

Clemson spends more to lobby in Washington than state's other colleges

University turning to Washington as state funding shrinks

By Raju Chebium • Washington bureau • February 21, 2010

WASHINGTON — Clemson University spent about \$1.7 million over the last decade lobbying the federal government, more than any other public or private college in South Carolina, congressional lobbying records show.

Clemson spent \$290,000 on lobbying last year alone, the largest amount spent by a South Carolina college or university in one year. That same year, the university hired a full-time Washington lobbyist for the first time while continuing a separate contract with a high-powered lobbying firm, according to congressional records.

Clemson is one of 11 public and private Palmetto State institutions that spent at least \$10,000 to lobby Uncle Sam from 2000 to 2009, according to an analysis by the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics. Other South Carolina-based colleges and universities either didn't lobby or spent less than the minimum \$10,000 that requires reporting.

Clemson was the only South Carolina institution to report seven-figure expenditures to lobby for a bigger share of federal funding and to shape legislation to its benefit. The university's lobbying targeted legislation such as the \$787 billion economic stimulus package that became law a year ago, and bills on climate change, energy and transportation.

Claflin University, a private, historically black institution in Orangeburg, was the second-highest spender, spending \$970,000 from 2000 to 2009, federal records show. The University of South Carolina, based in Columbia, was next, spending \$800,000.

Clemson has embarked on a well-publicized goal to raise its national profile. It defends the lobbying as a necessary expense, but critics say the university can't justify the expenditures when it raises tuition and fees.

University spokeswoman Cathy Sams said the school is turning to Washington more because state aid is declining.

“Federal appropriations received by Clemson in the past three fiscal years are in excess of \$25 million,” Sams said. “The bottom line is federal relations activities yield a substantial return on investment and are likely to become even more important as state funding continues to decline.”

State support for Clemson fell from \$167.5 million in 2000 to \$113 million as of December, Sams said. The 2000 figure represented 39 percent of the school's budget. The December figure was 15 percent of the budget.

Over the 10-year period, in-state tuition and fees rose from \$1,795 a semester to \$5,539 a semester to compensate for the reduced state aid and factors such as inflation and higher spending on faculty, she said.

Sams also said lobbyists help the university maintain good relations with federal research agencies and navigate the complicated maze of federal regulations. And she said Clemson's lobbying expenses appear high partly because, unlike other schools, Clemson also reports expenses incurred by university officials when they visit Washington for official business, such as testifying before Congress.

Ashley Landess, head of the South Carolina Policy Council, a conservative think tank that advocates smaller government and fiscal restraint, said Clemson's lobbying expenses translate into higher costs for students.

She said Clemson should return to its core mission of educating students rather than pursuing federal money to create jobs and take on a larger economic development role within the state.

“It's not the job of universities to be (Washington) players,” Landess said. “It's not the job of the university to make a profit. It's not the job of the universities to create programs that need more tax dollars. (They are) so off-mission in higher education.”

Gov. Mark Sanford also frowns upon state institutions using tax dollars for lobbying, according to spokesman Ben Fox. Sanford, who has banned lobbying by Cabinet agencies, also wants to eliminate lobbying by state colleges and universities, but the South Carolina Legislature won't go along, he said.

“We think that's not the best use of money,” Fox said.

Last year, Clemson hired Katy Bayless, a 2006 alumna, to serve as the university's first lobbyist in the nation's capital. Sams said the lobbyist, who will work out of her apartment to cut costs, will be paid \$75,000 a year. Clemson's contract with Patton Boggs LLC will end in September, Sams said, and it's unclear if that relationship will continue.

Since 2000, Clemson has paid \$1.6 million to Patton Boggs and another firm, Van Scoyoc Associates, lobbying records show.

Patton Boggs is the top moneymaker among Washington lobbying firms, earning \$352 million from 1998 to 2009, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

Van Scoyoc was the fourth-highest revenue generator, earning nearly \$232 million in that time.

Clemson is a modest spender compared with institutions such as the New York public university system, which spent more than \$1 million last year on federal lobbying, and private Boston University, which spent \$960,000, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

Sixty-nine colleges and universities spent more on lobbying than Clemson did last year. Educational institutions as a whole spent at least \$99 million to influence the federal government in 2009, the watchdog group found.

When public institutions like Clemson engage in lobbying, “Taxpayer dollars are being spent to lobby for taxpayer dollars,” said the group’s spokesman, Dave Levinthal. “For some people, that may be distasteful. For others, it may be the cost of doing business.”

Taxpayer-supported institutions like Clemson often are criticized for hiring lobbyists because members of Congress who represent the institutions already work to get federal funds for them.

Clemson has benefited often from those efforts. For example, Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., successfully requested \$1 million for Clemson’s veterinary institute this year, and Reps. Bob Inglis and John Spratt got \$1.4 million for a Clemson cyber-institute last year.

Sams acknowledged that South Carolina’s lawmakers have helped the school secure federal dollars, but she said they often depend on the university to tell them how congressional legislation would affect Clemson — and that requires a lobbyist’s expertise.

Inglis also defended Clemson’s lobbying expenses, saying the university is getting noticed in Washington despite funding cutbacks.

Lobbying helped the university land a \$45 million Energy Department grant for wind research in November and \$3 million in federal funding for the International Center for Automotive Research, and lobbying was instrumental in getting Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood and Energy Secretary Steven Chu to visit Clemson facilities, Inglis said.

“Clemson has clearly earned a return for South Carolina on what they’ve spent on representation,” Inglis said. “In one of the most difficult years in recent memory — a year that’s involved painful staff furloughs — Clemson has had an incredible and outstanding run of success.”

COLLEGE LOBBYING

These Palmetto State colleges and universities reported spending money on lobbying at some point during the past 10 years:

- Clemson University: \$1.7 million

- Claflin University \$970,000

- University of South Carolina: \$800,000

- Morris College: \$325,000

- Florence-Darlington Technical College: \$200,000

- Lander University: \$70,000
- Bob Jones University: \$54,000

- Erskine College: \$30,000
- The Citadel: \$20,000
- Coastal Carolina University: \$20,000
- Greenville Technical College: \$20,000

(Source: Center for Responsive Politics and Lobbying Disclosure Act database maintained by the House and Senate clerks' offices)