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## Schools spent millions lobbying

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WASHINGTON — Montana's public universities paid lobbyists more than \$4.3 million over the past decade in efforts to win millions more in federal aid, a practice they and other universities defend as necessary but which, critics charge, is contrary to their core mission.

The University of Montana spent the most — more than \$1.9 million — on Washington-based lobbying since 2000, according to public lobbying disclosure documents filed with the U.S. Senate. Montana State University-Bozeman and MSU-Billings spent more than \$1.7 million and \$640,000, respectively, on lobbyists during that period.

The universities' lobbying firms directly communicate with members of Congress, alert the universities and their faculty to the availability of competitive academic grants, work through federal regulations and maintain relations with federal agencies.

The two MSU campuses pay for the lobbyists with unused money left over from private grants, according to MSU-Bozeman spokeswoman Cathy Conover.

Jim Foley, executive vice president for UM, said the money to pay for that school's lobbyists comes from various sources, but not from tuition or general appropriation dollars from the state.

The Montana Higher Education Office, which governs the state's public colleges and universities, said it is unaware of any public money being used to pay for lobbyists.

Lobbying has become common for universities across the nation. Five universities spent more than \$1 million each in 2009 alone, according to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics. By comparison, MSU-Bozeman, which spent the most of the three Montana schools that reported lobbying expenses, spent \$190,000 that year.

University officials say the spending paid off.

MSU-Bozeman has increased its level of federal funding from \$53.7 million to \$84.2 million over the decade, Conover said.

Foley said the University of Montana received approximately \$68 million of federal grants in 2009. He said the university has seen a modest increase in federal funds over the decade.

"In this culture, you have to have people on the ground (in Washington) to be competitive," said Foley, a former top aide to Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont.

Public universities never say they have enough money, said Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank. He added that the federal grants are not as beneficial as they sound.

"Usually, (research funding) is for the benefit of the professors," McCluskey said. "It's almost completely bogus to say it is for the benefit of the students, especially undergraduate students."

Ashleen Williams, a UM senior and president of the Association of Montana University Students, disagreed. She said students believe the increased federal funding helps them.

Montana public universities receive about \$2,000 less per student from the state than the national average, but have made up for the difference with increased tuition revenue, according to a report by State Higher Education Executive Officers, a trade organization for the nation's public colleges.

"I think the university system, because it doesn't get a lot of money from the state, needs to do some lobbying," Williams said.

Williams once interned in Washington, D.C., for Baucus, who, along with the other two members of Montana's congressional delegation — Democratic Sen. Jon Tester and Republican Rep. Dennis Rehberg — has sponsored millions of dollars worth of requests for the state's colleges and universities.

Rehberg and Tester sit on their respective appropriations committees in Congress, giving each an advantage over most lawmakers in securing money for pet projects, including for state colleges. Both said they determine priorities after listening to constituents.

"I don't make decisions based on what lobbyists tell me," Tester said. "I make decisions based on what Montanans tell me and what I hear and see in Montana when I go home every weekend. I'm not in the business of telling organizations what to do with their resources, but no one needs a lobbyist to get access to me and my staff."

Foley and MSU-Billings government relations director Dan Carter said their universities keep in contact with the congressional delegation, but need the lobbying firms to monitor daily developments in Washington, D.C., especially within federal agencies.

Carter said the lobbying is especially helpful for a smaller university such as MSU-Billings. He specifically cited five earmarks totaling \$959,219 that MSU-Billings received in 2008 and 2009 that totaled more than the school's lobbying costs over the whole decade.

"It helps having someone (in Washington) that can say, 'Oh, hey, by the way, here is a grant for health care lab equipment that you need,'" Carter said. "The greater risk is not having a presence in Washington for these projects."

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