Legislature approves smaller budget cut, adopts two-tier retirement system, changes ethics laws

In its 2012 regular session that ended May 16, the Alabama Legislature took several actions that affect Auburn University and its faculty and staff. These include passage of a state education budget for the next fiscal year, changes to the Alabama Retirement Systems and changes to the state employees ethics law and additional punishment for violators of the ethics law. The Legislature also adopted a resolution commending Auburn for leadership in cyber technology.

Education budget reduced but less than projected
Auburn University, along with Alabama public education in general, fared slightly better than originally forecast in the 2013 education budget approved by the Legislature and signed by the governor in May.

In the budget year starting Oct. 1, Auburn University is scheduled to receive $238.38 million from the Education Trust Fund, with each division receiving a 4 percent reduction in its operations and maintenance budget. Initial projections had been for up to a 6 percent reduction in the education budget, and 5 percent midway through the session, but a slowly improving state economy helped reduce the figure to approximately 4 percent by session’s end.

State adopts two-tier retirement system
The State of Alabama is adopting a two-tier retirement system for employees in state and local governments and public education, including Auburn University, starting Jan. 1.

The changes result from changes adopted by the Alabama Legislature near the end of its 2012 regular session and signed by Gov. Robert Bentley. Under those changes, current employees and those who start before the end of calendar year 2012 will be classified Tier I and will continue to pay into and later collect retirement benefits from the Teachers’ Retirement System under the existing plan.

Employees who start in 2013 or later, classified Tier II, will pay less each month and collect less in pension payments when they retire. However, persons who are already in the Retirement Systems of Alabama — such as through employment before 2013 in RSA-member institutions — when they start at Auburn will be classified as Tier I.

The Retirement System change affects new employees in three ways:

♦ Tier II employees will pay 6 percent of their salary into their TRS accounts instead of the 7.5 percent paid by Tier I employees, as of Oct. 1.

♦ Retirement-eligible Tier II employees have to wait until age 62 before they can start collecting a pension. Tier I employees vested in the retirement system can retire and begin drawing a pension after 25 years of creditable service or age 60 with 10 or more years of service.

♦ Tier II employees will have their pension benefits calculated on the basis of their five highest-paid years out of the last 10, whereas Tier I employees will continue to have their pensions calculated on the basis of the three highest-paid years. The requirements are the same throughout Alabama public education and for most governmental workers in Alabama but differ slightly for law-enforcement personnel in each tier.

The Legislature adopted the changes after the economic recession and slow recovery limited the growth of investments by the Retirement Systems of Alabama and placed greater pressure on a cash-strapped state government.

The change to a reduced-benefits plan with smaller pensions for future hires is projected to produce $162 million a year, or more than $5 billion over 30 years, in savings for the state in contributions to the Teachers’ Retirement System and the Employees Retirement System. Local governments and education institutions will also experience future savings or slower growth of expenditures through reduced matches in tandem with the smaller contributions to the state retirement systems by new hires.

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New ROTC Drill field dedicated in honor of 1940s student who was a hero in college and two wars

Auburn University dedicated the Max Adams Morris ROTC Drill Field and historic marker May 24 at the Nichols Center on campus.

The new field is located in front of Nichols Center; the marker was placed near the building, as close as possible to the old Max Morris Field, which was located on the current site of the Village Residence Halls and adjacent parking lot.

Morris was a 1942 graduate of Alabama Polytechnic Institute, as Auburn University was then named, where he was an honor military student and a varsity football player. As a student, he received the Carnegie Medal for Heroism after he suffered severe burns rescuing Wayne Nelson Jr. and attempting to rescue H. Daughtry Perritt from electric shock at ROTC summer training camp at Ft. Benning in 1941. Another cadet, Donald Kelly, saved Morris.

Charles Hendrix, Auburn professor and board member of the Auburn Heritage Association, came across Morris’ story while working on another project. He began working with the Auburn University Board of Trustees to have the area in front of Nichols Center named as the new Max Morris Field. He also wanted to place a historic marker near the former site because, to him, Auburn is about heroes.

“Morris’ story is one of courage, selflessness and love for your fellow man,” he said. “It is a story of scholar athletes. It is a story of love of country. It is the story of a simple, unassuming man. It is a story of ‘making a difference.’ It is a story of how many people are touched when even one life is saved. There is just so much humanity behind this story.”

Following a storm, a four-and-one-half-foot radio antenna had become electrically charged and the ground was soaked from the storm. Perritt touched the antenna, was shocked and fell unconscious. Nelson thought he had been overcome by heat and went to tend to him when his wrist came in contact with the antenna. He, too, was shocked and fell unconscious.

Morris grabbed Nelson’s arm and was shocked, but was able to pull himself free. Balancing on the rubber heels of his shoes, Morris again grabbed Nelson and pulled him free from the charged antenna. Morris then used a pillow to knock Perritt free of the contact, but the antenna broke and fell across Morris’ shoulder, neck and back. He was shocked and fell unconscious as well. Kelly was then able to use a board to lift the antenna off Morris. He and Nelson were both revived, but Perritt could not be saved.

API President Luther Duncan and Ralph Draughon, then-secretary to the president, wrote a letter nominating Morris for the Carnegie Medal for Heroism. He was selected as one of the winners for 1941, receiving the medalion and $250, which “was to be paid for a worthy purpose” to be approved by the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission’s executive committee.

Morris was commissioned an officer in the U.S. Army upon graduation and served eight years of military duty. For his service in World War II, he was promoted to the rank of major and was awarded the Bronze Star Medal and the Army Commendation Ribbon. He was killed in action in the Korean War in 1950; his remains have not yet been recovered.

Members of the Morris, Nelson, Perritt and Kelly families were brought together for the ceremony, Douglas Chambers of the Carnegie Hero Fund surprised the Morris family with the presentation of a duplicate medal to replace the original, which had been stolen.

The original Max A. Morris Drill Field was dedicated on May 14, 1953, under the leadership of API President Ralph Draughon.

— Carol Nelson
Legislative Action

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Ethics violations defined, punishment increased

The Alabama Legislature took steps in its 2012 regular session to clarify the value at which a gift to state employees and office holders becomes illegal and to make it easier to convict and further punish future violators of state ethics laws.

One statute clarifies an existing law by setting the legal threshold for a gift or gifts to a state employee or official at $25 for a single gift or $50 for two or more gifts in a calendar year. The amount will be adjusted every four years to reflect changes in official cost-of-living indicators. The dollar limits define the Latin term “de minimis,” which had led to confusion in some school systems regarding students’ gifts to teachers while leaving prosecutors unsure about what monetary value should apply to actual criminal cases of ethics violations.

In another ethics law change, new legislation strips state employees and retirees of pension benefits under the Teachers’ Retirement System and the Employees’ Retirement System if they are convicted of a felony related in any way to the person’s public position. In such cases, the convicted employee will only be eligible for his or her contributions to the retirement plan, plus interest. Felons who are already retired will see their refunds reduced by the amount of matching state funds previously paid.

Legislature commends Auburn for cyber security

The Alabama Legislature recently passed a resolution commending Auburn University for its innovation in cyber security technology, research and education.

The resolution recognizes cyber security as a rapidly expanding field that represents economic development opportunities as well as challenges posed by potential threats from electronic attacks to government, business and industry.

“The defense and homeland security communities, law enforcement, financial institutions and many others face new cyber challenges every day,” said Rodney Robertson, director of Auburn’s Huntsville Research Center. “We’re eager to help analyze and guard against threats, protect sensitive data and increase productivity.”

The resolution was sponsored by State Sen. Tom Whatley of Auburn in the Senate and, in the House, by Speaker Mike Hubbard of Auburn and State Rep. Greg Wren of Montgomery. It noted that Auburn University’s “technology transfer, commercialization of intellectual property, active recruitment of cyber security interests” and partnerships with universities and the private sector will “help attract industry to the state.”

Auburn’s cyber research includes classified and unclassified projects. “Engineers and scientists at Auburn are working across the broad cyber spectrum, ranging from supply chain risk management and open source intelligence to encryption technology and workforce development,” said John Mason, Auburn’s vice president for research.

Grad students, local teachers help public schools improve educational ties with Korea

Twelve local public school teachers and seven Auburn University graduate students will travel to Korea in June as part of the Auburn University Global Initiative in Education project. They will learn about the country’s culture and educational system in an effort to bridge communications gaps with Korean-born students attending school in Auburn, Opelika and Lee County.

The College of Education and AJIN USA, a Chambers County-based metal stamping company that supplies parts for Kia and Hyundai, and its parent company, JOON, LLC, have worked together to help local educators better serve this growing student population. For the second consecutive year, a gift from AJIN USA will provide support for the Global Initiative in Education project. The company has provided more than $120,000 in support of the program.

Andy Gillespie, Auburn University’s assistant provost for international programs, called the establishment of the project a “visionary act.” U.S. Census Bureau statistics show the Korean population in Lee County has grown from 312 in 2000 to more than 1,300 in 2010. Koreans are now the most populous Asian group in the county.

Karen Snyder, federal programs coordinator for Auburn City Schools, was among the 14 educators who traveled to Korea in 2011 through the program. She said her experience, which included visits to K-12 schools and two universities, proved invaluable in understanding the needs of students from other cultures. During the 2011-12 school year, more than 700 students enrolled in Auburn City Schools reported speaking languages other than English. ACS students speak 48 different languages in all, with Korean (321 students), Spanish (112) and Chinese (74) being the most common.

Suhyun Suh, project co-director and coordinator of the school counseling master’s program in the College of Education, said educators receive unique insight through their immersion in Korean culture. In addition to visiting cultural landmarks like the Korean Demilitarized Zone and taking a side trip to Shanghai, teachers learn how to better relate to students who may not yet be proficient in English or who may not understand American cultural norms.

“They experienced what it was like to be in a country without the ability to communicate at all,” Suh said. “They have realized what it is like for Korean students in the classroom.”

And they learn how much of a life change Korean-born students are in for when they come to East Alabama. In Seoul, for instance, a young student becomes accustomed to riding the subway to school without an adult chaperone. Children often arrive at school as early as 6:30 a.m., and study quietly until class begins. Unlike American middle and high schools, where students move to different classrooms throughout the day, Korean students remain in one room while being instructed by a rotation of subject area specialists.

“One of the teachers who went to Korea last year said, ‘just being in that huge city of Seoul reminded me of just how much of a culture shock it must be for those students who come to Auburn,’” said John Dagley, project co-director and associate professor in the College of Education’s counseling psychology program.

Farmers Market returns

The Market at Ag Heritage Park is operating again this summer, with locally produced seasonal fruits, vegetables, honey and other seasonal products. Hosted by the College of Agriculture in cooperation with AAES and ACES, the market is open from 3-6 p.m. each Thursday through August.

— Troy Johnson
Biggio Center to host summer institute for Saudi faculty

Auburn University’s Biggio Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning will host a summer institute on major issues and methods of collegiate instruction June 18-29 at The Hotel at Auburn University for 32 faculty members from Saudi Arabia’s King Saud University.

The visiting faculty delegation from Saudi Arabia is the latest in a series of interactions between Auburn and King Saud University over the past five years involving Biggio Center Director James E. Groccia and Auburn faculty associated with the Biggio Center.

Groccia, who is also on the faculty of the College of Education, noted that Auburn has attained an international reputation as a center for professional development services to enhance teaching and learning. In addition to working with colleges and schools at Auburn to promote excellence in teaching, the center extends its services to institutions around the world, he said.

The Biggio Center director said the Saudi institution and Auburn share a commitment to promoting excellence in collegiate instruction as well as a common interest in international cooperation. An important benefit for Auburn faculty and students, he said, will be the opportunity to meet leading scholars in their academic fields from Saudi Arabia.

Located in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia’s capital, King Saud University has 65,000 students. Representing a cross-section of the university’s academic areas, the visiting faculty members are in the colleges of Dentistry, Computer and Information Sciences, Sport Sciences, Pharmacy, Engineering, Languages, Education, Law and Political Science, Sciences, Business, Medicine and the Arts.

Institute presenters will be drawn from the Biggio Center, Auburn colleges and schools and the University of Virginia. Some of the topics will include course design, research on effective teaching and learning, teaching evaluation, communication in the classroom, technology in teaching and models of effective teaching. Teaching and learning issues will also be reviewed in depth.

Institute faculty and presenters from Auburn include Groccia, Bill Buskist, Emad Mansour, Raj Chaudhury, Stacy Nickson, Kathy McClellan, Betsy Gilbertson and Amanda Major. They will be joined by Michael Palmer and Deandra Little from the University of Virginia.

Smith receives Fulbright for academic work in Turkey

Alice E. Smith, a professor in the Samuel Ginn College of Engineering’s Department of Industrial and Systems Engineering, has been awarded a Fulbright grant to teach and conduct research at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey, next spring.

Smith, whose research and teaching involves modeling and optimizing complex systems, will instruct a series of courses on adaptive optimization and advanced modeling to Turkish graduate students in technical disciplines, including engineering. She also plans to focus her research on gender issues related to engineering academia, for which she has been awarded several National Science Foundation grants.

“Turkey is extremely progressive when it comes to women in engineering academia, and there is more to learn about the country’s success story,” said Smith. “Their best practices should be shared with other countries, including the U.S.”

Smith will present technical seminars at several Turkish universities and will feature topics which engage students and faculty in discussions about women in engineering. She has previously hosted six visiting scholars from Turkey, where industrial engineering is one of the fastest growing technical fields of study.

Bilkent is recognized by some international organizations as the top university in Turkey.

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