

ENTER THE HERO

BY CAROL AGAIN

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—Jim Westbrook

We're tired of paying more and getting less.
—Rick Mihalevich

ZAP!

Strapped for state funds, the governor in December announces the fourth consecutive withholding of University appropriations, this time in the amount of \$3.3 million.

Wham!

On the Columbia Campus, professors and staff brace for another year of stagnant resources. Maintenance workers brace for another round of layoffs. Students brace for another fee surcharge. The future looms precarious. Morale plummets.

Then optimism stirs.

Zoom! The hero arrives.

Spurred into action during a meeting called by Boone County's state legislators, a group of faculty, staff, students and friends of Mizzou resolve to stop the hand-wringing and take action. On Jan. 26, some 150 people gather in Middlebush Auditorium, affirming the creation of the Higher Education Rescue Operation (HERO) with resounding shouts of "Aye!" Memberships along with \$1 annual dues continue to arrive at Columbia post-office box 7081.

At HERO's core is dedication to enhancing higher education's quality through more adequate funding. "Like a lot of people, I got very upset when the General Assembly didn't raise taxes in the special session," says Jim Westbrook, a law professor who at the legislators' meeting challenged his colleagues to put some effort and dollars into promoting higher education. His

ardor pegged him a leader, and though typically not one to initiate a grassroots movement, Westbrook took the helm. "For several years it's been one crisis after another. After a period of time it gets very hard to be optimistic about the future, and you get a feeling that you want to do something."

Specifically: Raise taxes. Just lobbying for an increased share of current state revenue would be fruitless, HERO members say, because there is not enough to go around.

"Higher education, mental health, corrections—virtually all of those services are inadequately funded," says Chancellor Emeritus Herb Schooling, a HERO member leading an effort to align with other state schools and agencies. Political science Professor Robin Remington applies a basic truth from her field: "Either you hang together or you hang alone."

The desire to improve Missouri's tax situation and consequent state support of services helps provide the glue. While tax capacity on a per capita basis is average or slightly below, says political science Professor David Leuthold, the state ranks last in state and local taxes per person. In 1983-84 higher education appropriations per capita, Missouri is 47th in the nation, falling below all neighboring states.

Significant tax decreases in the form of sales-tax exemptions have eroded tax revenues since 1972. Leuthold adds. One result: State funding has not kept pace as the University's responsibilities have increased in the last decade.

Meanwhile, Mizzou's student fees

have more than doubled in the past nine years, putting costs near the top of the Big Eight. "The reason we've had to raise tuition is that the state has abandoned us. Curators have no place else to go," says Jim Clark, a HERO member who advises the Associated Students of the University of Missouri. "We've been holding our finger in the dike by tuition increases. But we won't be able to do that much longer because the market isn't accepting the price increase."

It's not that students are unwilling to pay for school, says HERO member Rick Mihalevich, president of the Graduate Student Association. "We're tired of paying more and getting less. Buildings are crumbling, and teaching assistants' stipends are not enough."

THREAT to quality has unified the rescue effort. "If you look at it, you'd think there was a war going on among UMC programs," says Dr. David Thelen, professor of history and HERO member, in reference to anticipated budget cuts. "In HERO, those issues are staying out, and people are finding reinforcement for their own parochial conflicts. It's allaying the horizontal violence that pits the University against elementary and secondary education, and those against prisons, and those against men-

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tal health. Then it's campus against campus, department against department, and individual against individual. The best thing HERO does is unite people across those areas of horizontal violence."

United, Thelen says, citizens' interest can overwhelm inertia and wage a successful grassroots campaign. He's the expert: In the 1970s, Thelen led students in a grassroots project that brought about Columbia's deposit ordinance on throwaway soda and beer containers.

For HERO to attain its goals, Thelen says it must make an effective case. That won't be easy, Westbrook predicts. "When you hire people to teach, reflect, think, research and write, it's a different situation than people are used to seeing," he says. "On the outside it's sometimes harder to see what they are doing: digging in books, working in labs, pecking at typewriters, advising students, participating in public-service activities. Yet these efforts produce tangible results in a bolstered state economy, higher quality of life and opportunities for all citizens."

HERO has targeted parents of students for its first audience. The tactic: Build a statewide base reaching every legislative district.

It's been done before. Following budget cuts at the University of Massachusetts in 1981, faculty contacted students' parents, urging them to support higher education by writing to legislators. The effort produced the largest amount of mail in any grassroots lobby ever done in the state, Thelen says.

Enlisting the public's support is vital because "I don't think legislators

are particularly interested in hearing from University faculty," Westbrook says. "They're primarily concerned with what their constituents need."

But Westbrook is not apologizing for promoting his livelihood. Neither is Remington: "I think most people would think we were stupid if we were not involved in trying to preserve that component of society to which we have devoted our lives. If those most directly affected by the situation are not going to change the situation, then who is?"

HOW MUCH, if any, change can be effected is yet to be seen. Leuthold predicts chances for a tax increase are so-so: In the last 10 years, nine tax increases or financing issues have been on the ballot. Pro-tax positions prevailed five times.

Historically, taxes in Missouri generally are 25 percent lower than in other states—corporate taxes alone are about half the rate of others. But while general tax increases have been rare in the past two decades, voters have supported earmarked tax increases, such as those for elementary and secondary education and conservation. Clark is confident voters would come through for higher education, too: "Give me 15 minutes with any Missouri voter, let me walk him around Campus and take him into classrooms, and he'll vote for a tax increase. I guarantee it."

Adds HERO member Bruce Bealke, a junior from Kirkwood, Mo., with a passion for politics, "The tax burden in the state is very, very, very low. It's ridiculous for a politician to say we can't tax any more. It may get votes, but it won't help the state."

This election year may well be a boon to HERO, providing a natural forum for the group to raise issues. A HERO committee is pondering the consequences of forming a separate political action committee, which could contribute to or endorse political candidates and publicize candidates' positions on issues.

GRANTED, the University has a lobbyist in Jefferson City. But HEROs assert they are allies: Legislators are ten times more interested in hearing from constituents than lobbyists, and if nothing else, the group hopes to inspire the public to vent its views to lawmakers.

"Nothing in life is a sure thing, but it is a sure thing that if a sustained effort is not made, there won't be change," Remington says.

Westbrook agrees it's too early to forecast HERO's impact, but hints at optimism: "HERO suggests a state of emergency. Maybe some day we can change its name." □

Since this story was written, Gov. Christopher Bond released the University funds he withheld in December. However, the basic reason for HERO remains the same: to improve seriously inadequate state funding for higher education in Missouri.