Guidelines set priority for merit salary improvement in planning 2012 budget

Auburn University employees will be eligible for a two-part merit salary improvement in the fiscal year starting Oct. 1, under budget development guidelines reviewed by the Board of Trustees on June 17.

The board agreed to increase the salary pool by 3 percent on a continuing basis and an additional 2 percent increase in one-time funding for a salary supplement for fiscal 2012 only. Both increases would be merit based, with regular, continuing employees eligible for increases of zero to 6 percent of base salary in each case.

Sam Ginn, chair of the board’s compensation committee, said the university would not be well served by a fourth consecutive year without a permanent salary increase. He said such a prospect could have long-term consequences on Auburn’s ability to attract and retain talented faculty and staff, which are crucial for attracting and educating talented students.

During the past decade, Auburn came close to the regional average for faculty and staff salaries among its academic peers, which are the region’s largest state universities with national standing. Most institutions have felt the impact of the global economic recession that began in late 2007, and Auburn has witnessed a softening in salary competitiveness against its peers during this time. Auburn has remained within 10 percent of the regional average and was able to provide some relief last year in the form of a one-time salary supplement. Ginn said additional funding for salaries is needed if Auburn is to remain competitive in the coming year and beyond.

Also, faculty receiving promotions in the next budget year will receive an additional $500 increase.

Under a new law passed in the recent session of the Alabama Legislature, employee contributions to the Teachers Retirement System will increase from 5 percent to 7.25 percent on Oct. 1. The increase in individual employee contributions to the retirement system corresponds to a reduction in the university’s matching contribution to Teachers Retirement System. That change is projected to result in significant savings, which will go toward the merit increases.

Other continuing sources of additional revenue reflected in the budget guidelines for fiscal 2012 include $5 million in additional state appropriations and $5.2 million from a tuition increase. Additional one-time increased funding includes $9.9 million from the main campus proration fee adopted last fall and $13.6 million in reduced funding for deferred maintenance, proration reserve and other reallocations.

Additional spending is anticipated in the budget guidelines for debt payments, building costs and utilities, public safety, library periodicals, AUM outreach projects, merit promotions, SACS accreditation preparation and merit salary improvement. Cost increases for significant one-time commitments are forecast for provost-academic needs, veterinary medicine cancer research, merit salary supplements and scholarships.

The 2012 budget will come before the board for review and a vote a few weeks before the start of the fiscal year.

Students to develop electronic portfolios in proposal to SACS

The Provost’s Office has announced plans to form a broad-based committee charged with developing an action plan to enhance student learning at Auburn through the use of electronic portfolios.

After review by the university community, Auburn will submit its action plan to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools’ Commission on Colleges as a Quality Enhancement Plan, a mandatory component of the university’s 2013 accreditation review. The development team will be asked to complete the action plan by September 2012. All campus constituencies will have an opportunity to review and respond to the draft before its submission to SACS in January 2013.

An electronic portfolio is a digital archive and arrangement of student work products, developed over time and usually managed using the web. It can be used to collect evidence of learning and to extend and deepen learning through reflection and arrangement of materials. Electronic portfolios are also increasingly used to document the effectiveness of instructional programs and to provide students with a way of showcasing their learning and accomplishments for external audiences.

As defined by SACS, a Quality Enhancement Plan is a multi-year project focused on a key issue emerging from institutional assessment. The QEP is designed to improve learning outcomes or the environment supporting student learning. Acceptable QEP projects demonstrate institutional capability to plan, include opportunities for broad-based involvement and identify both clear project goals and means to assess their achievement.
Three campus buildings scheduled to come down by fall as planning proceeds for new central classroom building

Auburn University is preparing to demolish three vacant campus buildings this summer and is pursuing a site or sites for one or two central classroom facilities to replace the classrooms of Haley Center and several other large academic buildings.

In a briefing to the Board of Trustees on June 17, Dan King, assistant vice president for facilities, said the university is preparing to take bids for the demolition of Mell Hall, Sewell Hall and Alpha Psi fraternity house. The buildings are projected to come down by the end of the summer.

Mell Hall, west of Spidle Hall on Mell Street, was constructed in 1925 and named in honor of Annie White Mell, a campus and community social leader in the early 20th century. The building fits Auburn’s Character and Image criteria, but King said it is in such poor condition that renovation would be too costly and ill-advised. The site could be used for another building in the future, King said.

Sewell Hall, built in 1962, was Auburn’s athletic dormitory for approximately 30 years until changing NCAA regulations made the concept of athletic dorms obsolete. The building is named for West Georgia clothing magnate and philanthropist Roy Sewell, who commissioned the creation of Auburn’s fight song, “War Eagle,” in 1958. The board voted earlier this year to build a new dormitory in the vicinity rather than renovate the old facility; a new parking facility is also slated for construction nearby.

The old Alpha Psi fraternity house also dates from the early 1960s, when it was constructed in what was then the new fraternity row, a designation that now goes to Lem Morrison Drive, where Alpha Psi has relocated. The old fraternity house, now vacant, is west of The Village student residence community, and King said, it will become an eyesore and “attractive nuisance” if allowed to remain for long in its present, deteriorating condition. At the request of board members, he also agreed to look into the status and future plans for the deteriorating Sigma Nu house around the corner from Alpha Psi.

The board, meanwhile, authorized the university to initiate development of a large classroom facility in the core of campus by seeking an architect and a construction manager for the project. The development signals a move away from multiple, generic classrooms in each college and school, which could be housed in smaller buildings in the future; colleges and schools would still have dedicated labs and academic areas to meet specific, rather than general, needs.

In her final meeting with the board before departing for the presidency of Bowling Green State University in Ohio, Provost Mary Ellen Mazey said classrooms in mid-20th century buildings such as Haley, Parker, Funchess and Upchurch are poorly designed for the needs of 21st century students. She said a new building or buildings will be designed with the technology to meet those needs and provide the flexibility to maximize usage of classroom facilities.

A new, central classroom facility would be designed to provide greater diversity in size and seating capacity, configured with the flexibility to be adapted for different instructional methods and requirements, facilitate learning and student collaboration and be set up for use of emerging technologies.

King said it is too early to choose a site or sites for the new classroom facilities, but they would be in the core of campus to be accessible to students in most colleges and schools.

Haley Center leads the list of buildings targeted for replacement over the next decade or longer, with Parker, Funchess, Upchurch and Spidle also on the list for eventual replacement. Those buildings contain 91,000 net square feet of classroom space, 41 percent of the total provost instructional space on campus. A new building or buildings could provide the same functions in 77,000 net square feet, King said.

– Roy Summerford
Institutional investors

Forestry study to examine changes in land ownership that could affect future of forests

Timberland across the South is an economic fixture that supplies wood for houses, furniture, paper and the like and now, for many people, may be generating funds for retirement or their favorite school.

The forests have become an attractive option for institutional investors — pension funds, retirement systems and even university endowments — far removed from the everyday planting, harvesting and replanting, says Daowei Zhang, a professor of forest economics in Auburn’s School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences.

The good part is that any investment in timberland contributes toward a thriving forest-products industry. Yet Zhang says the long-term effect of these short-term investments, typically lasting eight to 10 years, is unknown and is creating questions for industry analysts.

“Who owns the forestland with such a limited term and how are they managing their forests?” Zhang asks. “After they harvest the timber, will they change the use of the land? Do they practice reforestation so forest-product manufacturers will have adequate timber supply?”

Zhang says industrial timberland owners in recent years have sold more than 30 million acres of commercial timberland across the country and more than 3 million acres in Alabama, mostly to institutional investors.

Industrial timberland owners, such as Georgia Pacific, International Paper and Weyerhaeuser, used to own the land, equipment and mill and run the entire operation, from planting the seedlings to the sale of construction-ready lumber and tissue paper. They also buy timber from independent land owners.

Facing tough competition and difficult economic conditions over the past 20 years, many of these companies have sold tracts of land to generate capital. Most of the sales were made to institutional investors, which hire timberland investment management organizations, or TIMOs, to manage the property for a short-term return on investment.

“It’s a very attractive investment because the institutional investors pay only a 15 percent capital gains tax, whereas the timberland companies pay a 35 percent tax,” Zhang said.

“The institutional investor also benefits from the generally accepted accounting rules that list land and timber value at the time of purchases and thus ignore the value of timber growth, which can rise dramatically each year.”

Zhang and his collaborator, Brett Butler of the U.S. Forest Service, are using a new three-year, $263,000 grant from the USDA’s Agriculture and Food Research Institute to study institutional investors’ forest management and land-use practices to help the forest-products industry predict future timber supply, attract capital investment to the industry and shape governmental policy making.

The research seeks to:

- identify all institutional investors that have bought timberland in Alabama and the South;
- describe and map their timberland holdings;
- study their forest management and land-use behavior such as timber harvesting, reforestation and conservation; and
- assess their economic impacts to rural communities.

Approximately 20 percent of the timber used in forest-products manufacturing is from institutional-owned timberland in the South, according to Zhang.

“If institutional timberland owners reduce timber harvesting after their initial short-term investment period, it will cost the state economy and reduce jobs,” he said, “and will increase the cost of timber and all wood products. If the reduction of timber harvesting from all forest owners in the state of Alabama is 10 percent, the state economy could lose $250 million a year.”

Zhang and three graduate students are gathering and analyzing forest-landowner information from U.S. Forest Service surveys conducted each year, looking at data on timber-harvesting, erosion, reforestation and land-use changes. The Auburn researchers are observing specifically five- and 10-year increments to note the changes taking place in those time periods.

At the end of the project in 2014, Zhang will publish the results in forestry and economics journals and provide information to timberland owners, policymakers and the public through brochures and other forms of communication.

“We hope the results will help the forestry-products industry and governments deal with the changing market dynamics and avoid possible negative economic impacts,” he said.

— Charles Martin

Electronic portfolios

Continued from Page 1

The selection of the electronic portfolio project concludes a yearlong exploratory process. A 30-person QEP Topic Development Committee, chaired by Sushil Bhavnani, worked throughout the past academic year to develop a list of four feasible projects, including the electronic portfolio project, any of which could become Auburn’s 2013 QEP.

The committee received 25 concept submissions; from those, eight concepts were selected for expansion into full proposals; four proposals were then identified as suitable. The senior leadership team for Auburn’s SACS accreditation process selected the electronic portfolio project from that list.

Budget planning

Continued from Page 1

before the Oct. 1 start of the fiscal year. The administration developed the budget guidelines with assistance from a 26-member budget advisory committee.

Primary points of the budget strategy include:

- continued focus on the university’s strategic plan; enhancing Auburn’s quality and reputation while maintaining progress; reducing costs of operations where possible; and having an inclusive budget process.

— Roy Summerford
Auburn Board of Trustees selects Harbert as its president pro tem for 2011-12

The Auburn University Board of Trustees on June 17 selected member Raymond Harbert of Birmingham as the board’s president pro tem for 2011-12, succeeding John Blackwell of Huntsville.

The president pro tem is the presiding officer of the board in the absence of the governor. Under the Alabama Constitution, the governor of Alabama is the presiding officer of the board, but governors rarely attend and more rarely preside at board meetings.

Blackwell and Harbert will continue to serve as the board’s representatives on the Auburn University Trustee Selection Committee.

Special exhibit in Draughon Library recalls work of Kathryn Tucker Windham

A special exhibit of the books and papers of the late Kathryn Tucker Windham is on display through fall semester in the Special Collections and Archives Department in Draughon Library.

The Selma native, who died June 12 at the age of 93, was the author of a variety of books on Southern folklore and folk life, including a popular series of ghost stories, including a ghost said to inhabit Auburn’s University Chapel. She was also well known as a storyteller, practicing her craft on National Public Radio and at a variety of festivals around the United States.

“Ms. Windham has been very generous to Auburn University over the years with her personal papers,” said Dwayne Cox, head of Auburn University Libraries’ Special Collections and Archives Department. “Now we want to honor her life by sharing with our patrons the things she shared with us.”

The exhibit includes items that chronicle Windham’s life, including a handwritten manuscript for one of her books; fan letters from school children; a 1991 resolution of the Alabama legislature honoring Windham; and a variety of photographs of Windham and certificates she had been awarded.

Education professor selected as external evaluator for Green Schools program

Lisa Kensler, an assistant professor of educational leadership in Auburn’s College of Education, has been selected as an external evaluator for the U.S. Green Building Council’s Green Schools Fellowship program.

Kensler and colleague Cynthia Uline, a professor of educational leadership at San Diego State University, will assess the first year of the program’s efforts to promote sustainability and “greening” in school districts. The Green Schools Fellowship program will begin placing full-time sustainability officers in school districts across the country in July 2011. These experts will work with school district leaders to implement environmentally conscious practices.

Agriculture professor receives NSF grant for research on food contamination

Jacek Wower, a biochemistry professor in the College of Agriculture’s Department of Animal Sciences, has received a three-year, $380,000 National Science Foundation grant to develop flexible, programmable biosensors that can rapidly detect and measure food-contaminating bacteria that frequently infect humans, animals and plants.

Using genetic material from disease-causing organisms, Wower and project collaborators Jong Wook Hong, an associate professor of materials engineering at Auburn, and microbiologist Christian Zwieb of the University of Texas at San Antonio will create highly selective biosensors designed to be user-friendly, economical to produce and easy to store and that can be applied on farms, food production and distribution companies, hospitals and schools.