

WSU pleads for help in raising \$8M debate tab

NEWS

By **Laura A. Bischoff** - Columbus bureau

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Updated: 5:22 p.m. Friday, May 13, 2016 | Posted: 12:00 a.m. Saturday, May 14, 2016

COLUMBUS — Wright State University is under the gun to raise \$8 million, spruce up the 25-year-old Nutter Center and roll out the welcome mat to 5,000 journalists who are expected to cover first presidential debate in Dayton on Sept. 26.

“It’s overwhelming right now but I got a good team working on it,” WSU President David Hopkins told this newspaper last week. “And we have lots of partners in the region.”

But in the same conversation, Hopkins twice made a plea for fund-raising assistance, saying, “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.”

The plea comes as the university began informing some staff members that their positions will be eliminated as the school works to cut \$19 million from its budget in the next two years.

Officials have not said how many positions will be cut.



Wright State University staff and faculty are showered with confetti and balloons during Staff Development Day as Debate 16 is launched ... [Read More](#)

‘All hands on deck’

Hopkins said roughly \$2.5 million has been raised through cash and sponsorships as well as in-kind contributions, plus what the university expects to be able to re-coup through “charge backs” — fees assessed to media outlets and others for university services.

University spokesman Seth Bauguess said private cash donations so far total just over \$500,000.



David Hopkins, president of Wright State University, told Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce members Tuesday that the September presidential debate to ... [Read More](#)

Initially, Hopkins estimated the hosting duties would run between \$3 million and \$5 million. **But in January the WSU board of trustees was told the price tag would be about \$8 million**, in large part to cover cyber-security upgrades.

Exact costs hinge on yet-to-be-made decisions by the Commission on Presidential Debates about security, debate format, space for the media and candidates and more, according to WSU trustee meeting minutes.

“Fund-raising is coming along. It’s one of those things where you just have to keep working, working all over the state and working in Columbus because this is a state opportunity too to really show off the state, but it is most importantly a Dayton opportunity to show off the great community that we have,” Hopkins said. “So, it’s coming along.”



WSU President David Hopkins says all hands are on deck to pull off the Sept. 26 presidential debate at Wright State, ...
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He said the school hasn't been able to put all its focus on the debate because of the Rise.Shine fund-raising campaign, which continues through December. The school hosted a major event with actor Tom Hanks on April 19.

"So, now after April 19, I have my whole team working on this," Hopkins said. "So, it is all hands on deck. We are accelerating now, which is what we thought we would be."

No help from Columbus?



Wright State University will host the first presidential debate of 2016 on Sept. 26. Initially the event was expected to cost
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It is unclear how much help, or money, the Ohio General Assembly will provide beyond a \$220,000 security grant that has already been allocated.

State Sen. Bob Hackett, R-London, said he is pushing legislative leaders to come through with

more financial help.

“I do see them helping but time will tell,” he said. “Discussions are going on.”

But state Rep. Rick Perales, R-Beavercreek, said an earmark in the state capital bill didn’t make it into the final version of the spending bill.

It’s also not clear how much Wright State’s one-promising relationship with Ohio House Speaker Cliff Rosenberger, R-Clarksville, has been ruptured.

Rosenberger, a Wright State alumni, was angered when he learned the university paid nearly \$1 million in 2014 to economic development consultant Ron Wine, without a written contract that year. In emails to Hopkins, Wine twice suggested that Hopkins ask Rosenberger for state funding for projects including the debate and offer to host a political fundraiser for him.

That led Rosenberger to ask for a state ethics review of the emails and to tell other House members to exercise caution when dealing with WSU officials. The review of emails did not result in any findings by state ethics officials.

Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley, who serves on a debate host committee, said WSU has been counting on getting state funds to defray costs.

“I have heard that they’re hurting for money,” Whaley said. “No one has approached us, though we wouldn’t be able to do anything with our budget.”

‘It’s a hard sell’

The last time Ohio hosted a presidential debate was Oct. 28, 1980, in Cleveland when incumbent President Jimmy Carter faced off against former California Gov. Ronald Reagan, according to The American Presidency Project. Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland hosted a vice presidential debate in 2004 between incumbent Dick Cheney and challenger John Edwards.

It’s not 100 percent who will be facing off at Wright State, although Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are both closing in on the number of delegates they need to secure their nominations.

Wright State landed the first presidential debate while Longwood University in Farmville, Va.,

will host the vice presidential debate Oct. 4. The final two presidential debates will be Oct. 9 at Washington University in St. Louis and Oct. 19 at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas.

Washington University, which has hosted four presidential debates since 1992, said it expects to spend between \$3 million and \$4 million, including the required \$2 million upfront fee charged by the Commission on Presidential Debates.

Washington University Associate Vice Chancellor Steve Givens, who chairs the presidential debate steering committee, said the private university foots the bill, though it does charge media outlets and the campaigns for services such as Internet connections and work space. Lining up corporate sponsors can be difficult, he said.

“Very honestly, it’s a hard sell. It’s hard to say what the benefit is to a sponsor because there is no TV time, unless they do it on their own. There’s no advertising or signage on camera. So, we’ve just kind of opted out of that,” Givens said. He added that if the Commission on Presidential Debates issues debate tickets to the university, Washington University wants to give those to students and not feel obligated to dole them out to corporate sponsors.

Hosting a debate provides short-lived national name recognition and prestige but more importantly it inspires students to be engaged, Givens said. “The students get jazzed to be right in the midst of something that is very historic.”

Presidential debate schedule

Sept. 26: Wright State University.

Oct. 4: Vice-Presidential debate, Longwood University in Farmville, Va.

Oct. 9: Washington University in St. Louis.

Oct. 19: University of Nevada-Las Vegas.

About the Author



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