

End of Year Report on Legislative Advisory Committee Activities to the University Senate

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April 30, 2015

The 2015 Kentucky General Assembly completed its work and adjourned sine die on March 24, 2015. Although it is difficult to characterize any legislative session that did not fully fund KTRS pension funds as successful, if one looks at the session from the perspective of WKU and its legislative priorities, the outcomes have been more or less neutral for the university. During the short legislative session from January to late March, the Legislative Advisory Committee received briefings from Vice-President for Public Affairs Robbin Taylor and her staff to get updates on various bills which the university was tracking and to provide feedback and input on them. What follows is a brief re-cap of the university's legislative priorities and a summary of the legislative initiatives of interest to WKU and updated bill tracking summary. I will discuss this in two parts: the budgeting process and the legislative process.

2015 Legislative Session Recap

WKU Government Relations staff tracked 133 bills during this session. Of those bills tracked, Governor Beshear has signed seven and eight more were delivered to him for his signature on the last day for the session.

Some of the bills WKU tracked had a significant impact on higher education:

- HB4 would have provided a long-term funding plan for the Kentucky Teacher Retirement System (KTRS). KTRS was asking for \$3 billion in bonds to help fund the retirement system. The House and Senate could not reach an agreement on this legislation. The House and Senate encouraged the creation of a task force to study the system and propose a better solution to the funding problem.
- HB67 was a KEES bill which would have increased the minimum number of credit hours needed for students to remain KEES eligible. Basically, students would have to increase their semester hours from a full time load of 12 hours to 15 hours to remain KEES eligible. This would have had a huge impact on our students. Using current data, had this legislation been in effect now, 366 students would have lost their KEES money. This bill passed the House, but failed on the Senate floor.
- HB235 related to training for university governing boards. This bill was sponsored by the Chair of the House Education committee, Rep. Derrick Graham. Chairman Graham contacted the universities for input on the legislation and we provided him feedback on training our board members participate in. This bill passed the House, but never received a hearing in the Senate.
- HB298 authorized funding for a Cancer Research Center at the University of Kentucky. This was a project UK had in their original capital request last year, but was not funded. This bill has been signed by the Governor.

- SB16 sponsored by Senator David Givens was originally filed to allow computer programming courses to be accepted as meeting foreign language requirements in public schools. The bill also stated that if a university had a foreign language requirement for admission, computer programming would be accepted as the foreign language. WKU does not have a foreign language requirement for admission, so this would not have affected us. However, the bill was amended by Senator Givens making computer programming a science or math credit instead of foreign language. This bill passed the Senate, but failed to pass the full House. This is the second year this bill has been filed.
- SB110 was another KEES bill, which would have allowed high schools students to use their KEES money for dual credit courses. This bill passed the Senate, but never received a hearing in the House.
- SJR106 was a joint resolution directing CPE to develop a performance-based funding model for the public universities. The joint resolution passed the Senate, but never received a hearing in the House.
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Several other bills we had on our list never saw any movement in the session.

- HB18 related to the transfer of academic credits never received a hearing.
- HB74 prohibited public universities from operating any office or facility outside of Kentucky. This bill also did not receive a hearing.
- Several tuition waiver bills were filed, but none of them passed.

Other bills of importance to the state did pass in the final hours of the session.

- SB192 is known as the heroin bill and was high on Governor Beshear's priority list. The bill will make stronger penalties for dealers; provide for substance-abuse programs; protect people who call 911 to report an overdose from being charged with possession; and provides for a clean needle exchange program which must be set up by the local governments.
- HB299 reset the floor on the gas tax. The new floor is frozen at 26 cents per gallon.

Other bills tracked that we foresee being filed again in the future are:

- Smoke-free legislation: HB145 would have created a statewide smoke-free law; this bill passed the House but never received a hearing in the Senate.
- Public Private Partnerships (also known as P-3): HB443 would have allowed the P-3 financing mechanism for transportation projects. P-3s are used for a variety of projects in Kentucky, but cannot be used for highway and bridge projects.
- Local Option Sales Tax or LIFT: HB1 would have created a constitutional amendment vote on LIFT to allow communities to fund specific capital projects for a defined period of time. The House passed this bill, but it did not receive a hearing in the Senate.

Please contact me if you have any questions about any of these issues, either now or going forward as legislators pre-file bills this fall. Next year's session is a "long session," so it is reasonable to expect that there will many bills filed that impact WKU, its stakeholders, and higher education generally. Overall, it has been a very positive experience to have faculty representation on the Legislative Advisory Committee so I could report to the Senate on relevant bills and share your views with the Committee. It is my pleasure to serve as your representative.