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SUU professor booted from state tax-credits study

By Ronnie Lynn
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Legislative leaders and researchers booted a Southern Utah University economics professor from a state-funded tuition tax credits study after deciding his support of the controversial measure could undermine the report.

A second researcher -- this one from Utah State University -- will remain on the team despite his role as a scholar with The Sutherland Institute, a conservative public-policy group that supports tuition tax credits.

SUU's Joe Garrett Baker was to be part of the USU-led team that was awarded a \$141,000 contract to conduct an objective study into one of the touchiest issues in Utah politics: whether public schools would save or lose money if parents could claim state tax credits for private-school tuition.

Lead USU researchers and lawmakers from both sides of the aisle agreed Monday to cut Baker loose because of his open support -- as published in several Cedar City newspaper editorials -- for tax credits.

Baker said Tuesday that his personal opinions would not have factored into his economic analysis.

"I feel like my professional reputation has been attacked," he said. "People who are knowledgeable enough to do the analysis on this have looked at the literature and formed an opinion or have a bias one way or another. It's like trying to find an O.J. [Simpson] juror."

But even the perception of bias could tarnish the study, said Senate Minority Leader Mike Dmitrich, D-Price, one of four legislators who scrutinized the researchers' objectivity Monday -- two weeks after they and others on the Legislative Management Committee selected the USU group.

"It's such an emotional issue and a political issue, that if there's bias either way, it obviously would throw a cloud over the study," Dmitrich said. The committee opposed two other groups partly because they completed school-choice studies for organizations that support one side or the other.

With Dmitrich at Monday's meeting were House Speaker Marty Stephens, R-Farr West; Senate President Al Mansell, R-Sandy; House Minority Leader Brent Goodfellow, D-West Valley City; USU Vice Provost Chris Fawson, and Roberta Quigley Herzberg, a USU associate professor of political science.

Baker was to help design economic models for estimating how various factors -- such as reduced tuition prices -- influence parents' decisions to transfer their children from public to private schools.

Legislators determined Fawson's affiliation with The Sutherland Institute did not constitute bias or conflict of interest because he has not studied tuition tax credits on Sutherland's behalf. His academic papers for the institute have focused on rural health care, Fawson said.

"We have our own academic reputations at stake here," he said, defending Baker's involvement. "It's not something I'm going to risk my reputation and career for \$10,000. That's insanity. The last thing I want to do is spend the next 30 years defending some shoddy report that supports some ideological position."

Before awarding the contract, Legislative Management Committee members stressed the importance of researchers' objectivity. The tax-credit issue has surfaced many times, but has never been passed by the Utah Legislature.

Opponents say the credits would drain precious state dollars from public schools, while proponents say they will save schools money by eliminating the expense associated with children who transfer to private schools.

Lawmakers hope the study will direct debate on the issue during the 2005 general session.

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