, taxpayers and parents in Michigan school districts are once again being short-changed by the Legislature as it continues to ignore its constitutional obligation to adequately fund special education.

Senate Bill 1044, currently being considered by the Michigan House of Representatives, is a case in point. It repeats the accounting and legal mistakes that have already cost taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars



BOB MAXFIELD

over the past 20 years. If this bill succeeds, it could very well cost individual districts additional millions of dollars. Yes, I'm talking again about the "Durant case" that found the state responsible for underfunding special education and responsible again when it tried to use accounting tricks in place of real reform. Ironically, no current members of the Michigan Legislature were in office 20 years ago when this problem began.

If you're as tired as I am at having to go back to court again and again, paying legal fees and robbing general education funds to make up for special education underfunding, tell our legislators now that Senate Bill 1044 is unacceptable.

However, our current legislators have the opportunity to exercise leadership and statesmanship in resolving this issue once and for all! It was the voters who passed the

Headlee Amendment that the Supreme Court found the state guilty of violating. It was the voters who passed Proposal A that the Court of Appeals found the state guilty of violating. So how can our elected officials think the voters will let them get away with yet another attempt to circumvent the will of the people in this latest piece of legislation?

Superintendents, board members, teachers and parents are outraged over this issue. While we all recognize that more needs to be done through early intervention efforts and reform of rules to control special education costs, we must begin by holding the Legislature accountable for adequate-

ly funding the current program.

If you're as tired as I am at having to go back to court again and again, paying legal fees and robbing general education funds to make up for special education underfunding, tell our legislators now that Senate Bill 1044 is unacceptable. Michigan voters won't stand for one more piece of faulty, dishonest legislation that violates the Michigan Constitution.

You can write, call or e-mail your legislator to let your voice be heard on this very important issue.

C. Robert Maxfield is the superintendent of the Farmington Public Schools.

LETTERS

Just think

In response to a letter to the editor on May 11 by an individual who received a citation for having a stray dog.

It appears the officer performed his function properly. Since when is it harassment to get a ticket for breaking the law?

Not all people are animal lovers and some, especially children, are afraid of dogs, no matter how small and cuddly. The officer prevented someone from being bitten or the dog from being killed in the road by a car. What about the person who called the police to complain about the stray dog in the first place, should their call for help be ignored?

This dog was a "family member" but was missing for so long that the "household had to be mobilized for a search." Everyone I know who loves their animals has nametags and/or a license for them. This way the officer could have just brought the dog home.

I doubt the police cars are driving by any more now than any other time. Most law-abiding citizens would prefer the police in their neighborhoods more often.

Were these numerous other people who were "shocked and appalled" just hearing one side of the story or maybe just being patronizing?

Farmington has its own police/fire departments because the citizens want it that way. There are thousands of police officers in the state of

Michigan, most of whom work for departments smaller than Farmington.

This whole situation could have been avoided if people would just think about how their actions might affect other people and not just themselves.

Kathleen Ludwig Farmington

Above public scrutiny?

While viewing the school board meeting on Tuesday, May 16, I was appalled to see three members of

the board publicly attack and berate a concerned parent and constituent.

The last time I looked, the school board was an elected one. Sometimes this means dealing with unhappy constituents. You don't then use the bully pulpit of your office to chastise a citizen for speaking out.

A more civil response might have been, "I'm sorry that you aren't satisfied with the responses to this point. I will call you to arrange another meeting to see if we can't come to a mutually satisfying solution."

I have followed the Observer articles on the issues raised and found no personal attacks on anyone as charged by the three board members during their responses. Only Dr. Maxfield and the Farmington High School

principal were named as individuals in the process.

The fact that they were the reason for some of the frustrations of the concerned parent does not constitute a public attack.

Once again, these are public servants.

Are they above scrutiny? I obviously don't know all the details behind this apparently long-running issue, but I do know that I expect our elected officials to treat their constituents with more respect. Certain board members have displayed this poor behavior before and I think that we all deserve better.

Tom Glossop Farmington

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Robert R. Florka, P.C.
Attorney at Law
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