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Many factors broke Wright State's debate dream

NEWS

By **Lynn Hulsey** and **Josh Sweigart** - Staff Writer

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As Wright State University gained worldwide attention in 2008 for providing the stage where presidential hopeful John McCain introduced Sarah Palin as his running mate, WSU political science chair Donna Schlagheck had a bold idea. Why couldn't Wright State host a presidential debate?

The answer, it turns out, was that the university could try, but it wouldn't be able to pull it off



...to plan it out.

Ballooning security costs in the wake of terrorist attacks around the globe, a multi-million dollar university budget deficit, tapped-out donors, and a lack of state help conspired to rob the Dayton region of a chance to take the world stage as host of what may be the most-watched presidential debate in U.S. history.

On Tuesday, **WSU President David Hopkins** announced that the university had withdrawn as host of the year's first General Election presidential debate, scheduled for Sept. 26 at the Nutter Center. The debate will now be held at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y.



Wright State University leaders watch a video of past presidential debates as they celebrated the Debate 16 kickoff on March 1 ... [Read More](#)

“We continued to work hard on fundraising, but we were not achieving what we had hoped to and the costs were starting to accelerate,” Hopkins said. “I can’t dip into reserves to do this debate.”

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The original plan was for contributors to provide \$3 million to \$5 million to pay for

the event, which had a projected economic impact of \$25 million. Instead, the university spent \$2.5 million in state and university funds with no debate to show for it.



Wright State University staff and faculty are showered with confetti and balloons during Staff Development Day, on Super Tuesday, as Debate ... [Read More](#)

Hopkins said the Secret Service — not the university — would have been responsible for debate security costs at the Nutter Center and inside the perimeter fence surrounding the arena, which is separated from the rest of the campus by woods. But he had lost confidence in Wright State’s ability to afford what it would take to secure the rest of the 557-acre campus, where thousands would gather on

debate day for a festival, watch parties and other events.

Hopkins said cost estimates seemed to rise with every meeting he had with his security team — **eventually adding \$3 million onto the original worst case-estimate of \$8 million.**

‘A fortress’



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Hopkins said the network of tunnels running underneath campus presented a particular challenge, as did the prospect of placing protective fencing around the huge north lawn where the largest gathering was expected.

"These were the estimates to almost build a fortress," said Hopkins. "I have to protect the safety of the campus and I just didn't feel like I could do it in a way that was financially



feasible."

He said his concerns over security have multiplied in the wake of the Bastille Day terrorist attack in Nice, France, on July 14 and violence at public rallies, including the killing of police officers in Dallas.

Hopkins also was concerned that protesters would bring weapons on campus — concealed or carried openly, as Ohio's law allows. While the public university bans weapons, those violating the rule are not arrested or kicked off campus because it's legal to carry guns, according to WSU spokesman Seth Bauguess.

Hopkins said the decision to withdraw from the debate was agonizing, particularly because he wanted students to experience what he saw as an opportunity to be part of history.

"We certainly did not want to pull out of this. We certainly didn't want to disappoint the community. We certainly didn't want to disappoint our alumni," Hopkins said. "But the priority has to be the people here and how we take care of them."

The last straw

Hopkins does not believe the security hurdles were impossible to overcome, even as those costs increased the estimated price tag of the debate to \$11 million, far more than the \$8 million budgeted.

As recently as late June, Hopkins was saying he expected costs would total \$5 million and he was optimistic that WSU would be able to raise the money needed.

He was working with a donor who had \$1 million to give and a Wright Flyer replica to loan for display. When Hopkins found out Monday that the contribution wasn't coming, that became the final straw. Hopkins called trustees Tuesday morning and got their blessing to pull out of the debate. He made the decision public that afternoon.

>>>BACKGROUND:Presidential debates expensive but worth it, hosts say

The university raised just \$2 million in cash and cash pledges, all “from people just doing smaller amounts” and a state contribution of \$220,000, Hopkins said. He anticipated another \$1 million to \$1.5 million in in-kind contributions and revenue from chargebacks for services.

He said donors will be asked to let the university keep the money it has raised, in part to fund student activities centered around the debate.

Hopkins and Michael Bridges, chairman of the board of trustees, said they were not sure why so few public and corporate donors materialized. Bridges speculated that there is simply “not enough funds to go around to support everything.” The university is at the tail end of its massive Rise.Shine fundraising effort, which brought in \$156 million, none of which can be used for the debate.

Hopkins said some donors likely were deterred by the inability to put logos on the debate set and by the political nature of the debate in this most bitter of political years.

Reserves dwindling

While other universities have used their own funds for debates, Hopkins originally said Wright State would not use reserve or instructional funds and couldn't afford it anyway because of its financial situation.

When he applied for the debate, Hopkins knew Wright State was under financial pressure. Enrollment growth was stagnant, expenses were increasing and the school was dipping into reserves. **But not until last month did the public learn the depth of WSU's budget hole.**

That's when Hopkins and the board of trustees unveiled a plan to balance the budget by cutting \$27.7 million from the school's budget and pulling \$18.9 million from reserves over the next two years.

Wright State Chief Financial Officer Jeff Ulliman announced that the university's reserves had plummeted from \$162 million in 2012 to a projected \$40 million in 2018.

“Under ideal circumstances, I think it would be a nice thing for the university to host this kind of an event, but given the financial issues the university is grappling with, from the start this seemed like a kind of dubious proposition,” said Martin Kich, president of Wright State's faculty union.

“I think it's unfortunate we've gotten two months away from it and we have to pull the plug. I don't think that makes anyone look good,” he said. “But if the alternative is we would be left with a sizable financial liability, then I think it's the smart thing to do.”

The \$2.5 million the university has already spent includes \$500,000 spent on

cyber security and improvements to the Nutter Center. Hopkins is hoping to recoup at least some of the \$2 million paid to the debate commission, a fee hosts pay to cover costs to stage the debate. He is not optimistic that any of that money will be returned.

Officials from the nonprofit debate commission did not respond to requests for comment.

Asked if it were a mistake to take on the debate as the fiscal crisis loomed last fall, Hopkins said he had hoped the university would be able to resolve the financial issues.

Little public funding

This year's third presidential debate will be at a public university: the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. It will be supported by \$4 million from that region's convention and visitors authority, which estimates the publicity it will bring Vegas at \$50 million.

Last week's Republican National Convention in Cleveland also received heaps of institutional support. JobsOhio, the state's privatized economic development arm, pledged \$10 million to the convention. Cleveland and Cuyahoga County each kicked in \$2.5 million. The federal government shelled out \$50 million for security.

The Wright State debate, on the other hand, received \$220,000 from the Ohio General Assembly and nothing from JobsOhio. Montgomery County spent \$50,000 on a website to promote the region in relation to the debate and pledged \$25,000 to the debate. Dayton and Fairborn provided staff support, but no money.

"The city has policies that prohibit spending funds on events such as this," said Dayton spokeswoman Toni Bankston.

Fairborn spokeswoman Katie Lewallen said her city's viewpoint was that its contribution would be the cost of additional police, fire and street workers.

When asked why Cleveland's four-day convention received \$10 million but Dayton's one-day debate got nothing from JobsOhio, agency spokesman Matt Englehart said the RNC convention introduced tens of thousands of visitors from throughout the world to Cleveland and Ohio.

"Presidential debates such as the one in Dayton do not offer similar economic development opportunities," he said. "This is the same reason JobsOhio did not provide assistance to the Republican debate in Cleveland last year."

Ohio Senate leadership spokesman John Fortney said, "we felt \$220,000 was an appropriate investment."

"These are two totally different events, with funding from two totally different organizations. It's not a balanced comparison," he said of the convention and debate.

Year of controversies

Another factor that did not work in Wright State's favor was timing.

Wright State has strong ties to current state leaders. Ohio House Speaker Cliff Rosenberg is a WSU graduate. Ohio Senate President Keith Faber's district includes WSU's Lake Campus and his district office is a 3-minute walk from the complex near Grand Lake St. Marys.

But Hopkins' request for another \$1.6 million from the state's capital budget came at the end of a year of controversies for the school. First its provost and top officials were suspended amid **an ongoing federal probe of possible violations of federal immigration law**. Then questions arose over **a \$1 million economic development contract the school entered into with consultant Ron Wine**.

Any hope for additional funding this year was dashed when emails were exposed in which Wine suggested Hopkins propose holding a fundraiser for Rosenberger at the same time he was asking for state money, which would violate ethics rules.

In February, Rosenberger advised House members to be careful in dealing with Wright State.

"I said use caution on everything because clearly they can't handle themselves right now," **he told the Dayton Daily News at the time**.

Rosenberger spokeswoman Carolyn Best last week said the state's contribution was "appropriate, and given the information provided to Dayton-area lawmakers by Wright State at the time, \$220,000 seemed to be sufficient."

Others spent less

The \$11 million cost estimate by Hopkins is dramatically higher than any costs at six universities or colleges that have hosted 11 debates since 1992, this newspaper found. Recent debates had ranged in cost from \$3 million to \$5 million, according to officials at those universities.

Hofstra University, which hosted debates in 2008 and 2012, already has some infrastructure in place and expects that there will be some modifications necessary as it prepares to take Wright State's place hosting the first debate, said Karla Schuster, assistant vice president of university relations.

"We anticipate a slight uptick in our previous debate budget, which was between \$4 million and \$5 million in 2012," she said.

And unlike Wright State, funding isn't going to be a problem for Hofstra, a private university on Long Island.

"We are fortunate that we have individual donors and trustees who believe that this is a transformational experience for our students, and have agreed already

...this is a transformational experience for our students, and have agreed already, to fund our efforts, as well as a campus and regional community dedicated to making this debate as successful as our two previous efforts," Schuster said.

Longwood University in Farmville, Va., set its cost at \$5 to \$8 million for the vice presidential debate it will host on Oct. 4. The University of Nevada, Las Vegas budgeted \$4 million for the Oct. 19 presidential debate and Washington University in St. Louis, hosting its fifth debate on Oct. 9, will spend approximately \$4 million, officials said.

Terrorist threat

In the 10 months since WSU learned it would host the debate, Schlagheck worked to make it an educational experience for WSU and the community. Themed political science classes were designed, watch parties were organized, and the Girl Scouts designed an honor badge for researching and watching the debate.

When news of the cancellation came out, she was meeting with the student government helping it draft a request urging the faculty union to cancel classes the day of the debate, both for security and educational reasons.

"I'm so very disappointed," Schlagheck said of the cancellation, though the professor emeritus hopes many of the programs go forward.

Schlagheck, who was on the debate planning committee, said no one could have predicted how different the 2016 election would be from 2008 or 2012.

New technology raises cybersecurity concerns. International terrorism spiked.

And perhaps most of all, the election season itself was marked by unusual rancor and violence. During Donald Trump's only visit to Dayton so far this year a Wright State student interrupted his speech by jumping a police barricade and charging the stage.

Schlagheck said the combination of Trump and Hillary Clinton on one stage — and possibly a third-party candidate — "was just going to attract more attention than we had ever seen, and global attention, too."

Debate planners told WSU to be prepared for up to 3,500 media attendees. Already 4,000 had sought credentials.

Meanwhile, ISIS has pushed its followers to seek soft targets. Police officers have been targeted nationwide. Schlagheck, whose field of expertise is international terrorism, said the threat of violence kept adding to estimated security costs.

"The exercise of democracy by large numbers now automatically produces a terrorist target," she said. "I never thought I would see the cost of terrorism and trying to secure democracy come home in my backyard this terribly."

Debate timeline

Sept. 23, 2015 — Wright State is awarded the first 2016 presidential debate. Its application was turned in two years earlier. John McCance, WSU advisor for the debate, said, "I think we have a very competitive package. The impact on the region will be significant."

March 1, 2016 — Wright State kicks off the debate season with an all-campus event on Super Tuesday. Staff and faculty are showered with confetti and balloons during Staff Development Day as "Debate 16" is launched.

May 13 — Hopkins foreshadows fundraising concerns in an interview with the Dayton Daily News: "We're going to need everybody to step up and help us. We went out in good faith to bring this. We've been on it for two years. It is coming. We're going to have a chance to really show off, but we need help."

May 19 — WSU students are able to register for the debate ticket lottery. After the university announces the registration website, nearly 1,000 register for a ticket or to be volunteers.

July 19 — Wright State President David Hopkins announces that the university will not host the first of this fall's presidential debates, citing rising costs and security concerns.

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