College presidents concerned about reduced state funding

ANNAPOLIS – Gov. Martin J. O'Malley's budget doesn't do enough to help the state's Catholic and other independent colleges, according to the leaders of Maryland's three Catholic colleges.

In fact, while the governor has provided substantial increases in funding to the state's public universities, his January budget gives no additional money for independent colleges – a historic break from tradition that Catholic college presidents say will hurt students and the wider community.

For decades, state spending on independent colleges has been based on a funding formula providing a percentage of whatever the public schools receive. The formula is known as the Rev. James A. Sellinger Grant Program, and was named after a former president of Loyola College in Maryland, Baltimore, who worked with state lawmakers to establish it in the early 1970s.

The governor is cutting the funding link between private and public schools by giving $100 million in additional aid to the public universities and $29 million more to community colleges without giving new monies to the independent colleges.

"We have been decoupled from the formula with the state," said Dr. Thomas Powell, president of Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg. "As (their funding) is rising, we're staying steady and that's never happened before."

Because small institutions like Mount St. Mary's lack large endowments, lack of new funding will have a "huge impact," Dr. Powell said. Under the new policy, the Mount will receive about $300,000 less than what it would have. That's money that is largely used for tuition assistance, with about 25 percent geared to infrastructure and deferred maintenance, Dr. Powell said.

Dr. Mary Pat Seurkamp, president of the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, Baltimore, said her institution will receive about $200,000 less than its fully funded level.

“For the last four years, 17 percent of our students in the women’s college have come from families with incomes below $25,000,” said Dr. Seurkamp, noting that the college provides significant financial assistance to students from low-income families.

“We are providing access and an opportunity for them, but it’s an expensive kind of opportunity to fund for students,” she said.

The college has been using Sellinger funding for tuition scholarships and programs that prepare graduates to work in fields that have experienced critical workforce shortages in Maryland – teaching and nursing.

Father Brian Linnane, S.J., president of Loyola College in Maryland, Baltimore, said his institution will receive about $700,000 less than what it would be due if the Sellinger program was fully funded. The college uses money from the grant for programs like last year’s “Year of the City” initiative, which explored ways of helping Baltimore. Lacking that money, the college will be forced to pull back on some programming, he said.

If independent colleges no longer existed, it would be incredibly expensive for the state to pick up the costs of educating the many thousands of students who would rely on the state system, he said.

“The Sellinger formula has been a brilliant way of partnering with the state without putting us in competition with the public schools,” said Father Linnane. “To see that link severed is painful to me personally as Father Sellinger’s successor. We have to keep talking to our friends in the General Assembly to let them know we don’t think it’s a good policy move to undermine what has been a model program.”

The governor’s budget includes $56.7 million for independent colleges. If fully funded, the Sellinger program would provide $61.3 million for independent colleges, according to the Maryland Independent College and University Association (MICUA).

Based on the governor’s budget, the independent colleges will receive no additional funds to cover enrollment growth, according to MICUA. As a result, the independent colleges will receive less state aid on a per-student basis than they received in fiscal year 2008 and just slightly more than they received seven years earlier, according to MICUA.

Senate Bill 91 and House Bill 101 have been introduced by the governor in the Maryland General Assembly to change the Sellinger formula to limit the growth of the program in fiscal year 2010. The program would be restored to full funding in fiscal year 2011.

Dr. Seurkamp noted that the Sellinger program has already been operating below statutory level in 2008, having taken a $2.5 million cut from full funding in fiscal year 2007.

“It’s being funded at a level that was already a reduction,” she said. “We are not even being kept even with what would have been the fully funded amount.”

The college presidents and other advocates met with state lawmakers in Annapolis Feb. 7 to discuss the funding issue. They are opposing SB 91/HB101.