

Hesston Keeps Funds; New Flag Pole Offered

HESSTON, Kan. - After a flurry of last-minute maneuvers in the Kansas Legislature, Hesston College will not lose any of its state tuition funding next year over its practice of not flying the American flag.

Meanwhile, a Wichita legislator has been authorized in a state spending package to offer to buy the campus a new flag pole out of his office's unused postal funds.

The spending bill is now awaiting the signature of Gov. Bill Graves.

Hesston President Loren Swartzendruber said the flag issue will be taken up by the college's board of overseers in July. But for now, he said, "I'm certainly grateful for the funding for our students."

Swartzendruber said he expected a spirited debate on the matter, and said options could include flying the flag outdoors again. Hesston has not flown the flag regularly since 1970, when it was removed amid protests of the Vietnam War. The funding dispute centered on whether Hesston should receive state money though it does not fly the flag on campus.

Lawmakers have cited a 1939 statute requiring all Kansas schools, including private and parochial institutions, to fly the flag. A recent opinion from the Kansas attorney general's office indicates the college may be in compliance by virtue of a display in its cafeteria, where the U.S. flag hangs alongside the flags of other nations represented by Hesston students. The opinion did not weigh in on whether the law applied to colleges.

The dispute over Hesston's funding began in March, when the Kansas House passed a spending bill with a proviso cutting about \$130,000 in state funds to the college unless it started flying the flag. The funds come from a program that encourages Kansas residents to attend college within the state by giving them tuition breaks.

Once the measure reached the Senate in April, however, the funding cut was removed and replaced with a compromise allotting \$500 to the college to erect a

new flag pole.

This came with the understanding, voiced by lawmakers, that funding could be cut in next year's budget if the college did not start flying the flag.

As the bill moved toward final approval, amid appeals from the state's many cash-strapped programs, the \$500 allotment was dropped.

However, in a May 15 House conference committee, the funding cut was reinstated, blocking grants for new students but leaving them in force for students already in the program.

State Rep. Melvin Neufeld, R-Ingalls, was one of those behind the last-minute revival of the measure. A farmer of Mennonite Brethren background who attended Tabor College at Hillsboro in the 1960s, Neufeld said it was legality and not anti-Mennonite sentiment that kept the funding issue alive. But he said the perception among some lawmakers that Hesston officials view the flag as a sign of militarism has raised some hackles in Topeka.

"To call the U.S. flag a symbol of war, even with my heritage, gets a lot of folks upset," Neufeld said.

Swartzendruber said no one from the college had called the flag a symbol of war, and that neither he nor anyone else from the college had lobbied against the funding cut in Topeka.

State Rep. Carlos Mayans, R-Wichita, said during a House debate that he would offer \$500 from his office's unused postal budget to buy the school a flag pole if it wanted one. The final version of the omnibus spending bill, while reinstating the tuition grants, authorized Mayans to use his postal funds for that purpose.

This came as a surprise to Neufeld, who thought the funding cut was still part of the bill.

Apparently, some additional last-minute maneuvering excised the measure before it won final approval by both the House and Senate.

"That's possible," Neufeld said after the unusually hectic session was finished. "I guess I hadn't paid that much attention to it."

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