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Ex-OSU president to review higher ed

Gee will investigate rising costs of college.

By Meagan Pant
Staff Writer

COLUMBUS — Ohio Gov. John Kasich said it costs college students “too darn much to go to school” today -- so on Monday he tasked Ohio State University President Emeritus E. Gordon Gee to do something about it.

Gee will submit a report this summer on how colleges can enhance quality and cut costs at the same time. He will tour the state in the coming months with Chancellor John Carey to gather information and ideas for the project.

“It is going to require all of us to think differently,” Gee said.

For now, Ohio ranks seventh in the nation for the amount of debt its students take on to pay for college, according to the Project on Student Debt. It is considered a “high debt” state for the average debt per student who borrows, at \$28,683. Ohio also ranks ninth for the 68 percent of students who take out loans to pay for their schooling, according to the project.

Amid the increasing student loan debt, some private colleges in Ohio have made dramatic changes. Ashland and Ohio Northern universities plan to cut tuition rates next year, while Cedarville and Wittenberg universities have frozen tuition. The University of Dayton has eliminated fees and now offers a four-year guarantee that tuition costs

Kasich and Gee did not reveal many details of the work to come, including who will be involved. Gee said he does not want to have a preconceived idea of what he will need to achieve.

“We know how to enhance quality one way, which is just throwing money at it,” he said. “... And we also know how to cut cost and I’ve done that a lot. You take a sledgehammer you take a meat cleaver, you just do everything across the board,” he said. “But in today’s world, the question that has not been asked ... is how do you increase quality and value, at the same time making sure that it’s affordable.

“And that is the uniqueness of this project.”

Gee said he will do this work at no pay. He is still being compensated by Ohio State after retiring from the presidency in July when his disparaging remarks about Catholics, the University of Notre Dame, the Southeastern Conference and others became public. He remains a full professor in the College of Law, with an office and a secretary, and a total compensation package of \$5.8 million over the next five years, according to the Associated Press. He is also scheduled to teach at Harvard

University, he said.

During his tenure as president, Gee was among the highest paid university leaders in the country. He was on track to make \$2.1 million for the 2012-13 academic year.

Last fall, an investigation by the newspaper documented that Gee had spent \$7.7 million on since October 2007 on housing, travel, entertaining and other discretionary spending.

The university spent at least \$895,000 for gatherings at the president’s mansion, \$574,000 on private jet travel for Gee and \$64,000 on his trademark bow ties, bow tie cookies, O-H lapel pins and bow tie pins for university marketing, according to OSU records. The newspaper also found that the senior management staff under Gee has been expanded to 27, up from 20 under former President Karen Holbrook. The top 27 executives under Gee had a combined base pay of \$11.86 million in 2011, plus another \$2.2 million in bonus compensation. Holbrook’s senior staff made \$6.1 million in base pay in 2006, plus another \$490,000 in bonus money.

Gee was praised by university trustees for raising \$1.5 billion toward a \$2.5 billion goal as president. And Kasich on Monday pointed toward a deal Gee made that brought in \$500

million for OSU by leasing out the Columbus campus’ 35,000 parking spaces to private company.

Kasich praised Gee as an “asset” to Ohio and said his experience leading multiple universities makes him the right man for this job. Last year, Gee led Kasich’s previous requests for universities to work together to split the state’s capital budget and to create a new funding formula that ties more money to whether students graduate.

Richard Vedder, director of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity, praised Kasich’s efforts to study why college costs are high and what can be done to lower them. But he said Gee’s selection is “somewhat inadequate and almost amusing.”

“A retired president certainly can offer a good deal of insight,” Vedder said. “However, having said that, President Gee exemplifies... personifies the increasing college costs. He was a very strong participant in what some people call the ‘academic arms race.’ Gathering money from every source possible and then spending like crazy... He knows how to spend money, but whether he is the right person to talk about reducing costs remains to be seen.”

OHIO COLLEGE GRADUATES IN DEBT

Ohio ranks seventh in the nation for the average debt of its graduates -- \$28,683 for those who borrowed to pay for school and graduated in 2010-11.

| Institutions | Average debt of graduates | Percent of grads with debt |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Antioch University-Midwest | \$40,000 | 48 percent |
| University of Dayton | \$36,331 | 67 percent |
| University of Cincinnati-Main Campus | \$27,593 | 67 percent |
| Cedarville University | \$27,279 | 67 percent |
| Miami University-Oxford | \$27,178 | 54 percent |
| Wright State University-Main Campus | \$27,119 | 83 percent |
| Ohio State University-Main Campus | \$24,840 | 58 percent |
| Ohio's total average | \$28,683 | 68 percent |

*Data was not available for other area colleges and universities that did not appear on list.

Source: Project on Student Debt