

How



Missouri State  
UNIVERSITY

Got Ph.D. Degrees



by Thomas Strong

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## **Table of Contents**

<b>The End.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The Beginning .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Preparing for the 2023 Legislative Session.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>The 2023 Legislative Session.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Preparing for the 2024 Legislative Session.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>The 2024 Legislative Session.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Preparing for the 2025 Legislative Session.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>The Compromise of 2025 .....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Some of the Players .....</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Epilogue .....</b>	<b>100</b>

## The End

On Wednesday, July 9, 2025, an historic date in Missouri higher education, Governor Mike Kehoe signed into law HB419, HB150, and HB160. Each of these bills contained provisions that allowed Missouri State University to confer Ph.D. degrees. Few people know that before that date, the University of Missouri was the only public university in Missouri that had that right. Even fewer know that Missouri was the only state in the union that so severely restricted granting those degrees.

The following is the true and almost unbelievable story of how the movement started and of the rocky journey that ended when Missouri passed this new and important law.

## The Beginning

The journey began in a car as Kerry Dickerson, Darron Hemann and I were returning from a football game at Southern Illinois University (SIU) in the Fall of 2021. Kerry was on the staff at MSU and Darron and I were strong supporters of the University. Somewhere in the conversation during that long trip, I complained about a law that was passed in 2018 that restricted MSU's ability to offer a stand-alone Engineering program. The law was RSMO section 174.160 and it provided in part, "...such [governing] boards shall have the power and authority to confer degrees in engineering only in collaboration with the University of Missouri ... and that in these instances the University of Missouri will be the degree granting institution." I lamented, "why should MU have a program in our university, use our faculty, staff and facilities, and then have only its name on the diploma? We should have the right to offer a stand-alone engineering program with MSU's name on the diploma."

This road trip was the first time I had met Darron. Little did I know as I was venting that Darron was a man who would not sit idly by when there was a wrong to be addressed. I was almost 91 years old. I could be unhappy and complain, but I would never have had the energy or commitment to address the injustice. It had taken 19 years to change MSU's name from Southwest Missouri

State University to Missouri State University, and I couldn't go through an ordeal like that again. Darron, however, was incensed, "this is not right and we need to do something about it." Let there be no mistake. This adventure would never have begun had it not been for Darron Hemann.

We decided to form a committee and that is exactly what we did. Our first meeting was on Tuesday, January 18, 2022, with Art Haines, Darron Hemann, Callie Carroll, Britton Jobe, and myself among those attending. I started the conversation by relating how RSMO section 174.225 was passed in 2005. It gave MSU its new name (Missouri State University) but in exchange for the new name, it severely restricted what degrees MSU could offer. Then in 2017, when it looked as if the Coordinating Board of Higher Education (CBHE) was going to allow Southeast Missouri State University (SEMO) to have an Engineering program, MU flexed its muscles and passed the present law in 2018. The 2018 law applied to all tax supported universities and, among other things, repealed RSMO section 174.225, the name change bill. MSU benefitted from this law, but section 174.160 was a sore spot that would not let MSU have a stand-alone engineering school. We needed to repeal this section.

New members were recruited to join us. Dr. Rick Seagrave, Bill Rowe, Dennis Heim, Mark Eck and Bev Keltner were among those added to the group. Our ambition also expanded. Why should we restrict our goal to repealing section 174.160. Why not repeal the

whole rotten law that gives MU a monopoly on so many programs. On February 15, 2022, I wrote an email to the committee that included, "We should have the right to a stand-alone engineering school, a stand-alone pharmacy school, a veterinary school, a law school, a med school, a school of architecture, or offer any other program that the Coordinating Board of Higher Education thinks we need."

Our first item of business was to try to arrange a meeting with Clif Smart, MSU's President. Part of Darron's email to Clif stated, "We are writing today as a collective group of proud alumni, concerned citizens, and Missouri State supporters, to discuss with you Missouri Statute RSMO section 174.160... We believe that this bill is unjust not only to Missouri State University, but to all other public universities that are not part of the University of Missouri system." At this point in time, notice that the committee as a whole still was only concerned with section 174.160, engineering. Thirteen people were listed as signatures to the email.

We met with Clif on March 17, 2022. Part of our message to him was as follows:

We are aware that we struck a bargain in the form of RSMO, section 174.225, when we obtained our name change in 2005. We also are aware that that draconian bill was repealed and replaced by a much more lenient bill, section 174.160, in 2018. We know that you and MSU

were instrumental in the passage of 174.160, and are very grateful for your involvement.

We are so very proud of the progress MSU has made since you became president in 2011. We now have new programs and cooperative programs that are available for students from Missouri and beyond. But we are not satisfied. We would like to repeal 174.160, and replace it with a statute that would permit us and other colleges and universities to offer any program that the Coordinating Board of Higher Education would approve. .... It took 19 years to get our name changed. Hopefully, it will not take that long to rid ourselves of 174.160.

In retrospect, our message was not as focused and concise as it should have been. We said we wanted to repeal section 174.160, a section that only mentioned one program by name, Engineering. But we also made it clear that we wanted the right to offer any program that CBHE would approve. Whatever Clif may have thought, he was pleasant and sympathetic. He gave us his blessing. More power to us, if we could pass our bill. MSU just would not be part of the effort. Much later Clif told me that he promised in 2018 that he would not try to pass any new bill that benefitted MSU so long as he was its President. Clif was the first President of a tax supported university with whom we met, but the goal was to see all of them.

Thus, on May 10, 2022, Darron, Bev Keltner, Mike Keltner, Dennis Heim, and I meet with Southeast Missouri State's (SEMO) President Carlos Vargas. We explained the kind of bill we wanted to pass: "We want to repeal 174.160, and replace it with a statute that permits all tax supported colleges and universities to offer any program that the Coordinating Board of Higher Education approves."

Dr. Vargas listened attentively. He said SEMO had petitioned CBHE for an engineering school. Engineering students were going across the river to SIU, just 45 minutes away for their degrees. MU was more than three hours away not counting stops. He thought CBHE was sympathetic to its petition, but MU squelched the effort by passing section 174.160. The gorilla in the room, MU, had put SEMO in its place.

We left the meeting with Dr. Vargas thinking that we had found a partner. In some ways, he seemed inclined to help us. He introduced us to SEMO alums who said they would form a citizens' committee much like our group. His chief of staff, Chris Martin would work with us. In other ways, Dr. Vargas seemed to be very timid. He wanted to communicate with us only by phone, not by email that could be subject to the Sunshine Law. He said if I called him, he would return my call. I thought we had a partner, but when I repeatedly tried to call him, he did not return a single call. No citizens' committee was formed. Even Chris was hard to reach. If we had a

partner, it was a very timid one, perhaps even a nonexistent one.

On May 18, 2022, just eight days after seeing President Vargas, we met with Dr. Dean van Galen, President of Missouri Southern State University (MSSU). The idea we pitched was much the same as the one to President Vargas, and with a similar response. MSSU was satisfied with its current curriculum. "Good luck, but count us out."

We contacted high officials in the other major universities and talked with Dr. John Jasinski, a former President of Northwest Missouri State University. No one wanted to help us. The unspoken, subliminal message was: "You guys have no idea what you are getting into. You don't have a chance to pass your bill and we don't want to waste any of our political chips to be part of a failed effort."

Now we had a choice. We were trying to help our Missouri students, but none of our non-MU public universities wanted to be part of the effort. We were an advocate without a client. We could say, "to heck with them (the universities)" and quit, or we could plow ahead. Well, quitting was out of the question. Little did we know at that time that we soon would find an ally, and a very powerful one. It would not be a university or some large corporation that would help us. It would be one man, Lincoln Hough.

### Preparing for the 2023 Legislative Session

The meeting was in my office on July 31, 2022. At this time, our committee consisted of twelve people, eight of whom were present to greet Lincoln Hough, our State Senator. I had spent a significant amount of time preparing our best sales pitch for the Senator. I expressed the evil intent of section 174.160, to deprive SEMO of an engineering school; of MU's resolve to look good by keeping its boot on the throats of the other universities; that other university Presidents agreed that section 174.160 is bad law; that someday MSU may want a stand-alone engineering school, or pharmacy program, or medical school, or some other program that we can't get because of 174.160. The Senator agreed with our position and thought he would help us. One statement I had prepared for myself read, in part: "Our goal is to offer a bill that would acknowledge MU's status as the state's research institution..." At this moment in time, it was clear that I was content to let MU have the sole right to confer Ph.D. degrees, the degrees we ultimately obtained for MSU.

I next was able to see the Senator for a one-on-one 30-minute slot on September 22, 2022. He said he did not want to file a bill that had no chance to pass in the next session or in the next couple of sessions. He wanted to know the attitude of the other universities toward our bill. We would need their support, he said. It was not

enough for them just to say that 174.160 was a bad law. He said he would talk to Sen. O'Laughlin. If she would give us a hearing, he would pre-file a bill for us. After this meeting, I wrote an email to the MIHE committee that said, in part: "Senator Hough's approach to the bill makes sense to me. He is for us and will be an effective spokesman for the bill, if he decides it has a chance to pass. Our fate is in his hands. If he does not file a bill for us, we might as well fold our tent and stay home, at least this year."

Lincoln said he would call me after the general election, and he did so on November 19, 2022. Things were not looking good for our bill. Sen. Rowden, who represented the district where MU was located, would be the Pro Tem of the Senate. He could kill our bill by refusing to bring it to the Senate floor for debate and a vote. Sen. O'Laughlin, presently Chair of the Education Committee, would be Senate floor leader and no longer chair of the committee. Lincoln was still on board, but anything but optimistic.

Lincoln wanted us to find help, someone in the legislature from a school other than MSU, who would be an active, willing participant to help in the crusade. So, on November 29, 2022, I sent an email to Chris Martin, Chief of Staff at SEMO, that read in part: "If you can persuade your senator and representative to contact Senator Hough, he would appreciate it very much. Perhaps they could offer to sponsor or co-sponsor the

bill. He would like to know that he is not in the fight alone."

Chris responded to our email that same day, saying that he would "plug our local Senator, Sen. Holly Rehder, into the conversation." As the days went by without hearing from either Chris or the Senator, we repeatedly tried to contact Chris. Our phone calls were not returned. There was no response to our emails, not even a lame excuse as to why SEMO would not help us. On December 7, Darron and I decided that the unspoken message from Chris was clear. Chris and SEMO wanted nothing to do with us.

### The 2023 Legislative Session

When the legislative session opened in early January, 2023, I called Sen. Hough's office to see if he had pre-filled a bill, or intended to file a bill. His Chief of Staff said she would check with the Senator and get back to me. On January 5, 2023, she did call back as promised. No bill had been pre-filed, but she said that Senator Hough asked her to file a bill that would satisfy me.

It was evident that this was a completely new and novel subject for his Chief of Staff. She was full of questions. Did we want to repeal all of 174.160, or just the sentences that dealt with Engineering? What were we trying to accomplish? What would happen if all eleven public colleges wanted the same degree, a business degree for example? Would our bill apply to both graduate and undergraduate degrees?

My response to all of her questions was to this effect: "we just want all tax supported colleges and universities to have the same rights as the University of Missouri. The CBHE should decide what programs a university could offer, not MU or a law that gave MU a monopoly." At the end of the conversation the lady said she understood my objectives and said that she would send my views to the people who would draft the bill.

On January 17, Sen. Hough called with good news. He had filed a comprehensive bill, SB473:

to repeal that portion of RSMO section 172.280 that provides, in part, "the University of Missouri shall be the only state college or university that may offer doctor of philosophy (Ph.D.) degrees or first professional degrees, including dentistry, law, medicine, optometry, pharmacy, and veterinary medicine."

to repeal that portion of RSMO section 172.005 that provides, in part, that each state college or university "shall have the power and authority to confer degrees in chiropractic, osteopathic medicine, and podiatry only in collaboration with the University of Missouri...and that in these instances the University of Missouri will be the degree granting institution."

to repeal that portion of RSMO section 174.160 that provides, in part, "[universities] shall have the power and authority to confer degrees in engineering only in collaboration with the University of Missouri...and that in these instances the University of Missouri will be the degree-granting institution."

Sen. Hough said MU supporters told him that he had just killed his chances to be elected, if he ever decided to run for office again, by filing our bill. He asked me to come to Jefferson City and meet with Senators who might be receptive to our bill. In particular, we should

see Sen. Andrew Koenig, Chair of the Education Committee, and Sen. Holly Rehder, who represents SEMO's district.

In the Senate, the Senator Pro Tem is required to assign bills in the order in which they are filed. Thus, 472 bills would be assigned to a committee before our bill, SB473. Sen. Rowden was assigning about 50-70 bills a week, so it would be several weeks before our bill could possibly be heard. Mental note, next year we must pre-file our bill in order to be assured an early hearing.

Darron and I were on our way to meet Sen. Koenig on January 24, 2023, when we received a phone call from a lobbyist I will call "X." X said he could help us pass our bill. We should form a 501(c) corporation to start with, and expect to spend \$500,000 or more to bring the bill home. X indicated that it would take a few years. Darron and I were shocked and aghast. After finishing our conversation with X, we wondered why we should need a 501(c) corporation and why would we need, or where would we find \$500,000. I said I would like to talk to my cousin, Nikki Strong, who was a lobbyist. Nikki's grandfather and I were first cousins. Maybe Nikki could give us some good advice. We did call Nikki, and it was one of the best political decisions we ever made.

In our first conversation with Nikki, she asked if we wanted to pass our bill in this session. I acknowledged that there was no hope for that as long as Sen. Rowden, who represented MU's district, was Pro Tem of the

Senate. He could kill our bill by not bringing it to the Senate floor for debate and a vote. However, Rowden would be term limited in 2024, so we should target 2025 as our first real chance. Nikki said we could wait until 2025, or we could start the journey now and build momentum for 2025. Darron and I did not want to wait. "Let's pull out the stops and have at it."

On February 3, Darron and I had a meeting with our MIHE group. I recounted the events of the session as they had happened up to that time. I recited that if we have a hearing and obtain a "do pass" vote, Sen. Rowden might never bring our bill to the Senate floor for a vote. If he did bring it for a vote, it probably meant that he had the votes to kill it. But if it did get out of committee with a "do pass" vote and the Senate, as a whole, voted for it, we were only halfway there. The same procedure must take place in the House. Bottom line; our bill would not become law in 2023.

I also reported that MU had told Nikki that they would die on the sword fighting our bill. I said we must be willing to compromise. In my view, something was better than nothing. For example, don't expect for us to ever get a Ph.D. degree. I wanted to know how the group felt about compromise and what they would be willing to give up. I said we needed to know whether other states were limiting what their non-flagship universities could offer. I had the feeling that we might be among the most backward states. Finally, we needed to adopt a name for our organization. I suggested

"Improving Missouri Higher Education," (IMHE). Mark Eck suggested "Missourians Improving Higher Education," (MIHE). Mark's suggestion carried the day. We now had a name.

On February 7, 2023, Nikki suggested that we create a website. She said, "This will keep the issue alive as we build momentum." So that was what we did. Part of it stated our beliefs:

#### What We Believe

- We believe that all tax supported colleges and universities in Missouri should stand on an equal footing before the law.
- We believe that Missouri should join the many other states who do not arbitrarily restrict the programs its non-flagship universities can offer.
- We believe that the Coordinating Board of Higher Education is a bipartisan body composed of well qualified people able to fairly administer its statutory charge.
- We believe that the Coordinating Board of Higher Education is the best qualified body to determine what programs should be offered by Missouri tax supported universities.
- We believe, if the Coordinating Board of Higher Education determines that a particular university can best serve our state by offering a particular program, the law should not stand in its way.
- We believe that the Coordinating Board of Higher Education will fulfill its duty to see that

programs are not needlessly duplicated and that unnecessary programs are not allowed.

- We believe that the citizens of Missouri deserve the best education possible at the most appropriate location for the best possible price.
- We believe that SB473 will improve higher education in Missouri and will bring our state into the modern era.

We contacted Lincoln University, Truman State University, and the University of Central Missouri and received polite, but unenthusiastic responses from each. The response of David Pierce, Chief of Staff at the University of Central Missouri, said that he liked SB473, and would like for it to be law. However, he said that UCM did not need any new programs, but might need one at some point in the future. Charles McAdams, from Truman State said, "Thank you for sending me this information. I will keep this effort under advisement."

X's suggestion that we form a 501(c) corporation did not work out. We hired attorney Emily Kembell, who researched the issue and determined that a 501(c) corporation would provide no tax benefits. Darron reported the reasoning to MIHE, "We have decided not to set up 501(c) after all because it does not allow for the tax deduction for donors as we originally thought that it did. Apparently, in the state of Missouri, you cannot deduct contributions you make to a nonprofit organization that employs a lobbyist."

An LLC would do as well, so Darron, who is not a lawyer, found forms on Google, filled them out, and on February 14, we became an LLC corporation with an operating agreement in the most inexpensive way possible. Darron is the best unlicensed lawyer I know. As to X's prediction on the cost of getting our bill across the finish line – his estimate was actually on the conservative side. We ended up spending more than the \$500,000 X predicted.

Wednesday, March 8 saw Darron, Nikki, Lincoln and myself in the office of our political enemy, Sen. Caleb Rowden, the Senator of MU's district, and Pro Tem of the Senate. Lincoln and I did most of the talking. Rowden was cordial and listened politely to our arguments, interposing a question or two here and there. He said he would talk to his constituents and get back with us. He never did.

On March 23, Rowden referred our bill to the Senate Education Committee. But with May 12, as the last day of the session, and with so many bills stacked up ahead of us, it was too late for a hearing. We would not get a hearing in the Senate. What did our meeting with Rowden gain us? Probably nothing.

Rep. Brenda Shields, a MU graduate and Chair of the House Education Committee granted our request for a hearing. The date would be April 12. I intended to be our only witness at the hearing, but Darron ended up playing an important role by responding in rebuttal to

one of MU's witnesses. The hearing was an eyeopener for us. The majority of the committee seemed to think there was merit in our argument. Rep. Bill Allen, a Republican representing Clay County, was particularly vocal in his support for our bill. We will never know how the committee would have voted because Rep. Shields never took a vote. Perhaps she feared (or knew) that the vote might have been in our favor.

Missouri Legislative sessions end in mid-May. We had been busy in the 2023 session, seeing people, contacting universities, becoming a corporation, printing business cards, opening a bank account, writing letters to Representatives and Senators that were (wisely) never sent, spending lots of energy with little or no visible results. Most sane people probably would have thought that we had wasted our time, energy and money. Darron and I would have disagreed. We had started out like a goose in a new world, having no clue what to do or how to do it. We had learned a lot during the session. Darron summed it up best in his email of March 9, "No one expected us to get as far as we have come so that is encouraging."

### Preparing for the 2024 Legislative Session

On May 2, 2023, we had a meeting of the MIHE group. I probably spent too much time recounting the history of our group and all the important events of the legislative session. I mentioned how fortuitous it was that our bill included a provision that would allow MSU and other schools to offer Ph.D. degrees. I said that "I would never have had the guts" to make such an audacious request.

I announced that in preparing for the 2024 session, we must pre-file identical bills in the House and Senate; we must increase our membership; we must hire a lobbyist, perhaps Nikki; we must keep our Facebook and website up to date. I said Darron and I had done most of the work and we must plan for a diminished role for me. I was too old to be leading a crusade that would take months or years before our goal could be reached.

Two days later, on May 4, Darron and I recommended that we form committees: a Lobbyist Liaison Committee, a Membership and University Liaison Committee, a CFO, a Fundraising Committee, a Website and Facebook Committee, a Political Action Committee, and an Executive Committee. Chairs of the committees were named. We did not provide oversight for the Chairs, so most of them faded out without functioning effectively. That was my fault, not theirs. Two

did contribute. My son (Dr. John Strong) provided ideas as chair of the Website and Facebook Committee. My son-in-law (Terry Mitchell) acted as CFO, established a bank account and paid the bills.

It was obvious that we had suffered in the past legislative session because we did not have a lobbyist, and it was equally obvious that Nikki should be that person. On May 5, I wrote her, "Well, the session is finally over and you have to be exhausted. After you have taken a much-needed vacation, please give me a call. We would like to retain you as our paid lobbyist if you are available." She had helped us at no charge in the 2023 session, so I wanted to be sure that she knew that we expected no more gratuitous work. Nikki accepted and would work for us at a bargain basement price. We now had the best lobbyist in the Capitol on our side.

Lobbyists cost money and there would be other expenses, so a request for donations went out to the group. Part of Darron's email of May 13, read, "We have a couple thousand dollars in the bank but much of that is already accounted for." I chimed in with a plea, "I can assure you that we are not spending a single penny more that is absolutely required." Some responded. A total of \$9,800 came in from donors other than myself. I felt guilty for having made the request because one donor, Leon Combs, had been responsible for giving \$6,000 of the \$9,800, and I am confident that he donated only because he was my close personal friend. The other donors were also my friends. I hated asking

friends for money and we never made another solicitation. I did not want to be like others who pester people for money.

In early May, Terry and Stephanie Mitchell told me that they had a friend they wanted me to meet. He was Dr. John Hutchinson, a retired president of a small university, who would be curious about our bill. Terry, Stephanie, Dr. Hutchinson and I met for lunch on May 12.

Dr. Hutchinson, who preferred to be called John, was an intelligent, affable, soft-spoken, nice-looking man. Terry and Stephanie were wrong when they said he had been President of a college; he had been President of four public and private colleges. He also had served as Commissioner of Higher Education for the State of Montana and was Chief of Staff of a board that functioned much like Missouri's Coordinating Board of Higher Education. WOW! This was the ultimate expert, just the guy we needed to prove the point we were trying to make. We thought there was a chance that only a few of the other states gave their flagship university a monopoly on offering degrees in so many programs and were so restrictive in offering Ph.D. degrees. But we did not know how to research the question. We needed facts, hard indisputable facts to prove our point beyond a reasonable doubt. Maybe John was the man who could help us.

Early in our conversation, John said that he was semi-retired and was not interested in being part of our effort. He was just there to hear about the issue and what we were trying to accomplish. I told him about Missouri's harsh law and how we were addressing it. I gave him the best sales pitch I knew how to give. I appealed to his sense of justice and pleaded for his help. He could help us right a wrong. Would he try?

Well, John didn't say "yes," but he didn't say "no" either. That afternoon, as soon as I could get back to my office, I wrote John an email. I thanked him for letting me pick his "educated brain" at lunch and said, "I think we would have a powerful argument in favor of our campaign if we could argue that no state (or only a few states) other than Missouri has such draconian restrictions on its non-flagship universities. We greatly appreciate any help you can give us on this issue." I gave him a history of our movement and told him what we were trying to accomplish. I pleaded, "We do not want to pressure you but would welcome your involvement to the extent you would like to be involved. If your research discloses that Missouri is alone, or nearly alone, in keeping all other universities from offering needed programs, we will be one step closer to success."

The next day John replied, "I'll surely look over the material you have provided," and later, "it's kind of stirring the old fires." That did it. John was in with both feet. His research was thorough and indisputable. He prepared charts showing the position of every state on

the issues. They confirmed that Missouri was the only state in the union to restrict engineering degrees to one public university. They confirmed that we were the only state in the union to give its flagship university a monopoly on so many programs. They confirmed that we were the only state in the union with such stringent restrictions on offering Ph.D. degrees.

John testified for us at all the hearings in both the House and Senate in all the sessions to come. He was a powerful witness, with the credibility of an affidavit. No one could challenge his research, or his conclusions. No one even tried. It would have been foolish and counterproductive to do so.

In MIHE's meeting of August 8, 2023, I announced that we had retained a lobbyist, Nikki, and a media expert, Sarah Schlemeier. I noted that, "Nikki gives us a lobbyist with years of experience and a respected presence with the legislators. Sarah gives us the ability to get our message out statewide."

Nikki brought us up to date with her report of September 29: "My goal is to get this passed as quickly as possible. Realistically, I believe the best case scenario for our bill this year is that we get a hearing in the House and a hearing in the Senate and maybe get this out of one or both of those committees. After that the trajectory is very difficult to predict and we will need to push and deal with issues as they are thrown at us. Sen. Rowden controls what goes on the calendar for debate

in the Senate and that is a huge roadblock that no matter what we do, likely will not be able to move him – but you know this. Keeping this issue alive and discussions going this session is key to our success whether it is this year or in the future.”

October 31 marked the first day Darron and I would take our show on the road. It was then that we made our case to our home Rotary Club, the Downtown Rotary Club in Springfield. Over the next weeks and months, we presented to three more Springfield Rotary Clubs, a local Lions Club, the local Barron’s Club, the League of Women Voters, two Civic Clubs in Marshfield, and Civic Clubs in Carthage, Kansas City, Clayton, Bolivar, Ozark, and Dexter. We passed out brochures that told about our mission and how the attendees could help us. We appeared on a couple of local radio shows to spread the word. Almost no one knew that Missouri’s unconscionable law existed, and many thought it would be easy to repeal it. Common sense, they volunteered, would demand a change.

Common sense, however, often does not carry much clout in Jefferson City. I needed to meet politicians in addition to Lincoln and convince them of the merits of our cause. This is another way Nikki’s connections were helpful. She was a friend of Mike Kehoe, Missouri’s Lt. Governor, and he would be running for Governor in the 2024 election. She arranged for Mike, his wife, Leon Combs and herself to meet me in my office on December 7, 2023. Peter Herschend joined us on zoom.

Mike listened to my reasons why the present law should be repealed and how Missouri would benefit with its repeal. By the end of the meeting, Kehoe said he would support a compromise bill. We had no hope of passing the complete package.

### The 2024 Legislative Session

I contacted Nikki on January 2, the opening day of the 2024 session.

She had spoken to Sen. Rowden over the Christmas holidays. As Pro Tem of the Senate, Nikki believed Rowden would assign our bill to the Committee on Education and that we might have a hearing as early as the week of January 15.

We needed to get our house in order and do it fast. Who would be our witnesses? Ed Gargas, the past president of the SEMO Board of Governors, was on board. Dr. Hutchinson agreed to testify. So did Patricia Latall, an alum of Northwest Missouri State University. I would testify, making a total of four witnesses. We would be ready to go. On January 7, I told Nikki our plan: "Ed Gargas will tell about students leaving southeast Missouri to study at SIU in Illinois. Patricia Latall will testify about the unfairness of the present monopolistic law that we want to repeal. Dr. John Hutchinson will relate how his research revealed that Missouri's law is perhaps the harshest in the country. I will testify about the financial aspects of our bill." Nikki put her stamp of approval on our witnesses and testimony; be ready on January 15.

Our major problem was that we (MIHE) were alone in promoting our bill. No university, no Chamber of Commerce, no alumni group, no student group, no one but us seemed interested. We were just a few individuals fighting the huge MU political machine. Fortunately for us, MU was not taking us seriously and was not mounting any kind of opposition to our bill.

To them, we were just like a fly that could be a pest, but not much else.

Well, as it turned out, a quick hearing was the least of our worries. The week of January 15 came and went. More weeks passed. We were on standby, waiting nervously for a chance to impress the committee with our testimony.

Sarah Schlemeier, with help from Nikki and me, prepared a press release to appear on our website. Portions were as follows: "Missourians Improving Higher Education (MIHE), a coalition committed to enhancing the quality and accessibility of higher education in Missouri, has announced its robust support for Senate Bill No. 749 and House Bill No. 1497 that will be considered during the Missouri Legislative Session that commenced on January 3rd...."

"At MIHE, we believe that every Missourian deserves access to a top-tier education that equips them for the demands of a dynamic workforce," stated Tom Strong, Spokesperson of MIHE. "The

proposed legislation aligns perfectly with our vision to create a future without educational barriers, producing more opportunities for students and generating growth in Missouri's workforce."

MIHE had been growing in numbers since its inception. Our email list that had started with about a dozen people, now numbered more than fifty. Darron and I should have been ashamed that, somehow we never figured out how to effectively use very many of our supporters.

On January 8, our bill was referred to the Senate Committee on Education and Workforce Development. Nikki warned me about one of the committee members: "I want to remind you that we do have at least one very passionate MU alum on this committee, Sen. Greg Razer who is a Democrat. In fact, Sen. Razer was MU's mascot, Truman the Tiger, when he attended MU....Even though he is a Democrat and in a super minority, Democrats have the power to filibuster in the Senate which can kill a bill very quickly."

The job of the Committee on Legislative Research is to consider each bill that is filed and determine its fiscal impact. In other words, it will determine how much Missouri taxpayers have to pay if the bill becomes law. On January 10, the Committee reported that our bill had no fiscal impact. Nikki was elated, "bills can be 'killed' bases on fiscal note alone. So this is good news."

Early in January we were notified that the Senate Committee would hear our bill on Tuesday, January 23, at 8 a.m. Our witnesses were prepared and excited. All of us had seen the scripts of the other witnesses and had made suggestions, if we had any. Our testimony would be short, to the point and impactful. All of the witnesses and Nikki had a zoom meeting at noon on Friday the 19th to confirm our roles and make final arrangements. Who would ride with whom to Jefferson City? Would we all stay in the same hotel? Plans were made to have dinner together Monday evening. Then, at 6 p.m. came the news. The hearing had been postponed, and no new date had been set. What a bummer!

The very next day, Saturday, January 24, we heard that Sen. Koenig was no longer chair of our committee and that we had a new chair, Sen. Curtis Trent who represented Barton, Dade, Webster and part of Greene County. What was going on? Why was Koenig gone; why was our bill in a different committee; and who is this guy Trent?

The next day Nikki answered some of our questions: "As you likely saw in the news yesterday, the Senate has 'blown up.' Yesterday Sen. Rowden made an unprecedented move and removed three senators from their chairmanships, one from a Vice Chairmanship and one from the Senate Appropriations Committee. One of those Senators who was removed was Sen. Koenig from the Education and Workforce Committee, the committee our bill has been referred to...Sen. Koenig

and two of the other Senators who were 'disciplined' are all on our Committee....The in-fighting is between the majority of the Republican Senators and a small group of Republican Senators who have labeled themselves as the 'Freedom Caucus'...As a result of this in-fighting, and in an unprecedented move, Sen. Rowden, backed by 16 of his Republican colleagues, removed three senators from their committee chairmanships on Tuesday and invoked other sanctions upon them."

I was becoming all too familiar with the leaders of our state who are affecting our incomes, our laws and sometimes even our lives. And yes, it makes me very nervous. Sometimes you just need luck to smile on you and this time it did. The new chair of the committee that would hear our bill, Curtis Trent, was an MSU alumnus who had graduated with a major in Political Science and from St. Louis University with a law degree.

With no committee hearing scheduled, all we could do now was drudge on. We prepared a handout that made the point that Missouri was incredibly backward in restricting who could offer Ph.D. degrees. Here is a list of universities, from just the states that border Missouri, that offer Ph.D. degrees:

Northwestern Oklahoma State University  
Northeastern Oklahoma State University  
Emporia State University  
Kansas State University  
Oklahoma State University

University of Central Arkansas  
Arkansas State University  
Wichita State University  
Middle Tennessee State University  
Tennessee Chattanooga University  
University of Memphis  
East Tennessee State University  
Southern Illinois University-Carbondale  
Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville  
Iowa State University  
Governors State University  
Northern Illinois State University

Most of these universities are smaller, lesser known and less respected than MSU. Does it make sense that they can offer those degrees while we cannot? If non-MU public universities in Missouri could offer those degrees, think of the students who could stay here. Think of students from other states who would come here. Think of the service to our students and the addition to our workforce.

Our struggles to have a hearing continued apace. We had four dates set and four cancellations. We had reserved hotel rooms, cancelled appointments and business meetings. We had lost time and money without even an apology. Finally, after being scheduled and postponed a fifth time, we actually had a hearing on February 21. Here was my report:

We finally had a Senate hearing on our bill, SB749, this morning. Dr. John Hutchinson, Ed Gargas, Patricia Latall and I testified in favor of the bill. Our message was focused and to the point. We pointed out that Missouri is the only state in the union that prohibits any tax supported university except the flagship university from offering an engineering degree and the only state to so severely restrict Ph.d. degrees. Many of our students are going out of state for their education and are not returning to Missouri to practice their trade or profession here. This is not fair to our students and hurts our state's economy. We made our case in about 25 minutes or so. Our lobbyist and others said we did a great job.

MU had only two five minute witnesses. Their argument was essentially, "we are doing everything okay now, so we don't need to do anything else." It was not a close debate. We won, but that may not mean much in a legislature where MU has so much clout.

After the hearing I was interviewed by Ciara Tate a TV reporter with Jefferson City's Channel 13, and by Aiden Pittman, a reporter with the *Columbian Missourian* newspaper, based in MU's hometown. We had come unafraid to MU's stronghold to make our case, and we had held our own.

One quote in the newspaper article read: "We're losing those students who go to other states, get their education there and remain there to practice their trade or profession," Strong said. "We need to have a system of higher education in Missouri that benefits all students in all parts of the state."

Later in the article I was quoted on the topic of MU's cooperative programs with other universities: "It's MU's program and they call the shots," Strong said. "They are taking advantage of another university's faculty, location, equipment, staff ... it doesn't work for most non-MU universities in the state."

The *Springfield News-Leader* newspaper and the *Springfield Business Journal* likewise ran similar articles. Then came an email from Peter Herschend, who made suggestions on how to move forward. Peter had been on the MIHE email list since December 7, 2023, the date he was part of the zoom meeting with Lt. Governor Kehoe. This was Peter's first contribution, but it would be far from the last.

On February 26, one of the MIHE group sent an email to everyone in the group touting what he had done for our cause and requesting money to support his efforts. Darron quickly responded with an email: "You received an email last night from [name deleted] regarding a petition that he launched that relates to our two bills. Tom and I would request that you not engage in this petition or donate any money to this cause."

"Name deleted" brought about changes in our way of sending emails. First, his name would no longer be on the mailing list. Second, henceforth all emails would be sent to "Tom Strong" with blind copies to the MIHE group. That way, no single member could send emails to everyone in the group. At this juncture, we did not need a splinter group going its own way. I replied to "name deleted" with the following email, "Thank you very much for your passion and interest, but as I discussed in my previous email, it is not helpful for our many MIHE group members to send emails to everyone. I will be happy to communicate with you either by phone or email, but our focus is lost if everyone is contacting everyone. Our success thus far has been because we have had one message with one voice."

We got good news on March 7. The Committee on Empowering Missouri Parents and Children met in executive session and voted 8-2 "do pass" on our bill. Nikki explained what would happen next: "Sen. Rowden is the person who decides what bills to advance to the Senate Calendar once they are voted out of committee, so our fate is back in his hands." It was only March, plenty of time for a vote that could help make our bill law. What would Rowden do? Can you predict the answer to that question?

There was good news on April 19. Governor Parson appointed Sen. Greg Razer (the former "Truman the Tiger" mascot at MU) to the State Tax Commission. We

would have one less vehement opponent in the next session.

Rep. Brenda Shields, Chair of the Higher Education Committee, after significant lobbying efforts by our group and Rep. Stinnett, finally gave us a hearing on Rep. Stinnett's HB2673 on April 24. Because of the short notice, John and I would be our only witnesses. The hearing went well. It was apparent that we would get a favorable vote from the committee, if Shields would take a vote. Nikki reported to MIHE, "Tom and John did a phenomenal job, in fact, I will embarrass Tom a bit as Rep. Bill Allen said at the end of Tom's testimony, that if he could he would give Tom 'an award for best testimony of the year.' John Hutchinson's research and testimony to his findings was also very important and key to the success of the hearing. Also, a big thank you to Rep. Melanie Stinnett, our bill sponsor. Rep. Stinnett is a true advocate for our bill and has put in a lot of effort on getting into both her bill and our Senate bill."

Nikki's final report of the session to MIHE included: "While I am very disappointed we didn't make it across the finish line this session; however, given all the dysfunction in the legislature this year and the controversial nature of our bill, I believe we made significant progress this session. We were able to pick up some allies, including Rep. Melanie Stinnett. In addition, we were able to move the needle with several of our opponents. Finally, we will or have lost some significant legislators who were opposed to our

legislation and in positions to keep it from moving forward (Sen. Rowden who is term limited and Sen. Razer who was appointed to the Public Service Commission a few weeks ago).”

The 2024 legislative session ended at the mandated time of 6 p.m. on Friday, May 17. Sen. Rowden never brought our bill to the Senate floor for a vote. Rep. Shields never allowed her committee to vote on our bill. Some might think the 2024 session had been a failure. But Rome was not built in a day, and most bills are not passed in a year or two. It took 19 years to get a name change for MSU. After all, we had one great asset; we were on the right side of the issue. We must keep the faith.

### Preparing for the 2025 Legislative Session

We wasted no time in planning our full scale assault for the 2025 legislative session. Our first major meeting would be on June 4, 2024. Nikki, Darron and I met in my office at 10 a.m. Then we conferred with Rep. Melanie Stinnett from noon until 1:30, over a nice brought-in lunch. Then on to see Clif Smart, Ryan DeBoef and Zora at 2 p.m.

It was a good thing that we met with Clif, Zora and Ryan early in the summer because there were differences on how to proceed. Ryan thought MSU, not MIHE, should lead the effort to pass the bill. He thought it might be wise to wait until 2026 for the big push. MSU would have a new president, beginning on July 1, and he would need a year to get comfortable in his new job and to get the feel for Missouri's political climate. We also would need a year to raise money for the project.

Nikki, Darron and I had a different view. I would be happy to have someone else head the charge, but it must be led with vigor and resolve. I was confident in Nikki's, Darron's and my ability to do that. I felt that 2025, not 2026, was our best chance. Rowden and Razer would be gone. Sen. Hough and Rep. Stinnett were eager, primed, and ready for the fight as was Rep. Griffith whose legislative style was more subdued. It would be nice to give incoming president, Biff Williams,

a year to feel comfortable in his new job, but if he was who we thought he was, he would recognize the challenge and step up to the plate. I claimed that there was momentum in politics. We had that momentum and MU had been slow in reacting. What we might gain in waiting a year could be lost by giving MU more time to get its act together. I knew we didn't have all the money we needed to wage our war, but we didn't have the luxury of waiting another year with the hope that money would flow in. Money had been hard to find. Darron had solicited others to donate, with little response. However, we had come a long way on a shoestring. Perhaps it was because we were on the right side of the issue and had enough funds to bring us to where we were. If we spent a year raising money, what would MU be doing? They had more money than we could ever raise. Would we have lost more than we had gained?

I said that Biff did not have the luxury of putting this issue on the back burner. Jeff Schrag, a member of the MSU Board of Governors, said the Board was ready to openly support our bill. He and others on the Board could help educate President Biff. If Biff was not ready to assist, we would do the best we could without him to build on our momentum and pass a new, much needed law next year.

Clif and Zora sent emails to me the next day. Clif's email read: "Thanks Tom. Zora will begin discussion w/ Dr. Williams. Great to see you and discuss this important topic." I hold Clif in the highest regard. He had been my

law partner for 15 years before moving to his new job as in-house attorney for MSU. He is super intelligent and a man of his word. He would be an asset in our adventure.

On June 10, Zora's email read, "Tom, I had a good conversation with Biff about this issue. He fought similar battles in Utah and looks forward to talking with you on July 3."

I did attend the meeting with Biff on July 3, Biff's third day as MSU's new president, and reported to Nikki and Darron about it:

A few weeks ago I was allotted 30 minutes to meet with our new President, Richard "Biff" Williams. They warned him that I wanted to discuss MIHE's bill with him. Then, at his request, the time was expanded to 1 ½ hours. Today, I met with Biff, Vice-President Brent Dunn and Vice-President Zora Mulligan. Apparently, Biff wanted Brent and Zora to be part of the meeting. We were served a very nice, private, lunch at the Alumni Center.

Brent started the meeting immediately after we sat down by stating that I had a bill in the legislature that I wanted to discuss. They ate their lunch while I talked. The discussion on our bill consumed about one hour and fifteen minutes of the meeting. To prepare for the meeting I made an outline of topics to cover, but I spoke from memory and did not refer to the outline. Biff and

the others did not interrupt me. My talk, plus the discussion that followed, consumed all of the time so I never touched my food.

Biff is soft spoken, but confident in his ability to be a successful university president, and expressed interest in our bill.

He said he had gone through a similar situation at Utah Tech. He said that our bill would not only be fiscally neutral, it would benefit the state's workforce and economy in a positive way. He mentioned that he would discuss the bill with Board member Jeff Schrag and would bring our bill to the Board's attention at the July and August meetings. He will call me after the Board's meeting. If the Board is with us, we will go from there.

Biff is with us. As a new President, he does not know how out-front he should be, but he will do what he can. He already has had messages from Rep. Stinnett and others about our bill. Zora says Stinnett is a power in the House and knows how to pass a bill. Zora is with us. No one hinted that we should not move aggressively in the 2025 session.

The meeting could not have gone better. I will see Peter Herschend at a function tonight and will try to get an appointment to meet him to discuss our bill at some convenient time. Let's do our homework for the 2025 session.

Biff was on board, but he had to take orders from his Board of Governors. They would be the ones who would decide MSU's role in the campaign. The Board was scheduled to meet on July 17, August 1-2, and September 18. I needed to educate them on our bill to be sure they knew what was at stake. I would begin by sending emails to two on the Board who were my close friends. First, I wrote to Jeff Schrag:

A few months ago, you allowed me to tell you about our bill to repeal MU's monopoly on Ph.d. degrees and ten named programs. Now I would like to ask you to help us persuade MSU to publicly support our efforts in the 2025 legislative session..... "I met with President Biff, Zora Mulligan and Brent Dunn on July 3, and received a warm reception. Biff likes our bill. He said he had gone through a similar situation at Utah Tech. He said that our bill would advance higher education in Missouri and benefit the state's workforce and economy. He mentioned that he would discuss the bill with you and would bring our bill to the Board's attention at the July and August meetings.

I would like for MSU to take the lead in openly supporting our bill. If it does, we believe that that other tax supported universities will have the courage to do likewise. If the members of COPHE announce their support, it could be the straw or anvil that breaks MU's monopoly. Please

encourage the Board of Governors to go on record in support of our bill.

Note: COPHE is the acronym for "Council of Public Higher Education" and its members are the presidents of all the public universities except MU.

Next was an email to Anson Elliott:

It has been a long time since you invited me to speak to one of your MSU classes. Now it is my turn to seek your help as a member of the MSU Board of Governors.

I am a member of "Missourians Improving Higher Education" (MIHE). The goal of MIHE is to repeal an atrocious law." Then I explained the present unconscionable law, how it was harming higher education and why it must be repealed. I ended with: "I have sent this email to you, my friend, in order not to unnecessarily consume your time, but I would like to see you in person and discuss our bill with you in more depth. I would like for you to know as much about our bill as possible before the Board meets. Please call me if you would like a face-to-face meeting.

Thanks in advance for all you have done for MSU and for all you are doing as a member of the Board.

Anson replied: "You were so inspiring during your presentation those many years ago and again during

your tribute to Clif. I just marvel at the work and impact you have and are doing for Missouri and way beyond.... I told [MU] I had a different goal of trying to [help] Missouri to have two outstanding Universities. I am anxious to visit directly with you. Could we meet this next Monday or Tuesday? Thanks so much for your kind words and reaching out to me. Anson"

There was a reason why I sent Jeff and Anson emails before seeing them in person. I wanted them to have the background information they needed before visiting them, and I had given them that information (not included in the above summaries) in the emails I had sent. I did see them later and talked to Board member Chris Waters as well. Nikki talked to Board member Tim Francka.

Missouri State University's support for our bill was absolutely essential if we had any hope of passing our bill in 2025. It would be the first school and perhaps the only school brave enough and courageous enough to stand up against MU. If no university wanted to pass our bill, why should the legislators bother with it?

Getting the approval of the Board was far from a sure thing. Chris Waters seemed to like our bill, but wondered if it was wise for the university to be out front in its support. Others wondered if they would be asking too much of a brand-new president if they added this large undertaking to his already full plate. Well, we had done all we could. All we could do now was hold our

breath and hope. Would the Board put it on its agenda for discussion? If so, would they allow the university to openly support us?

On July 11, I wrote Nikki and Darron: "VERY GOOD NEWS! I just got off the phone with Jeff Schrag. He is on board with our bill and will be a leading spokesman for us at the Board meeting next Wednesday. He said "I can't imagine there will be any resistance" to MSU openly taking a stand in support of our bill.

I also talked to Anson Elliott. He said he would see Board member Melissa Gourley before the Board meeting and that she would vote for us. We were counting votes. We believed Francka, Schrag, Elliott and Gourley would vocally support our bill, and we thought Waters would be a follower and also vote for it. At the end of the day, Biff should have a mandate to go full speed ahead.

On July 15, I emailed the MIHE group:

The primary election day in Missouri is August 6, just around the corner. Whether we are a Democrat, Independent or Republican, it is a fact of life in Missouri this year that whoever wins the Republican race for Governor and Lt. Governor will win in the general election. Whether we like it or not, that is the fact.

Fortunately, there are two outstanding candidates running for these two high offices;

Mike Kehoe for Governor and Lincoln Hough for Lt. Governor. Many Democrats and Independents will be voting in the Republican primary for these two well-qualified candidates.

On July 31, I wrote to Nikki and Darron: "I just talked to son Jack, the chair of MIHE's media committee. He thinks we may have hired the wrong people to accomplish what we need to accomplish. Instead of hiring someone to create a website, he wonders if we should switch gears and hire a publicist."

That is what we did, sort of. We did not hire a publicist, but we did not renew Sarah's contract for the next year. I wrote Nikki: "With Sarah out of the picture, we are on our own for media attention. Darron has arranged for me to be on Springfield radio station KWTO at 6:30 p.m. next Wednesday, but we have nothing else scheduled....I would like to pick up engagements on TV, radio and civic clubs. Darron and I will go anywhere in the state to help get the word out. If you have any ideas or contacts, please book us for presentations anywhere you can."

When we had the aforementioned meeting with Lt. Governor Mike Kehoe and others on December 7, 2023, he said he would support some form of our bill. At various times during the campaign, he re-affirmed his support. After a May 2, function I told Nikki: "It seems to me that Kehoe is still a long shot to win the election, but he is working hard so who knows. We will keep our

fingers crossed." Nikki's response included: "Here is what I can tell you. Ashcroft still leads in the polls, he seems to be in the lower 30s. Kehoe continues to be in the lower 20s and Eigel remains under or around 10." Kehoe needed all the votes he could get.

On August 2, I wrote to the MIHE group, that now numbered 60 members:

Four days from now, on August 6, Missourians will vote in the primary election. It is a fact of life, un-tasteful to many, that no Democratic candidate will have a chance to win a statewide office this year. For that reason, many Independents and Democrats will be voting in the Republican primary. Fortunately, MIHE has Republican friends who are running for Governor and Lt. Governor. Outgoing Governor Parson openly supports Mike Kehoe for Governor. Senator Lincoln Hough, a candidate for Lt. Governor, sponsored our bill in the Senate in the last session of the legislature. We have every reason to believe that both Mike Kehoe and Lincoln Hough will be in our corner in the next session if they are elected.

Please exercise your right to vote next Tuesday. Invite your friends and family to vote. Vote your conscience. You can vote for a Republican in the primary and vote for a Democrat in the general election.....It is fortunate that our bill is not partisan. It aids all

Missourians, regardless of their political leanings. So regardless of how you vote on Tuesday, regardless of whether you are a Republican, Democrat or Independent, we will be united in the fight for our bill in the next session.

When all the ballots were counted on election night, the results for Governor were:

Mike Kehoe: 274,840 votes (39.4%)

Bill Eigel: 227,014 votes (32.5%)

Jay Ashcroft: 162,086 votes (23.2%)

Amber Thomsen: 10,627 votes (1.5%)

In Missouri, a candidate does not have to get a majority of the votes to be elected, so there would be no run-off. Kehoe would be our Governor if he could win the general election.

Lincoln Hough was not so fortunate. He narrowly lost his race for Lt. Governor. He would retain his Senate seat and as such, would sponsor our bill again during the 2025 legislative session.

I visited Peter Herschend, co-owner of Silver Dollar City and other theme parks, on August 21. Would he help us? Specifically, would he be a witness for us at a hearing? Did he have a lobbyist who would help us? What advice did he have for us?

Peter gave me a "tentative yes" in answer to my request for him to be a witness. However, he did not want to waste his time if we had no chance to pass our bill. He would seek the advice of his political consultant and decide. When he had previously discussed our bill with the consultant, he was told that our bill was dead on arrival. He also would check to see if Jason Zamkus, his lobbyist, might have a conflict of interest if he helped us.

On October 10, COPHE met. Biff brought up our bill for discussion and was met with little enthusiasm. The other university presidents were not interested in the bill. They were pleased with what they had. They thought the bill was just a fight between MU and MSU. "Just count us out and leave us alone," was their attitude. Biff was very unhappy with COPHE. He thought the other universities might have orchestrated a plan before the meeting to make fun of his position.

The attitude of the Council may have affected Biff. He was for our bill, but he had been wondering whether MSU should be out front on the issue for some time. Now he had been rebuffed by all the other university presidents. Did he want MSU to fight the battle alone? If he went all in and lost, what negative impact would that have on MSU? Would he be doing MSU a favor by waiting to fight another year? Zora said: "Biff likes our bill and will determine how active he wants to be in 2025."

I saw Mike Kehoe at a political function on October 17. Later I reported to Nikki and Darron: "I was able to have a one-on-one conversation with Mike for a couple of minutes. He, not I, brought up our bill. He quoted Nikki as saying that I might have doubts about his commitment to support us. He said he has an idea for what he will do and for me to keep the faith. He is with us."

On October 20, I wrote to Nikki and Daron: "I was able to have a short, private conversation with Biff before the football game yesterday. The Board met on Friday and the university is now all in on our bill. Biff has ideas on what he can live with on a compromise, but I don't know what they are....I admit that I don't know how politics functions, or fails to function, but I like where we are now."

I had another meeting with Biff on the 25th, and impressed on him the need to pass our bill in the 2025 session; we would gain nothing by waiting a year. I reported: "Biff said the Board had met on October 18, and had given him the green light. He named Jeff Schrag, Tim Francka, Chris Waters, Lynn Parman, Melissa Gourley and Anson Elliott as verbally advocating that MSU move forward. No vote was taken or needed. Biff has full authority to do what he thinks is best to pass the bill. Biff said he will do anything he can and will fully cooperate with us. He will issue a press release. He will appear on radio and TV. If members of the Board and MSU staff want to, they also can participate."

Then came a caveat. "Timing is the only issue. Biff needs to wait till he knows Kehoe's views before he makes an announcement. He does not want to advance something that is contrary to Kehoe's position. So MSU is now on board, but maybe not yet publicly. I liked everything Biff had to say except the part about 'waiting.' I did not think we have the luxury to wait."

On October 29, Nikki, Darron and I met with Rep. Melanie Stinnett, Rep. Alex Riley, and Sen. Curtis Trent in my office. Stinnett was the sponsor of our bill in the House. Riley was House majority floor leader. Trent was willing to pre-file our bill in the Senate. Riley was not acquainted with our bill, so we gave him a short tutorial. He asked questions and made comments. Soon, he was comfortable supporting us.

We were trying to cover all the bases. MSU's role still was not certain. If Biff was going to be an active part of our struggle, he needed to be fully informed, so we sent him enough to make his head swim; Nikki's two page handout, John's exhibits and his testimony, my testimony, information about Ph.D. degrees MU was offering on its four campuses, Ph.D. degrees small schools were offering in our sister states, documents that refuted all of MU's arguments.

I conferred with Biff on November 6. He said he would tell MSU's lobbyists, Jay Hahn and Ryan DeBoef, to cooperate with Nikki and follow her lead. When I asked what MSU would want in a compromise bill, he

said Ph.D.'s, Engineering and a veterinary school. Coincidentally, that was exactly our position. Now we had a cooperative effort with a strong, trusted ally.

Bad news broke on November 9. Newspapers carried the news that three plaintiffs had sued Biff and several other officers and staff at Utah State University for alleged misconduct during Biff's tenure as President. One of the allegations against Biff was that he had sent a get-well card to a university colleague who had undergone a vasectomy. The card had a picture of fruits arranged in a way to resemble male genitalia. Biff's mistake was in signing the names of the female staff members who would become plaintiffs in the lawsuit.

News of the allegations raised a storm at MSU. There were calls for Biff to resign. The faculty voted "no confidence" in him. I and others came to Biff's defense. Dr. Rick Seagrave viewed the problem this way:

Come on, neighbors. It is not new. I've seen this gag a few times before - A get well fruit plate arrangement resembling male genitalia, given privately to a friend recovering from a vasectomy? The names listed on the get well message were of others, no doubt, to increase his friend's chuckling as these folks were the least likely to send him such a greeting. Sophomoric, yes. Mean spirited message, no. Grounds to ruin someone's career? I hardly think so.

I was concerned that the disruption at MSU might affect our chances to pass our bill. Nikki said it was a topic of conversations in the Capitol. Folks there thought it was pretty funny that there was such a storm at MSU. Fortunately, the legislature was not in session so the impact was not as bad as it might have been. But Nikki said that MSU should lay low until the story lost its steam. There should be no press release supporting our bill. Biff should not appear on TV or radio.

On November 19, I shared my views on the incident: "The MSU Board of Governors has done rather speedy work addressing the Biff problem. In less than two weeks they will have considered all sides of the issue and confirmed Biff as President. There has been a growing sentiment in Biff's favor in the community and I think the faculty and staff will be ready to accept the Board's decision and move on." As the weeks passed, emotions at MSU softened and the incident became a bad memory. In Jefferson City, it was a non-factor.

In mid-November, John Hutchinson inquired as to our plans for 2025. My reply:

- Nikki has retained two additional lobbyists plus an "influencer" to help pass our bill. She may hire a third lobbyist, if she thinks that will help.
- MSU's two lobbyist will work with Nikki and the above lobbyists.

- MSU will openly support our bill, if and when the time is right.
- We will pre-file our bill in both the House and Senate on the first allowable day, December 2, or soon thereafter.
- The makeup up of the Senate gives us an opportunity to get our bill to the Senate floor for a vote.
- Senator Rowden is term limited and gone.
- Senator O’Laughlin will be the Pro Tem. We think she will be helpful.
- Senator Hough will file and sponsor our bill, as he has in the past.
- Senator Trent strongly supports our bill and may chair the committee that hears it.
- We also like the makeup of the House. We have two vocal advocates there in Rep. Stinnett and Rep. Griffin.
- Governor Kehoe supports some form of our bill.

On December 2, the first day that people could pre-file a bill, our identical bills were filed in the House and Senate. Dave Griffith’s bill in the House was HB90. Lincoln Hough’s bill in the Senate was SB11. Later, when Melanie Stinnett returned from Japan, she filed HB616, an identical bill to Griffith’s. We would be ready to go at the opening bell.

On December 19, I saw Peter Herschend at his home to discuss our bill. This time Peter asked his wife, Jan, to

be part of the conversation and to take notes. Peter said he would do anything he could for us, including testifying at hearings in the House and Senate. I said that we had pre-filed our bills and might have a hearing in the Senate as early as January 27, 2025. Jan reminded Peter that they would be in Barbados from January 17 until February 3, so he would not be available. Peter said something like “no Jan, this is important. I will come back.” This level of commitment told me lots about Peter and why he was such a successful businessman. If he went all in on something, he would pull out all the stops.

Two days before Christmas, I sent an email to Ed Gargas, former chair of SEMO’s Board of Governors. I had been urging Ed to use his influence to convince SEMO to publicly support our bill. Ed said SEMO would not be the first to act. MSU must be first and it must be a public commitment, not just a private one. Partly because of Biff’s problems with his bad joke that had gone awry, there had been no press release or other public announcement from MSU. I told Ed that Biff had been interviewed by the *Springfield Daily Citizen* newspaper and part of the article included:

Williams added that the university supports Missourians Improving Higher Education, a group advocating legislation to undo the University of Missouri-Columbia’s degree exclusivity.

We will support that,” Williams said. “It really addresses priorities that are important to us for

furthering degrees we want to add at Missouri State University.

Here was an unequivocal public statement that MSU supported our bill. Would this be enough for SEMO to get on board?

We knew that there could be an early hearing on our bill in the Senate, perhaps as early as January 27, so we must be ready to testify. On December 23, I wrote to John, Ed, and Peter:

You three and I will be the witnesses to testify at Senate and House hearings in the 2025 session. The order in which we testify will be fluid, but I am guessing it will be in the order below:

Tom. My anticipated testimony is attached.

Ed. Ed will do two things. He will relate his close ties to SEMO, including his service as the past Chairman of the Board of Governors. Then he will tell of the students who are leaving the state for their education elsewhere.

John. If John testifies as he did last session, that testimony is attached. Of course, he will change it any way he desires.

Peter. Peter will be our cleanup hitter. If he writes a script, perhaps he will share it with us.

I am told that our testimony should be short and concise, about five minutes or less....I suggest that we all share our testimony with each other. In that way, we should be able to present an organized and powerful case.

Thanks to all of you who are giving of your time and talent to help pass this legislation.

Happy holidays to everyone!!!"

Now, at the end of the year, it was necessary for me to share some personal information with Nikki, Darron, my family, and my lady friend, Linda. Two days after Christmas I wrote them: "When I was 80 years old, my doctor noticed some calcification of my aortic valve leaflets. The condition has increased over the years. I am now 93 and an echocardiogram on December 18, revealed that the calcification has increased to 'severe stenosis,' making me a candidate for surgery....I should be able to have the surgery the first half of January....The nurse assured me that I will be able to testify at a hearing of our MIHE bill by the end of January....After [our bill becomes law] I will smoke a cigar, drink a real coke, and count my blessings."

Because of my age and the possibility of other health problems, Nikki and I felt that we needed a back-up if I could not testify at a hearing. My granddaughter, Audrey Pauls, a young attorney in town, was drafted for the job. Like the minute men of the Revolution, she would be ready to fill in at a moment's notice.

Here we were at the end of 2024, and whether we were ready or not, the 2025 session was just around the corner. We still had a lot of unanswered questions and unfinished jobs. But 2025 would be a golden opportunity. If we did everything right, if we worked tirelessly, if we could get universities on board in addition to MSU, if we could cultivate the right politicians, if we could dampen the resolve of our opponents, we might have a chance. Let's tighten our belts and get to work.

### The Compromise of 2025

In some ways we were ready to go. Peter Herschend had requested and received lots of information about our bill, why it was needed, and how it would help our students and workforce. He was preparing for the time when he could be called on to speak intelligently to Kehoe or a legislator, or to be a witness at a hearing. John and I had sent Nikki scripts of what could be our testimony at a House or Senate hearing for her to read and critique. Ed wanted to help any way he could.

Everyone felt a sense of urgency this year. We might never have another chance as favorable as this one. Sen. Hough was in a powerful position as chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee. Our two major opponents in the Senate, Rowden and Razer, would not be there to harass us. Shields would not be chair of the committee that would hear our bill.

We would pull out all the stops. We gave Nikki the green light to hire all the help she needed. She retained two lobbying groups, The Swain Group and Clarkson Nelson, LLC. This gave us a total of four lobbying firms, Strong Consulting (Nikki), the above two firms, and MSU's lobbyist, Hahn and DeBoef. All would work with and take direction from Nikki. Nikki also hired a consultant, Elijah Haahr, who would get us gigs on TV, radio and podcast shows.

Lincoln called me on January 10 with words of encouragement. He said he was optimistic that some version of our bill would pass this session. He said when he believed strongly in something he saw it through, and he believed strongly in our bill.

Nikki sent a report to the MIHE Group on January 12 explaining how our bill would be referred: "The Senate is expected to begin referring bills before they adjourn for the week on Thursday. The Senate Rules require the Senate to refer bills in the order they are filed. Because our Senate Bill is number 11, we know our bill will be in the first round of referrals and should be referred this week. It is very likely that we will have a hearing on our bill prior to the end of the month. The House is not required to refer bills in the order they are filed. We will work with Speaker Patterson and request an early referral of our bill in the House as well."

We got good news on January 21. The Committee on Legislative Research found that our bill had "\$0" fiscal impact on Missouri taxpayers. It was a fiscally neutral bill. We had been holding our breath for the report and now we could exhale. This should have put to bed MU's lie, repeated ad nauseam, that Missouri taxpayers could not afford our bill. Of course it didn't. That was about all they had, so they continued to spout the unfounded nonsense.

I had been slow to learn the need for and the ability of non-MU universities to offer Ph.D. degrees. But I did learn, and it became obvious that MSU and other public universities had both the faculty and resources to offer them. Rep. Dr. Bill Allen, who represented Clay County in the House, served on the committees that heard our bill in all three legislative sessions, 2023, 2024, and 2025. He had been Vice-Chancellor of a small Arkansas college and told us that it added nothing to his school's budget when it added a Ph.D. degree to its curriculum.

Common sense says Dr. Allen was not prevaricating. Other small universities helped prove his point. Emporia State University, with less than 6,000 students, the University of Central Arkansas, with about 10,000 students; and the University of Southern Illinois, with about 11,000 students, all offer Ph.D.'s. If these modestly sized tax supported universities in our neighboring states can offer Ph.D.'s, they are not cost prohibitive.

MU also helped prove Dr. Allen's point. It offers Ph.D. degrees on all four of its campuses; Columbia campus - 63 Ph.D.'s, Kansas City campus - 10 Ph.D.'s, Rolla campus - 15 Ph.D.'s. Even the St. Louis campus offers them.

There is no logical reason why MSU should not be able to offer Ph.D. degrees. It offers fifty-nine Master's degrees and eight Doctoral degrees. It has the faculty and the facilities to add a Ph.D. degree in many of those subjects. It might not have to add a single professor. It

might not even need to find an additional classroom. It would cost little or nothing.

Yet even with more than three times as many students as the Rolla campus, the law does not permit MSU to offer a single Ph.D. degree. This made absolutely no sense. If our non-MU public universities could offer these prized degrees, think of the students who could remain in Missouri for these degrees. Think of the students from other states who would come here. Think of the benefit to our students and the addition to our workforce. Ph.D. degrees would be a major point of emphasis when it came time to testify at a hearing in the House or Senate.

On January 25, Biff called. He had seen Paul Wagner, Executive Director of COPHE, in the halls of the Capitol Building and asked him to call for a COPHE vote on our bill. Wagner thought COPHE should take no position. Biff had a longer conversation with Wagner on the 28th. Biff said: "I finally spoke with Paul. He just danced around the issue and I told him I needed to know where they stand. He said he would get back to me." Well, Wagner never got back to Biff and COPHE never voted. MSU would be the lone institution to carry the fight forward. It was time for MSU to claim its swagger.

All the while, Nikki and her team were working the legislators, friends and foes alike. Strengthening the resolve of our friends, developing new friends, and softening the resolve of our foes was the goal. Sen. Tony

Luetkemeyer, Sen. Rick Brattin, Sen. Mike Henderson, and Rep. Chris Brown were receiving special attention.

One of the legislators told Nikki that university enrollment was projected to shrink in the coming years, so there was no need for our universities to expand programs. My response was: "If enrollment is going to shrink in the future, it is even more important that we do not lose our students to other states that are luring them with a more affordable and convenient education elsewhere. We must give our students an opportunity to stay here and entice students from our sister states to come here as well. This will help alleviate the effects of a declining enrollment, serve our students, add to our workforce, and boost our economy."

MSU was a DEI school. DEI, which stands for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, is "a framework that promotes the fair treatment and full participation of all people, particularly those who have historically been underrepresented or discriminated against. It aims to create a more inclusive and equitable environment by recognizing and valuing differences, ensuring fair opportunities, and fostering a sense of belonging."

Those sounded like lofty goals, but DEI was not in favor with the 2025 legislature.

MSU must deep six its DEI programs or lose \$36 million dollars in State funds, came the word from Jefferson City. Biff had no choice and divorced MSU

from DEI. He explained to the Foundation: "Over many, many years, Missouri State University has created a campus that is supportive of our students -- creating a safe environment to learn, grow and develop into adults who are prepared for a changing world. This culture, this environment doesn't cease to exist because we closed an office. We move forward with the same dedication to the education and development opportunities that we had a week ago, a month ago, a year ago."

The next time Biff was in Jefferson City some politicians were complimenting him on shutting down DEI. It was clear that we had dodged another bullet. Without DEI to vex us, the political debate over it would not be an unwelcome distraction that could hinder the passage of our bill.

In mid-February, Clif Smart, the highly respected and well-liked former President of MSU, weighed in with a newspaper article that addressed the weaknesses of the collaborative programs: "Missouri State does offer collaborative engineering programs with Missouri Science and Technology in electrical, mechanical and chemical engineering. New engineering programs cannot be added without partner consent, and no graduate engineering programs have been allowed to exist. While Mo. S.& T. has been a solid partner, having to obtain its consent to hire faculty and staff, set budgets, and create program constrains growth."

Then Clif addressed our bill:

It is time for the doctoral monopoly and the engineering restrictions to end. Missouri is the only state to restrict engineering programs to its flagship university. Missouri is also the most restrictive state on which public universities can offer research doctorates, with 40 states having no restrictions at all.

For example, in the surrounding states, Southern Illinois, Arkansas State, the University of Central Arkansas, Emporia State University, Wichita State University, the University of Memphis and Middle Tennessee State University all offer Ph.D. programs. All are smaller than Missouri State. Drury University, not subject to the engineering program monopoly as a private university, is beginning its own engineering programs without a partner university, yet Missouri State (15 times bigger) is precluded from doing so by statute.

The Speaker of the House was Dr. Jon Patterson, a graduate of MU's medical school. However, he could see the momentum and the merits of our bill, and he arranged a meeting at 12:30 p.m. on February 17, between MU President Mun Choi and MSU President Biff Williams. There would be three people in the room, the Speaker, Mun and Biff. I would not be there, and Nikki would not be there.

This was the first time, but far from the last time, that I had a helpless feeling. I would be excluded from holding up for my own bill. This was not Biff's bill nor Mun's bill, but they might be making decisions and compromises that I did not like. The politicians, in this case the Speaker, would be in charge for the most part of the rest of the session and I would be a bystander. Nikki told me that I would have veto power – nothing would be passed unless Darron and I agreed to it. That did little to pacify me. I might have to accept a bill that gave us something, but was far from what we deserved. Well, at least veto power is better than no power at all.

The February 17 meeting was a fiasco. Biff was in the Speaker's office at the scheduled time, but there was no Mun. The Speaker told Biff that he, the Speaker, would have to leave at 12:45 for a one o'clock appointment and asked Biff to state his position on our bill. So, Biff had fifteen minutes to make his case, and I am sure he did a first-rate job. Then the Speaker left at fifteen minutes till one, and had two aides stay in the room and take notes. They were to ask no questions and contribute no comments. As the Speaker was leaving, Mun was arriving.

The exchange between Mun and Biff could not have gone worse. Mun was very dismissive of our efforts to get the bill passed. He said MSU would never get Ph.D. degrees, or engineering degrees, or any other concessions from MU. The meeting was brief, perhaps

about 20 minutes, with no meeting of the minds on any subject.

Elijah Haahr was earning his pay by arranging TV, radio and podcast interviews. Darron was on three in St. Louis in just one day, February 14.

We were not the only ones using the media to make our case. In mid-February newspapers in Jefferson City, Columbia and Springfield carried an article by Chuck Brazeale, Chair of the University of Missouri Flagship Council, a private organization that advocates “for our historic flagship university to help support, build and strengthen the University.” Chuck had been a witness for MU during the hearings in 2024 and we would hear from him again later at the House and Senate hearings in this session. His testimony, in general, was much like his article that reads in part:

This is a pivotal moment for Missouri higher education. Demographic shifts, reduced enrollment and the need to focus on student performance require public universities to consider the best uses for limited resources. During these challenging times, Missouri students and Missouri taxpayers cannot afford to duplicate programs that will increase tuition and state support. But that’s precisely what the degree bill would do.

Chuck concluded with a plea: "We urge Missourians to consider the impact of the costly degree bill. Changes in higher education policy should be based on meeting the needs of the state and Missouri taxpayers, not the aspirations of individual institutions. Missouri students and Missouri taxpayers cannot afford it."

This false argument that our bill was a costly bill was essentially all MU had to say in opposition to our bill and, of course, it ignored the findings of the Committee on Legislative Research that our bill was fiscally neutral.

Governor Kehoe had told me several times during the Fall of 2024 that he would support us in passing some form of our bill. True to his word, he asked us to meet with three of his aides in order to learn our position on the bill. Present were Bill Anderson (Deputy Chief of Staff-Policy and Legislation), Jamie Birch (Policy Director), and Taylor Jones (Policy Advisor), Nikki and me.

The interviewers were friendly and relaxed. They gave me all the time I wanted to explain how the present law needed fixing and how our solution was the answer. I said that at the present time only MU can offer degrees in Dentistry, Law, Medicine, Optometry, Pharmacy, and Veterinary Medicine; and only MU can confer a cooperative degree in Chiropractic, Osteopathic Medicine, Podiatry and Engineering. I pointed out that Missouri is the only state in the union that restricts engineering degrees to its flagship university and that

we are the only state in the union that gives its flagship university a monopoly on so many programs.

I said hordes of students in Southeast Missouri are going across the river to SIU, or to Tennessee, Kentucky or Arkansas for a more affordable and convenient education than they can find in Missouri. Students in Cape Girardeau are 45 minutes away from SIU, but more than three hours away from Columbia, not counting stops. Students in the bootheel are closer to the University of Mississippi than they are to Columbia. More students who live in the bootheel are going to Arkansas State University than to any Missouri university. I said that this scenario is repeated in Southwest Missouri, Western Missouri, in all parts of the state. I said if SB11 does not pass, we will have missed a golden opportunity to give all of Missouri's students an affordable education at a convenient location. We will have missed a chance to add to Missouri's workforce and boost Missouri's economy.

Nikki's report to our MIHE Group related: "Tom and I met with the Governor's office for nearly an hour on Thursday. The Governor has expressed support of our bill or at least portions of our bill. The meeting went well. The Governor's office was up to date on our bill, engaged and asked several questions. Our ask was for the Governor to get involved with negotiations and help the players find a resolution."

I received an email from Springfield City Council Woman Callie Carroll-Swafford on March 5. She had just been at the Capitol and related: "Honestly the climate feels totally different this year. Lawmakers actually want to talk about our bill.... Alex Riley mentioned there's a ton of support for this bill from Springfield and MSU, but it was lacking support from other Universities or Higher Education Institutions. He mentioned hearing from those other schools would help this bill a ton. They need to speak with their legislators to help push from other areas of the state."

Here was the old familiar song we had heard so many times before: "if this bill is so good, why is MSU the only school backing it?" What was wrong with the other universities? Even if they did not need a Ph.D. degree or one of MU's ten monopolized programs today, what harm would it be to have a law that they could have it some tomorrow? I felt that someday they would be sorry that they had eschewed this once in a decade opportunity.

On March 6, I received a welcomed email from Nikki:

Kehoe met with Mizzou yesterday, specifically Mun Choi and Dusty Schnieders, MU's in house lobbyist. His message was simple and to the point - he wants our bill and he wants MU to work out a deal with us on the bill. Kehoe did not give a specific directive to MU on what that deal should be, just that he wants it done. That

message was direct and was taken seriously.... I also want to point out that it does not appear the Governor has made any demands as to what the "deal" should be. So at this point he let them know he wants something done, but he is also allowing "us" to negotiate our own deal.... We also need to not be discouraged if they [MU] come back with some bogus solution. If that happens, I believe that would play out in our favor.

Things were happening fast now. Nikki and Lincoln's persistence had paid off, we would have a Senate hearing the next Tuesday, March 11, and Lincoln had made an unusual request. He wanted the committee to vote our bill out on the same day it would be heard. He wanted it out promptly so the negotiations with Mun could continue apace. This scared me because I was seriously concerned that we might not get a "do pass" vote without time for our lobbyists to do their work. Nikki told me not to worry, the committee vote was her responsibility, not mine. Telling me not to worry was like telling a child to sit in a corner and not think about a white elephant.

We knew who our witnesses would be, John, Ed, Peter and myself, but I wondered if perhaps Biff might also agree to testify. I called him and he did not hesitate. He would be a witness. Mun had grossly underestimated MSU's new president. He should not have demeaned Biff at that meeting on the 17th.

By now, preparing to testify at a hearing had become routine. No witness should testify for more than five minutes. Every witness would have read the testimony of every other witness. No one's testimony should be repetitious of the testimony of someone else. We would meet at a restaurant the night before the hearing to bond with Nikki and each other.

Thus, on Monday evening, March 10, we met in a private upper room at a club Nikki belonged to. Peter wanted Nikki to read the latest version of his testimony. She did and made some suggestions that Peter accepted. We were ready.

When the gavel came down at the Senate hearing at 8 a.m. on March 11, our preparation paid off.

- I led off by explaining the barbaric law that we wanted to repeal, the fact that the repeal would be fiscally neutral, the fact that MU would not be harmed by our bill.
- John then explained his charts that proved that Missouri was the most restrictive state in the union when it came to conferring Ph.D. degrees and giving the flagship university a monopoly on so many programs.
- Biff came third and explained that MSU, with more than 26,000 students, had the faculty and facilities to confer Ph.D. degrees and degrees in several of MU's monopolized programs.

- Ed, our fourth witness, told the painful story of the mass of students going to other States for their education and not returning to practice their trade or profession here.
- Peter battled cleanup, and explained the harm that comes when one university has so much unchecked power. A State's obligation was to meet the needs of its students, something our State does not do.

MU had four witnesses that spouted the party line, "things were working well and our bill would cost way too much money." If the hearing had been a jury trial and the committee had been an unbiased jury we would have had a favorable verdict in short order. But our committee/jury was tainted before the hearing/trial began, so its decision might be in doubt.

Lincoln had demanded the committee vote on our bill the same day the committee heard it. They did just that, at 11 a.m. it voted "do pass" by a vote of 5-2.

Sometimes things in the legislature move at a snail's pace or don't move at all. On this day it moved at warp speed. Nikki told me all about it when she called me that night, the night of the hearing. She said Lincoln and Mun Choi had reached the basics of an agreement. The details would have to be worked out, but Lincoln had to know if I could live with the basic understanding and he had to know tonight.

Here was the proposal: all non-MU universities would be allowed to confer Ph.D. degrees. Period. A thousand thoughts were racing through my mind during that phone call. We would not get engineering or any of MU's other monopolized programs, but we would get something better, much better. MSU offers fifty-nine Master degrees and eight Doctoral degrees. Any one or more of these programs could be the foundation for a Ph.D. degree. Biff had previously told me that Ph.D.'s could raise our university's profile in the world of higher education as well as serve students in Missouri as they should be served. Lincoln had won an unexpected, valuable prize for my school, Missouri's students and its workforce. Good for him.

Nikki reminded me that I had veto power. I could nix the bargain and fight another day. Why would I do that? When, if ever, would we have a better chance to pass a bill than this year? Lincoln had reached a better bargain than I could ever have reached. I told Nikki, "take the deal." If you catch a fish, don't let it off the hook.

I thought about the compromise during the night and the next morning. Then, in the afternoon I sent Nikki and Darron an email: "I am elated. The more I think about it, the more pleased I am. We started only three plus years ago with nothing but a dream and now we may have no statutory limitations on offering Ph.d. degrees. Nikki has been magnificent throughout. I hope she will wear the t-shirt I will order that says, 'Nikki is Tom's Favorite Cousin.' Senator Hough has sponsored

our bill all three years. Without him, we would not be where we now are. The stars have aligned... We won't count our chickens before they hatch, but I will be forever grateful for Darron, Nikki, Lincoln and all the others who have brought us to where we are."

Darron and I were equal partners, so Darron also had veto power. He emailed the next day: "I am firmly in the acceptance camp, [and] I am grateful for what we can potentially get out of this deal. It's much more than we had before and it's a major step in the right direction for us."

Nikki wrote weekly reports to the MIHE Group, so at the end of the week she reported on the Senate hearing. What was she to say about the whirlwind of events that followed? It was too early for them to be made public, so she wrote:

We are pleased to report that not only was SB11 heard before the Senate Education Committee yesterday, but the bill was voted "Do Pass" out of committee by a vote of 5-2. This is a significant step forward; however, there is much work that still must be done.

I want to caution our group from reading too much into the 5-2 vote as several Senators on the committee made it clear that they believe SB11 - as it is filed - goes too far; however, they believe something needs to be done with the law and indicated that some form of our bill would likely

be acceptable. Committee members expressed that it is their hope, by advancing the bill out of committee, the parties will come to the table and negotiate a deal on the bill.

We are happy to sit at the table to try to negotiate changes to our bill and the law if MU is willing to sit and negotiate in good faith.

It is hard to keep secrets. Benjamin Franklin said three people can keep a secret if two of them are dead. Nikki completely understood that fact. In her email to me on the 16th, she wrote:

Here is my update for the MIHE group this week. Please note, I intentionally left out our current discussions with MU. I don't want to get into the weeds of the discussions currently going on as I think they are very fragile. If and when there is a 'deal' we will report that to the group.

Despite the best efforts of mice and men, there were a few leaks. Brent Dunn, MSU's Vice-President for University Advancement, sought me out at the Women's basketball tournament in Evansville, Indiana, on Sunday, the 16th. He had talked to Lincoln on Thursday and Lincoln had told him about the "deal." Brent was on cloud nine. He thought this would be a "game changer" for MSU.

Pinning MU down to an agreement was like trying to catch a greased pig at a county fair. Nikki emailed me on the 18th:

As planned, Lincoln spoke with Mun Choi again yesterday. Lincoln called me after they spoke....

Here is where we are currently. The original offer Mun agreed to take back to the Board was the following:

- 1) Ph.D.'s for all public universities.
- 2) Some sort of Vet or Vet Tech Program for MSU.
- 3) MU gets \$50 million for its research reactor center (MURR), and \$10 million for another project.
- 4) The bill is passed before the budget passes or MU does not get the money."

MU brought back the following offer (in a Nutshell) to Lincoln:

- 1) Ph.D.'s only for MSU;
- 2) Ability to offer BS in Vet Tech at MSU
- 3) Guarantees that MSU can't ask for money from the state for those programs
- 4) Guarantees in the budget that money won't be taken from MU
- 5) MU gets its appropriation for MURR and the additional project."

Lincoln talked to Mun yesterday for about 20 minutes. He stressed to Mun that below is what he wanted and there would be NO reference to

guaranteed restrictions on funding as lined out in number 3&4 above:

1). Ph.D.s for all public universities - Mun argued that nobody wanted to offer them except for MSU and that SEMO only wanted Engineering. Lincoln said that he wanted the Ph.D. prohibition removed completely because 'it is a stupid law and if nobody is going to offer them as MU says, then MU definitely isn't hurt.' Lincoln said he wants it gone completely, but will push to get at a minimum the removal of the prohibition to defer Ph.D.'s for MSU and SEMO.

2). Ability to offer BS in Vet Tech at MSU with no collaboration.

3) MU gets its appropriation for MURR and the additional project.

4) And the bill passes (meaning both chambers and sent to the Governor) before the budget gets done.

I replied to Nikki's email the same day I received it: "As for Ph.D. degrees, I would be happy if only MSU and SEMO got them. In the COPHE meetings, the other schools stonewalled Biff. They wanted nothing more than what they had and said the fight was between MU and MSU. We have repeatedly asked for their help, and they have found reasons to say 'no,' They have been more of a distraction than an asset." I thought this might give Lincoln a little more bargaining room. Mun only wanted to give MSU Ph.D. degrees.

At a little after 5 a.m. on Tuesday, March 25, I received a text from Nikki. We could have a hearing in the House Higher Education and Workforce Development Committee at 4:30 p.m. the next day, March 26, if we so desired. I immediately sent a text to Ed, Peter and John to see if they could be available on such short notice. John replied in short order that he could be there. By 6 a.m. or so, I was able to tell Nikki to agree to the date. John and I could testify. I had not yet heard from Peter. Perhaps he could be there. Ed could not make the trip. It was too far, and he had a business to run. He would be with us in spirit.

At about 7:45 a.m. I talked to Biff and told him of the hearing. I said I was sure that his schedule was full, and we did not need to impose on him. Later he called back with the news that he would attend and testify. Three busy people, John, Peter and Biff would put everything aside to travel to Jefferson City on short notice to testify at the hearing. Who could ask for more?

By 8:45 a.m. the news came back from Nikki: "Tom, we are good to go for tomorrow night.... Everyone should plan to provide the same testimony as in the Senate but be prepared for more questions. There should be no mention of a potential 'deal.' Since no official deal has been agreed to yet, we must move forward as if there is no deal and no discussions of a deal."

By now hearings were a piece of cake. We presented the same testimony as before, and MU's two witnesses espoused the same lame and pathetic arguments as before. This time, committee members shared their thoughts as never before. Reps. Bill Allen and Stephanie Hein, in particular, made powerful arguments for our cause.

The next day Darron wrote to us: "I just wanted to take a moment and say how proud I was of our testimony last night. I thought it was our best presentation yet and the evidence we presented was indisputable. I know it was a long night for everyone but I believe it will prove to be beneficial."

University presidents are very intelligent people, but sometimes they seem to have no touch with the world we live in. A Ph.D. degree does not guarantee good, common sense. Nikki told SEMO's lobbyists that the bill we were supporting would only provide Ph.D. degrees for SEMO and MSU. Soon the lobbyists reported that SEMO's president, Dr. Carlos Vargas, said his school did not want to be part of the deal, "leave us out." There was no explanation or attempt to justify the decision. Would SEMO never want to offer a single Ph.D. degree – never? Universities in our sister states that were the size of, or smaller than SEMO, offered them. Well, SEMO apparently didn't want them, so MSU would be the only public university to receive them.

What in the world was going on with President Vargas, now a lame duck President who would retire at the end of June? He had expressed support for our bill when we met with him in the Summer of 2022. He had even put us in touch with some SEMO alums who said they would form a citizens' committee much like our MIHE Group. It is true that Vargas never followed through with any aid and that the citizens' group never organized. But SEMO did have one person, Ed Gargas, a past President of its Board of Governors, who went to bat for SEMO and our bill in a big way. It was only because of Ed that we demanded that SEMO have the same right to Ph.D.'s as MSU. Whatever the reason, SEMO was out. I have a theory why and Darron has a different theory, but it would serve no purpose to express them here.

I wrote to Nikki: "It appears that SEMO may get nothing when we reach a final compromise. I know that nothing is done until it is done, but I want to plan ahead. Assuming SEMO is left out, I would like for Ed to hear it from us first. And I don't want to tell him on the phone. I think I owe it to Ed to meet him for lunch and explain in person how SEMO got neither engineering nor Ph.D.'s.... please tell me the earliest possible day when I can see Ed." Nikki said we must wait until a final agreement is reached.

Darron and I had started this journey with the goal of helping every public university in the state to have every right that MU had. From the very start we were

rebuffed by every university except MSU. In a later report to the MIHE Group, Nikki explained: "Please understand, we fought hard to include other public universities but when asked, the other public universities declined our offer and did not want to be included in the bill. Since no other public university publicly supported our bill or desired to be included, it was impossible to make an argument and fall on a sword to include anyone other than the university that supported our efforts."

Brinkmanship is an art in politics and MU seemed to be playing it. Nikki wrote on April 4:

Just a quick follow up after the text exchange yesterday. Heard from Lincoln today. We are at a standstill with MU over one issue, - MU continues to want language saying that they won't lose money and we won't get funding from the state for new programs. Lincoln will continue to hold out on this as he should, you can't legislate future appropriations. This is a losing argument for MU. If they don't relent by the time we get to budget mark-up in the Senate, Lincoln will pull MU's appropriations for MURR (MU's nuclear reactor) and its other project out of the budget. Mark-up will probably be the week after next.

In the meantime, we have identified several bills both in the Senate (House Bills that have passed into the opposite chamber) and in the House (Senate Bills that have passed into the

opposite chamber) we could amend our language to either in committee or on the floor once they hit the floor....This situation is typical in legislative negotiations and I fully expected to hit a "stand-off" at some point. The good news is that with several higher education bills already sitting in the opposite chambers, we still have plenty of time and a path forward!

Stand off? Plenty of time? This did not sound good to me. On April 7, I asked Nikki: "I am sure you know how nervous I am. Murphy's Law says if something can go wrong, it will go wrong. We are only 40 days from the last day of the session. What could go wrong to kill our bill this year?

Nikki's reply was not comforting: "Unfortunately, anything can go wrong to keep our bill from passing. There are just as many scenarios that could go wrong as scenarios that could go right for us. We need to take this one day at a time. I know you are nervous and so am I." Well, it did not help my nerves to know that our lobbyist was as nervous as I was.

Little did I know that help was just around the corner. I continue to be amazed by how fortunes can take a 180 degree turn in the Missouri legislature in a matter of hours. On the afternoon of Wednesday, April 9, Lincoln called Dusty Schnieders, MU's lobbyist, into his office and read him the riot act. I do not know the specifics of the conversation, but it must have been clear that

Lincoln had run out of patience waiting to hear from MU. Less than 24 hours later, at 11:30 the next morning, Dusty was back with MU's response. Nikki emailed me: "We have a DEAL. We are working on language now and I think we are not too far apart on what the language should be. I will update everyone on details and next steps when we talk tomorrow."

The "talk tomorrow" was a conference phone call with Nikki, Darron, Audrey and me as participants. The language MU had submitted for the new law included: "The University of Missouri is the state's only public research university..." Then it provided: "3. The board of regents of Missouri State University shall have the power and authority to grant doctor of philosophy degrees in disciplines other than engineering and to grant bachelors of science degrees in veterinary technology"

I did not like for the law to say that MU "is the state's only public research university" when MSU would also be a research university. The people in the legislature who would write the final version of the bill said the offensive language had no effect on what MSU could offer, so I should not worry. Good luck with that! If the language had no meaning, why was it in the bill? If the new law was going to say that MU is a public research university, it should also say that MSU is a public research university. The drafters of MU's submission didn't even seem to know that MSU has a Board of Governors, not a board of regents.

On Friday, Saturday and Sunday, April 11-13, Nikki, Ryan DeBoef, and Biff haggled with MU over the wording of the statute. Nikki had an appointment to call Lincoln at 9 a.m. on Monday to tell him if there was an agreement. She needed for MSU and me to give it our blessing. It was about 8:40 Monday morning when Nikki called to see if I would acquiesce. I was not happy with the "only public research" language in section 172.280, but the "Notwithstanding" sentence in section 174.160 gave MSU Ph.D. degrees, so I told Nikki to "go with it." MSU also agreed with the wording and we had a deal.

The pertinent portions of the statute that would give MSU Ph.D. degrees are:

Section 172.280: The University of Missouri is the state's only public research university. As such, the University of Missouri shall be the only state college or university that may offer research doctorates, doctor of philosophy degrees or first professional degrees, including dentistry, law, medicine, optometry, pharmacy, and veterinary medicine, except as provided in section 175.040 and section 174.160.

Section 174.160.2: Notwithstanding section 172.280 and section 174.225, the board of governors of Missouri State University shall have the power and authority to grant doctor of philosophy degrees in disciplines other than engineering and to grant bachelors of science degrees in veterinary technology.

Now that the wording of the new law was set, we needed to find the best and quickest way to pass it. The plan was to attach our compromise bill language as an amendment to a Senate bill that comes to the House from the Senate. Then send the bill with our amendment back to the Senate for it to vote on it. The same strategy would be followed in the Senate, amend our compromise language to the House bills that were in the Senate. That process began on Monday, the very day the wording of our new law was agreed to. The Senate had approved three bills that dealt with education, SB150, SB160, and SB38, and had sent them to the House. We attached our bill as an amendment to each of those bills, and all three were passed out of the appropriate House committees that same day, Monday.

On Tuesday, April 15, I had a dreaded chore to perform. I had to tell Ed Gargas, one of the nicest guys in the world, that his school, SEMO, would get nothing in the new law. It would not be fair to send Ed a cold, uncaring email, or tell him the bad news on the phone. I should be man enough to see him face to face, so I made the 140+ mile drive to Van Buren to deliver the devastating message in person. Ed, a class act, accepted the news without a murmur. He could not understand why his school, SEMO, would not accept the gift of the right to offer Ph.D.'s, but that was not my fault. That was his school being short-sighted.

On Wednesday, April 16, Nikki explained the procedure for our bill to become law: "Our bills were

added to Senate Bills and sent to House Committees. Then they were voted out of the House Committees. They now must be referred to the Rules Committee where they will require another vote. Then, once that happens, they will need to be put on the House Calendar where they will eventually be debated, voted on and passed out of the House. Then they will go back to the Senate where the Senate will either take a final vote to accept the changes made by the House and send them to the Governor or send them to conference to make changes. As I said when the deal was agreed to, this isn't done yet. We still have several important steps ahead of us. Once the bills get on the House Calendar, Alex Riley has control of them. We met with him yesterday and he has committed to move them quickly, but the Speaker (and House rules regarding times a bill must sit before it can move to the next phase) controls the pace until then."

In her report to the MIHE Group on Friday, April 18, Nikki cautioned: "Please note, our fight is not over and there are still many steps we will have to go through to get our bill passed. There are many outside factors that can impact the passage of a bill that have nothing to do with the bill itself. There are only 4 weeks remaining in the legislative session." Then she added a word of encouragement: "We will do all we can to get this across the finish line. Our team is working hard to get this done. We feel good about the position we are in."

On May 1, our language was added to HB419 in the Senate. Now the language of our compromise bill had been attached to every educational bill in the House and every educational bill in the Senate. All the bases were covered that could be covered.

As a practical matter, MU's appropriations bill would have to pass both the House and Senate by May 9, not the four weeks Nikki had mentioned in her last report to MIHE. Pursuant to House rules, May 9 was the last day to pass the State's budget. Remember, Lincoln had told MU that his bill would have to pass both chambers of the Legislature before MU would get MURR and its other project. And May 9 was only 15 calendar days away. More importantly, the Legislature would only be in session 11 of those 15 days. A lot still had to happen before our bill could become law. It had not yet passed either chamber of the legislature. Time was of the essence.

Fortunately, there were many things working in our favor. Gov. Kehoe had forced MU to negotiate with us to find a compromise. MU could not ignore this request. You don't poke a sleeping bear. Lincoln had the MURR anvil hanging over MU's head. MU couldn't afford to buck Lincoln and lose that bonanza. Nikki had helped educate the legislators about the unfairness of the law that gave MU so many monopolies.

In the 18 years that MU prevented MSU from getting its new name, Missouri State University, MU made liberal

use of the filibuster. It would not have that weapon in 2025. The two schools had agreed on a mutually beneficial bill that, in effect, precluded a filibuster.

To fulfil our agreement with MU, two things had to happen, MU's budget bill had to pass, and our "degree" bill had to pass. Because MU's bills were budget items, they had to pass by 6 p.m. on Friday, May 9. Since our bills were not budget items, they had to pass by 6 p.m. on Friday, May 16.

Here was the plan: The Senate would pass the two bills for MU that contained the MURR funding and funding for its other project. Then Alex Riley, majority leader in the House, would bring our bill to the House floor for a vote, where we expected it to pass. We thought both bills could pass by 6 p.m. on the 9th.

Darron was not pleased with the part of the plan that gave MU its side of the deal before our bill would be voted on in the House. He did not trust MU. Once MU got its money, what could it do to sabotage our bill, he wondered. Well, it was too late to worry about that now.

The next chore of the legislature was to get MU funding for MURR and its other project, and that might not be as easy as it appeared. On Wednesday, May 7, Nikki sent me a text saying, "the entire budget is a mess." Later she said, "everyone is very, very cranky right now....the budget is still a mess but we are positioned nicely." It was true that we were positioned nicely, but

time was flying by and there were just two days left to get MU its money, Thursday, May 8 and Friday, May 9.

It would have been nice if HB19, the bill that included MU's request for the MURR appropriation, had been in final form and ready to be voted on in the Senate on Thursday, May 8. But it was not in final form and ready for a vote, so the House and Senate spent most of the day on Thursday, May 8, drafting the final version of the bill.

This meant that the Senate had to pass HB3 and HB19, the bills that gave MU funds for its two projects, by 6 p.m. on the last possible day, Friday, May 9. Funding for the bigger project (MURR) was part of HB19, that provided in part:

Section 19.005.... For the planning, design,  
and construction of the Radioisotope Science  
Center at the University of Missouri Research  
Reactor (MURR) on the Columbia campus:

From General Revenue Fund (1101)  
.....\$50,000,000"

The Senate passed HB3 and HB19 in the early afternoon of the 9th and adjourned for the day. Now it was up to the House to take the bills up for a vote. The House passed all the bills that the Senate sent it – except for one, HB19. It took no action on HB19 and adjourned for the day. The 6 p.m. deadline came and went, and MU did not get its funding for MURR!

What happened? No one could remember a session when a capital improvements bill had not passed. Why didn't it pass in 2025? Had the legislature never heard of Murphy's Law? Had it never heard of the admonition to plan ahead? Both the House and Senate had Republican majorities, so the problem lay firmly in the lap of the Republican party.

Now MU was in a panic. How and when would it get the funding for MURR? Would Gov. Kehoe call a special session to address the budget issues? Would MU have to wait until the 2026 session to get its funding?

MU was not the only school with questions. Nikki, Darron and I wondered what would happen to our bills. Since MU did not get its money, would the legislature think MSU should not get its Ph.D. degrees? Our bill was not part of the budget packages, so we had until 6 p.m. on Friday, May 16, to pass one or more of the bills that included our amendment. The important language in the amendments that gave us Ph.D. degrees was:

Notwithstanding sections 172.280 and 174.225, the board of governors of Missouri State University shall have the power and authority to grant doctor of philosophy degrees in disciplines other than engineering and to grant bachelor of science degrees in veterinary technology.

On Monday morning, May 12, just five days before the legislature would adjourn, I talked to Rep. Melanie

Stinnett, sponsor of our bill. She said the Republicans would caucus at 3 p.m. that day and the House would convene at 4 p.m. It would be during the caucus that a decision would be made as to what bills would be voted on. She would text me if our bill would be advanced.

At 4:20 p.m. Melanie texted me that HB419, a bill that included our amendment, was being voted on. A few minutes later came the good news – it passed with a vote of 149-7. Still later the House passed SB160, a bill that also included our amendment, by a vote of 117-11-27. The next day a third bill that included our amendment passed the House.

HALLELUJAH! Now these bills will go to Governor Kehoe for his signature. If he signs all or any one of them, the bill(s) will become law, and MSU will be able to offer Ph.D. degrees and a Vet Tech program at its Springfield campus. MU will have to wait for a later opportunity to receive funds for MURR. Think of it – our bill was voted before MU's bill, just the opposite of what MU wanted. That still puts a smile on my face.

There was one final bizarre twist to the 2025 legislative session. On Wednesday, May 14, three days before the session was to end, the Senate adjourned for the year leaving several pieces of priority legislation to die without a vote. On May 27, Gov. Kehoe called a special session to address some of these issues, including MU's request to fund MURR. The special session ended on June 9, with MU getting the funding it

requested. MU's part of the deal had fallen apart during the regular session, but was revived and passed in the special session that followed. Who would have thought it? Trying to pass a law in the Missouri legislature is not for the faint of heart, even if you are the University of Missouri.

The final product is not what Darron and I had envisioned when we launched our undertaking more than three years ago. We wanted to be able to do everything MU could do, and we did not come close. We did not even get a stand-alone engineering program, our main goal. But we did get Ph.D. degrees, something that will allow MSU to enhance several programs, something far more valuable than the right to confer a degree in engineering or in any of MU's other monopolized programs.

MU is not happy that it had to allow another university to offer Ph.D. degrees. Darron and I are not happy that we were not able to accomplish more than we did. Neither party is happy. I am told that means the compromise was a good one. I am going with that idea and celebrate. I am going to wear a t-shirt that says, "Nikki is Tom's Favorite Cousin," sit on the back patio of my house, look out at the first fairway of the golf course at Highland Springs, smoke a cigar, drink a real Coke and think about our incredible journey. The cigar will probably make me sick, but you have to live dangerously once in a while.

### Some of the Players

It has been asserted that life is just a play, and we are the players. If that is true, our play would have a title, *"How Missouri State University Got Ph.D. Degrees."* Our play would certainly not be a comedy, although there were tiny bits of humor here and there; sometimes our Missouri legislature seemed to function much like the humorously incompetent "Keystone Cops" of silent films. Nor would our play have been a tragedy, although it almost became one. Our play had suspense, as any good play does. It had good guys and villains and in our play the good guys won something, and the bad guys lost something. When the curtain comes down after the final act in most plays, those attending may feel happy or sad as they find their way to the exits. Those leaving our play should think it was a feel-good play with a happy ending.

Here, after the last curtain call, it is time to look at the actors and assess their roles in the saga. The bad guys were not evil; they were just selfish or misguided. The good guys were not heroes, but they fought for what they believed was right with passion and conviction. I will be the critic of the actors, as well as being an actor, so the reader may gauge my critique as not completely unbiased. Here goes.

The Bad Guys: There are two groups of bad guys.

Obviously MU was the leading villain. It was not interested in providing an affordable education at a convenient location for all of Missouri's students. It mattered not to them that students were going to other states for their education and not returning to practice their trade or profession here. It mattered not that Missouri was losing the brain power of those students, their talent, their energy, the goods and services they and their employees would have provided, the taxes they would have paid if they had returned here.

MU selfishly wanted to look good in comparison, by keeping other universities from being competitive. I was an alum of MU and once was proud of it. I had donated to it. The law school once had offered to name it "The Thomas G. Strong School of Law," in exchange for a hefty gift that I could not afford. Those days of pride are gone forever. I will always appreciate MU for the legal education it gave me, but my pride in it was dead and buried long ago.

The other group of bad guys were the members of COPHE. If they had joined with us, all of us would have benefited. What a powerful political force we could have been. Jointly, we might have been equal to MU in our political struggle. So what if they didn't want or need something now. Sometime in the future they might want a stand-alone engineering program, or a pharmacy program, or some other program. By opting out, they

made a conscious decision to remain an average university with an average curriculum for years to come.

The Good Guys: There were too many to count. I will comment on just a few, but I WILL NOT TRY TO RANK THEM IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE.

Darron Hemann: Darron and I were equal partners in the venture from that first conversation in the car as we were returning home after the SIU football game until Gov. Kehoe signed our bill. There was never a harsh word levied by one of us against the other. Every decision was a joint one. Without Darron, our crusade would never have been born. Without him, MSU still would not have Ph.D. degrees.

Nikki Strong: Nikki is undoubtedly the most effective lobbyist in our state. Her political instincts are perfect. She has the energy of the energizer bunny and the charisma every lobbyist wishes they had. She knows all the players, Kehoe and Lincoln among them, and is respected by them. No other lobbyist would have gotten us across the finish line. I mean the words that will be printed on t-shirts I will order, "Nikki is Tom's Favorite Cousin."

Governor Mike Kehoe: When Gov. Kehoe says he will help you, you can take it to the bank. We needed the Governor's help badly. He is the one who told MU to work with MSU and agree on a compromise. Having him in our camp made all the difference in the world.

Senator Lincoln Hough: Lincoln fought for us for three years. In the beginning, he was told that he would never win another election because he sponsored our bill, but he never wavered. In year three, as a powerful member of the Senate, he proved to be more than MU could handle. When MU wanted a punitive financial provision in the bill, Lincoln threatened to withhold the \$60 million MU wanted. It was not an idle threat. As Chair of the Appropriations Committee, MU's request was at Lincoln's mercy. No other Senator would have championed our bill so effectively.

Representative Melanie Stinnett: No one believed in our cause and worked harder for it than Melanie. She sponsored our bill in both 2024 and 2025. She had the respect of the Speaker of the House, the floor leaders of both parties, and the committee chairs in both the House and Senate. Her behind the scenes lobbying had a positive effect and the personal story she told when introducing our bill at the House hearing was passionate and compelling.

Senator Curtis Trent: Sen. Trent was Chair of the committee that heard our bill in 2024, when it passed with an 8-2 vote. When Lincoln was defeated in his race for Lt. Governor, there was fear that he might not return to the Senate. Sen. Trent filled the void, drafted a bill to pre-file and was ready to sponsor it if Lincoln did not return for the 2025 session.

Representative Alex Riley: When HB19 did not pass, the bill that provided funds for MU's reactor, many of us feared that our bill might never be brought up for a final vote. All of the bills with our language in them were in the House and depended on Alex to bring them to the floor. Alex had told Nikki that if she would get our bill in his hands, he would guarantee that the House would pass it. He was as good as his word; the House passed not just one, but three bills with our amendment in them.

Representatives Bill Allen and Stephanie Hein: Each of these highly respected Representatives were powerful and effective advocates for us in the House.

Representatives Betsy Fogle and David Griffith: Betsy Fogle wanted to sponsor our bill in 2023, but she was a Democrat. It would be better for a Republican to be the sponsor. She could have gained recognition and attention by being the sponsor, but that was not her goal. She wanted to pass the bill, even if her name was not attached to it. She asked her Republican colleague, David Griffith to be the sponsor and he did, not only because Betsy asked him to, but because he believed in it. He was its outspoken sponsor all three years, 2023, 2024, and 2025.

Dr. John Hutchinson: John joined us early on and remained with us until our bill became law. It was John's research that proved beyond a doubt that Missouri was

the only state that gave one public university a monopoly on so many degrees and so many programs.

Dr. Richard "Biff" Williams: Biff was MSU's brand new President with a plate full of work, but he took the time and had the vision to see the opportunities our bill offered his school. No other public university president did. Nor was Biff timid in his support. His testimony at House and Senate hearings was impressive and compelling.

Peter Herschend: Peter had been part of MIHE since he joined the December 7, 2023, meeting with Mike Kehoe on zoom. His close friendship with Kehoe and his powerful words of support at the House and Senate hearings in 2025, were needed assets.

Ed Gargas: I am so very sorry for Ed. He was there for us for all three legislative sessions, and was an effective witness at hearings in 2024 and 2025. Yet in the end his school, SEMO, got nothing. It was not Ed's fault. SEMO could have obtained the right to offer Ph.D. degrees, but they wanted no part of it. Ed's work was in vain. My apologies to Ed for asking for his aid, yet obtaining nothing for him in return.

Yours truly: I am still trying to repay MSU for the education it provided to three generations of my family. My mother graduated there in 1925 and supported our family during the Great Depression by teaching at a one room school for \$520 a year. We were poor, even by

depression standards, but we survived. If it had not been for MSU, I shudder to think what would have become of us.

There were many other folks who helped us along the way, the supporting actors in our play. All of them made major contributions. I apologize for not mentioning them by name, but this epistle is already much too long. They must remain the unsung support staff who made the production a success.

Epilogue

Southwest Missouri State College had 1,577 students when I enrolled for classes in the summer term in 1949. Now, as Missouri State University, it has more than 26,000. It has come a long way since I was a student and with the ability to offer Ph.D. degrees, who knows what the future holds. GO BEARS!

