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Keeping track of government travel costs

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Provided

Travel spending is one of those areas of government that can be difficult to size up. Obviously, public officials often need to travel to discharge their duties, such as attending important meetings or recruiting economic development prospects. Even then, however, the return on travel costs sometimes can be hard to determine.

And travel that's lavish, excessive, or of marginal value is an age-old problem for government and a burden for taxpayers. The wise public official will be mindful of creeping travel costs, and government entities should exercise sufficient oversight – including a public accounting of expenses.

Each year I produce the S.C. Travel Report, which shows how much state agencies – including public

colleges and universities – spend on travel and related accommodations, meals, and event registrations. The report also ranks agencies by spending and lists the individual highest spenders in each.

I released the 2017 report in early November. It showed that state-supported institutions spent \$85.7 million on travel during last fiscal year – an increase of \$4.6 million from the previous year. The top-spenders were:

1. Clemson University: \$14,808,002
2. University of South Carolina: \$12,602,282
3. Medical University of South Carolina: \$7,381,725
4. College of Charleston: \$7,264,283
5. S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control: \$3,494,316
6. Department of Education: \$1,992,877
7. Coastal Carolina University: \$1,952,181
8. Department of Transportation: \$1,749,125
9. Judicial Department: \$1,683,341
10. South Carolina State University: \$1,407,028

The report shows that about \$57 million – or two-thirds of the nearly \$86 million total – was spent on travel by state-funded colleges and universities. As these institutions are quick to point out, much of their spending is done with money from sources other than the state's general fund – for example - foundation grants, student tuition payments, and sports ticket sales. Nonetheless, they still ask for and receive tens of millions of dollars a year from the taxpayers.

And in a state with the nation's eighth highest public college tuition and ever-increasing student fees, they certainly owe it to parents, students and the general public to demonstrate good stewardship of the billions of public and other dollars they take in annually.

The travel report is one component of a broader campaign by the Comptroller's Office to give taxpayers as much information as possible about how public funds are used – an initiative that includes the S.C.

Fiscal Transparency Website. Its purpose isn't to render judgement about the spending but simply to let people see the details – and if they have questions, contact the agency for answers.

Public entities are at their best when they allow the sun to shine on their financial dealings. That's the spirit of transparency. Transparency promotes accountability, which promotes good government.

The 2017 S.C. Travel Report and previous travel reports going back to 2004 are available on the Comptroller's Office website. Visit cg.sc.gov, select "Publications and Reports" on the left side of the home page, then click "Travel Reports" from the drop-down menu.

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