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Legislators OK study on higher education, potential university in southeast KY

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Senate President Robert Stivers, R-Manchester, sponsored Senate Joint Resolution 98, which calls for a comprehensive study of higher education in Kentucky.

Legislative Research Commission

A comprehensive study of Kentucky higher education, including an analysis into a potential university in the southeastern region, is now underway.

Thursday, a group of legislators in the interim Government Contract Review Committee approved \$632,952 for the study, which will be completed by the

Council on Postsecondary Education with some contracted help from Ernst & Young.

During this year's legislative session, Sen. Robert Stivers, R-Manchester, championed Senate Joint Resolution 98, which calls for the study. It includes three parts:



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- an analysis of the current governing structure of Kentucky higher education, and its capacity to meet the needs of students and the state's workforce in the next two decades ;
- a look into the feasibility and impact of a regional, residential four-year public university in southeastern Kentucky; and
- an examination of the Kentucky Community and Technical College System, particularly the impact of transferring responsibility for "traditional academic subjects" to regional universities.

The resolution, which passed unanimously, calls for the CPE to submit its findings on these points to the Joint Committee on Economic Development and Workforce Investment and the Joint Committee on Education by Dec. 1, 2023.

CPE Vice President and General Counsel Travis Powell said that they are on track to meet the deadline, but that the study will likely bring more questions to light.

“This is a very broad and comprehensive study with also some specific items. It’s a heavy lift, but we’re excited to do it. And I’m anxious to see what what we what we come up with,” Powell said.

“... We’ll answer a lot of questions, but there will be a lot of items for further analysis and discussion too I think, at the end.”

Looking into Kentucky’s higher education governance model is the first order of business, Powell said.

To determine whether the current structure will be able to meet future Kentuckians’ needs, CPE will analyze current and projected population and demographic trends, economic and workforce conditions and needs and the level of access to and affordability of postsecondary education, among other factors.

“It’s definitely a forward-looking study, but also I think intends for us to look at the current state of affairs as well as see what we need moving forward,” Powell said.

Ernst & Young was contracted to help with two specific parts of the study, Powell said —stakeholder engagement and an environmental scan.

The firm will talk to key stakeholders and individuals to figure out their needs for qualitative research, as well as analyze best practices and effective governance models across the nation.

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SJR 98 also asked CPE to determine the feasibility of a four-year public, residential university in southeastern Kentucky. Powell said this region spans from Rockcastle and Laurel counties to Pike County.

Currently, this region lacks a four-year public university, though it is home to several small private colleges, including Union College in Knox County, Alice Lloyd College in Knott County and the University of Pikeville in Pike County.

CPE is investigating three options:

- establishing a new, four-year university;
- creating a residential campus that is a satellite of one of the state's current public universities; or
- making one of the region's private universities public.

Powell said that CPE is looking at factors like cost, the region's existing infrastructure, the sustainability of each option in light of the region's population trends and needs of prospective students.

"I mean, you could build UK in the middle of this place, but it would be a lot more expensive than building Morehead, for example," Powell said. "And it even could be something less than that. So, if you're putting something there, what would the need be? Are there any existing assets there that can be leveraged?"

He added that CPE will make recommendations, but will share the upsides and downsides of each approach with state legislators in its final report.

"Ultimately, if anything is done in this area, it'll be what the General Assembly decides to do and what kind of investment they want to make," Powell said.

Lastly, the study asks CPE to determine the feasibility and impact of reorganizing the Kentucky Community and Technical College System so that KCTC remains responsible for technical education programs but transfers responsibility for “traditional academic subjects” to regional universities.

CPE will review how this shift would impact each regional university and prospective KCTC students.

Powell said there is a lot of overlap between the technical and general education parts of a community college education.

“It’s not as easy to just split those off as one might think,” he said. “So we’ll take a look at all that too, but I think this just generally gives an opportunity to take stock of what KCTCS is doing and how they’re meeting the needs on both the community college and the technical side.”

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