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Budget Story

Word Count:1569

The faculty at Nicholls State University has not had a significant increase in salaries in nine years, and the University is now taking small steps to resolve the problem.

“It’s something that I’ve spoken out against ever since I’ve been at Nicholls,” said Dr. Michael Jeffress, president of the Nicholls faculty senate.

According to the Nicholls State University operating budget, there are more than 20 teachers who, in the past nine years, have had no change to their salary. Two of those professors, Dr. Earl Folse and Dr. Kenneth Klaus have devoted 32 years to Nicholls, but have not received a raise in pay for at least nine years. Beyond those 20 teachers, the majority of the Nicholls faculty has had raises that do not exceed \$2000 in the past nine years.

Dr. Bruce Murphy, president of Nicholls State University, said that he is aware of the issue. Murphy said that upon arriving at Nicholls in January of 2014 he began asking faculty and staff what problems were facing the university.

“The answer was always the same,” said Murphy. “The answer was always money.”

Murphy said not only faculty but also staff members began to stress to him that there had not been a change in salaries for at least seven years by that time.

Murphy said the reason that salaries have not changed is widely affected by the state budget. Since Nicholls is a public college the university is funded by the state, and in the past 10 years state funding for higher education has drastically decreased. An Illinois State University Grapevine Study reported that Louisiana is the worst state in the nation when it comes to budget cuts for higher education. Over the past five years, Louisiana has cut almost 35 percent from higher education.

Murphy explained that in the past about 75 percent of the budget for Nicholls was funded by the state of Louisiana and the students funded the other 25 percent.

“In the past 10 years the state has funded less and less so now the percentages are almost exactly flipped,” said Murphy.

He said because of this the budget for Nicholls has remained relatively consistent, and without changes in the budget the university has no extra money to work with.

In November 2013, the faculty senate passed a resolution requesting a raise in salaries across the board for faculty members. The resolution also requested that a moratorium be placed on any raises or job creations in administrative positions. Jeffress said the senate conducted a survey of faculty members across campus to get an idea of how teachers felt about the issues regarding salaries. The scores from the survey, with one being strongly agree and five being strongly disagree, reported a mean of 4.54 as a response to the need for an increase in faculty salaries. Murphy said that he was aware of this resolution upon his arrival at Nicholls, and he stressed to the faculty senate that that he had a few problems with it.

“My first problem was that the methodology wasn’t very good,” said Murphy. “They asked questions like ‘would you like more pay’ and anyone’s response would be yes.”

Murphy said his second problem with the resolution is that it was targeted toward faculty alone. Murphy said that staff also needs to be included in the equation because staff have also had no change in salaries for the past 10 years.

Murphy said that last year he took a small step to begin to resolve the issue. He said he went directly to the financial advisor to attempt to find any space in the budget that would allow for some extra money to be distributed. In the end, Murphy said he was able to use one percent of the budget, which amounted to \$300,000. He said that money was distributed evenly between all faculty and staff at Nicholls, which gave every employee a \$500 raise last year.

“If you’re a professor getting paid \$100,000 a year, that \$500 dollars might mean a fun weekend,” said Murphy. “If you’re a grounds worker getting paid significantly less, that may be your mortgage payment.”

Murphy said that he plans to continue to take out a percentage of the budget to distribute to staff. Next year, he plans to go through the official budget when it is being planned out.

“I originally asked for four percent, but we settled on two percent because it was more feasible,” said Murphy.

Murphy said this two percent of the budget will strictly go to giving pay raises to Nicholls employees.

Jeffress said that Nicholls also faces a problem of salary inversion. He describes salary inversion as a case where a faculty member has been at the university for ten or so years with no pay raise, then a new faculty member is hired at a lower level with a higher pay grade.

Jeffress said that there are sometimes cases where a faculty member is committed to Nicholls and wishes to stay in Thibodaux but simply does not make enough money to make ends meet. He said that in that case the faculty member will request a raise, be told that it cannot be done, and eventually that member will leave the university in order to earn more money elsewhere. The university will then hire a new faculty member at a salary a few thousand dollars higher than the previous faculty member, said Jeffress.

“This year Nicholls has done that about 30 to 40 times,” said Jeffress. “There were 39 positions that were mostly faculty in situations where one faculty member leaves and another one is hired to take his or her place. For those 39 employees, the new hires got over a quarter of a million more than what the existing faculty got.”

Jeffress said the salaries averaged out to about \$6500 a person. He said that it is consistently said that there is no money, yet for 39 new faculty members there was \$250,000. Jeffress also said that the same would apply for new administrative positions.

“All of the administrators who have been hired have come in at higher salaries than their predecessors, plus there are additional positions that have been created like the chief of staff.”

According to the Nicholls State University operating budget, under the Murphy administration a new position was created for Chief of Staff with a salary of \$111,800.

This is an administrative position that did not exist in prior years, and the creation of this position went directly against the faculty senate's resolution.

In November, President Murphy created an ad hoc committee to begin to look at ways to address the issue of salary inversion at Nicholls. Murphy said he has a plan that he wants to implement that will look at salary inversion on a departmental basis. He said that the committee has come up with a list of faculty members who have salaries that are lower than that of other faculty members of lower rank within that department. Those who fall in that category will receive raises to address the issue. Jeffress said that Murphy has defined salary inversion in a limited way by taking it one department at a time rather than considering faculty as a whole. Jeffress said this plan will affect about 32 faculty members.

Both Murphy and Jeffress agree that they think this plan will be well accepted by those faculty members who receive raises, but it may not have a lasting impact on morale.

"I think [this plan] is a long time coming and it's overdue, and it's not to the extent that it needs to be," said Jeffress, "but it's a start, and I'll be happy to see that happen, and I'll be happy for the 32 faculty who see an increase in their paycheck if it happens."

Jeffress said that the fact that the president has created this ad hoc committee shows that he has finally accepted how serious the problem is, and he understands that something needs to be done. He said the next step is making sure that the plan is actually implemented. Jeffress then said any movement toward a solution is a good thing, but this plan is going to take many phases to be an actual solution.

“I’d like to say that I see a light at the end of the tunnel,” said Murphy.

Murphy said he believes the university is taking the right steps to move toward a solution to salary inversion and the lack of faculty and staff pay raises. He said there is no way to predict how long it will take the university to resolve all these issues, but he has seen an improvement in 2016 and he hopes to see a greater improvement by the end of 2017.

Jeffress said that he would eventually like to see the floor leveled. He said that all faculty should be hired at the same starting salary, and pay should be increased based solely on merit. The merit system works in a way that all employees may get a base line pay raise of \$500, but beyond that each employee is given additional money based on evaluations and experience. Murphy said that ten years ago when budget cuts got bad and funding problems began to arise, Nicholls stopped using the merit pool. He said that he would like to see the university get back to a merit based system.