



WEEKLY REPORT

State Senator Gary Nodler
District 32



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Funding Higher Education

Recently, the Senate Appropriations Committee, which I chair, has been conducting hearings so we can discuss budget requests with each state department and agency. During this process, we discuss funding issues, the rationale for funding increases, and the overall needs of the department. This week, we heard from the Missouri Department of Higher Education (MDHE). The department explained how they have worked to implement the provisions of Senate Bill 389, an omnibus higher education bill I sponsored last year that made significant improvements to Missouri's higher education system.

Senate Bill 389 made higher education in the state more affordable, accessible, and accountable. The legislation included provisions to cap tuition increases at state universities, increased needs-based scholarship opportunities, and introduced important accountability measures for public colleges and universities. The bill went into effect on August 28, 2007.

One important part of the legislation expanded Missouri's needs-based scholarship opportunities through the Access Missouri Scholarship Program. The program works by employing a simple formula based on a family's ability to pay for college. So far this school year, the program is providing more than 38,000 students with scholarships. The governor's budget recommendations for fiscal year 2009 (which begins on July 1, 2008) include a \$27.9 million increase in scholarship funding. This would allow scholarships to be funded at 100 percent of the statutory maximum, and would allow more Missouri students to have a chance to pursue higher education.

The MDHE has also asked for additional funding to increase their administrative staff in order to help the department efficiently continue to implement the Senate Bill 389. New staff will help the department enforce the tuition stabilization provision of the legislation, which places caps on tuition increases for public universities in Missouri. Another provision of the new

law requires colleges in the state to collaboratively develop competencies for entry-level courses associated with general education, resulting in smoother transitions and transfers between schools. The MDHE will use additional staff to further this work and develop policies and procedures impacting access to collegiate-level coursework and transferability of entry-level general education courses.

The budget process still has several phases to go through. The House must complete approval of the budget bills before the Senate begins to work on them. However, we are already in the process of gathering important information about the specifics of the departments' budget requests so that when we do begin to work on the budget bills, we will have accurate information that will help us to craft a fiscally responsible spending plan that meets Missouri's needs.

*Senator Gary Nodler represents the people of Newton, Jasper
and Dade counties in the Missouri Senate.*