

SIAS' RECORD AT KSU DOESN'T JUSTIFY BONUSES

Lacie L. Rice Jr. Published: August 31, 2012 12:00AM

Kentucky State University's Board of Regents decided to give University President Mary Sias a quarter-million-dollar bonus to stay at the institution until Dec. 31, 2016. In 2008, they gave her a \$75k retention bonus to complete her term, and in 2010, agreed to give her a \$100k retention bonus to stay through April 2013, and another \$150k to stay through April 2016. Essentially, though she publicly announced her intent to retire at the end of the 2016 academic year (June 30), they are giving her \$250k to stay an additional six months. In all, she can accumulate \$400k no matter how the university performs just to stay in 2016.

Just how has KSU performed? The institution's main purpose is to enroll, retain, and graduate students. U.S. News and World Report documented the university with a 12 percent four-year graduation rate based on 2010 data. State Sen. Tim Shaughnessy reported likewise during the last legislative session and proposed not giving university presidents of underperforming institutions raises and holding the Board of Regents accountable. The Council on Postsecondary Education reports KSU with a 22.4 percent six-year graduation rate, the lowest in the commonwealth.

Sias has led the biggest enrollment at KSU to over 2,800 students according to CPE records, far less than her prediction to "increase enrollment by 4,000 to 5,000 in less than five years" (The Key Newsjournal, Feb. 2, 2004). Also according to CPE records, KSU has the lowest retention rate in the state at 51.4 percent (No other institution is below 66.5 percent), of which 43.8 percent enrolled at other institutions, the highest rate by far (NKU is next at 28.6). According to the 2012-2013 FAFSA reports, the university reported a 25 percent graduation rate (Over a six-year period), 54 percent retention rate, and 43 percent transfer rate (out to other institutions over a six-year period). If this were a test, KSU would fail on two of three indicators, i.e. score a 33 percent. How many parents would be happy if their child brought home that type of test result? How many would even give their child a dollar?

The KSU Board of Regents is Sias' proverbial parent. It is ultimately responsible for her and the institution. They are supposed to make the big decisions with her executing their will. However, especially under former board president Laura Douglas, they have made some very questionable decisions and seem to just rubber-stamp her decisions. For instance, how can she continue getting "sparkling evaluations" when the university is underperforming? This may be due to none of them being KSU alumni, a reversal from its composition when Gov. Steve Beshear was inaugurated. Half the board were alumni when the governor came into office and for whatever reason, he has selected people who, besides Chuck Whitehead, had no previous relationship with the institution. The last alumna of KSU appointed to the board left during her term to fill a vacancy at her other alma mater. Not selecting the right type of person, an alum who would hold the president accountable, seems to be the norm when it comes to KSU. Sometimes, going with a big name or deep pockets does not equate to good governance.

While Dr. Sias is very cerebral and a good public speaker, some of her decisions have resulted in lows for KSU. Morale on campus has been reported by several constituencies as being very low. The crime rate has risen on campus since she hired the current chief of police. She cut direct hiring of Frankfort residents to campus jobs in favor of outsourcing. The university is understaffed as discharges have been high while replacements are low or none. She has given many ill-equipped people responsibilities they bungled for years before righting the ship, if they corrected themselves at all. Her overall hiring strategy has been questioned. She has raised tuition, but not financial aid. The university has been quick to enroll too many unprepared students while many honor students were left waiting for answers or offers. She has also added more layers to her administration than any other president. She has added a vice president and an assistant vice president the past two academic years to an already top-heavy structure. She has some vice presidents who "earn" more than any previous president.

She has also alienated many alumni and is perceived to take them for granted. These are problems systemic with the current administration.

The Board of Regents awarded her the raise after, as previously reported by The State Journal in June, KSU balanced what was termed "the biggest budget deficit in years." They balanced it by freezing hiring, freezing raises, raising tuition and extracting from its reserves according to the article. Then they returned the next month and give her a retention bonus, which, once again, the university is obligated to pay no matter its fiscal or academic condition. People might have been more understanding if it had been a performance bonus with verifiable and public objectives. That is what most businesses and institutions do. However, this is akin to the Wall Street bankers receiving bonuses, many of them retention in nature, after the Bush financial industry bailout. Where will the funds come from to finance her bonus, especially if the institution continues its current path? Laura Douglas spearheaded this initiative, but will be long gone by the time of its fulfillment, as will at least another board member. Will they contribute to the bonus if the university has a shortfall? They seemed to think she earned it.

The Board of Regents should be held accountable and questioned by their superiors for this decision. But, to whom are they answerable? The governor's office says no one. A representative from the lieutenant governor's office suggested legislation to address the accountability aspect. However, the governor appoints them which logically should make them accountable to him, the executive branch. A past governor reportedly once called appointees in to have them dismiss a president. Should Beshear not do the same thing to get an explanation of why they want to spend a quarter-million tax-payer dollars to retain someone for six months in a state that is continually cutting spending across the board? And she will take the money, just as she did the year Kentucky and Louisville's presidents declined their bonuses and the state had a raises freeze. In fact, her bonuses and raises have outpaced everyone associated with Kentucky State, which contributes to the low morale. There was a stipulation once that for her to get one of her bonuses in June, she had to issue paltry raises (less than 3 percent) to staff first.

Paying a person so much to stay at an institution is insane. This is her eighth year at KSU and it has worn on many constituents. While she has offered stability and some growth, she has also given grief to many, especially those who dedicated decades to the institution and are part of its lore. I once told her in an alumni meeting that if she made KSU successful, she would be successful. However, it mostly seems to be about her at the expense of the university. I also stated in an opinion piece a few years ago after she tried to leave for Bowie State University, that if she did not see the value in KSU and wanted to leave, leave. Kentucky State University is 125 years old and bigger than any one person. It has had some legendary educators and students to pass through its doors. She is still a leader in many fields of education. My alma mater deserves better than to have to continually entice someone to stay as its leader (To the tune of \$475k and numerous, generous perks). If she does not feel that way, then it is time for her to go. KSU will continue to exist and educate those who want to be there.

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KSU HAS TO CHANGE

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Kentucky State University President Mary Evans Sias, in a commentary published recently by The State Journal, reflected on change. Touching on the seasonal transition marked by the turning of autumn leaves, she went on to discuss the necessity for her institution to adapt to economic and academic change.

The next day, in her annual State of the University Address, she filled in some of the details. Because the school's once-growing enrollment has taken a downward shift, she told faculty and students she would freeze all vacant positions in an effort to save \$3 million; failing programs would be scrutinized.

The president explained why she believes KSU is losing students – and the money they bring to campus and the local economy. Like the university, which has lost 11 percent of its funding since 2005, students are up against a financial wall. Tuition is increasing to replace diminished funds and many find they can't afford to pay the price, especially those who depend on federal Pell grants, now waning. Sias reminded her audience that 73 percent of KSU's students qualify for those grants when they're available.

Nevertheless, in both her speech and her column, she pledged the institution will not give up on its mission to educate young people who need financial and/or academic assistance. She still hopes it can nearly double total enrollment to 4,300 by 2020, with a student body including gifted scholars as well as many who need a hand – being the first in their families to venture into higher education.

Not everyone is convinced she's on the right track to achieve these goals. Lacy L. Rice Jr., a 1994 KSU graduate who continued his business administration studies elsewhere, believes the president has failed the school and its alumni, even though the Board of Regents has generously rewarded her efforts. In an op-ed piece for The State Journal, Rice wrote scornfully of the string of "retention" bonuses the board has granted Sias since 2008. "In all," he pointed out, "she can accumulate \$400,000 no matter how the university performs, just to stay in 2016." It's a pattern he likened to the awarding of bonuses to Wall Street bankers who plunged the nation into economic chaos.

Presidents of Kentucky's other public universities have been offered bonuses, too, but some have declined them, all or in part, in light of the dismal economic conditions the nation and the commonwealth have battled over the past five years. Perhaps Sias should consider following their lead, especially with her subordinates expected to make sacrifices.

Rice further questioned the president's academic priorities. "The university has been quick to enroll too many unprepared students," he complained, "while many honor students were left waiting for answers or offers." He said KSU has not only fallen short of enrollment targets but has tallied abysmal retention and graduation rates.

Change, which the president promised to deliver, can be a good thing or not, depending on your viewpoint. It's certainly something the university has experienced throughout its history. What began in 1887 as the State Normal School for Colored Persons finally desegregated in 1954 but is still classified as a historically black university. It's also a Land Grant university which rightly takes pride in its aquaculture program and the ongoing effort to rescue family farming in Kentucky.

Declining enrollment and funding are changes KSU did not want but cannot easily reverse. A university that cherishes tradition must also embrace innovation and rededicate itself to achieving excellence in difficult times.