

Refocus higher education conversation

There has been much discussion this year about tax reform, budget cuts and changes in healthcare delivery in our state. These issues have dominated the conversation and deservedly so. However, by focusing exclusively on what we must overcome, we risk losing sight of our ultimate vision: creating a better Louisiana for the citizens of our state.

The Shreveport-Bossier Business Alliance made up of the Shreveport, Bossier and African-American Chambers of Commerce, Committee of One Hundred, North Louisiana Economic Partnership, Manufacturing Manager's Council, and Biomedical Research Foundation of NWLA have joined with the Baton Rouge Area Chamber, Council for a Better Louisiana, Louisiana Committee of One Hundred, and Blueprint Louisiana in support of establishing greater postsecondary education opportunities for the people of our state.

Although the recession has impacted higher education spending across the nation, many states (most notably our neighbor to the west)

have realized that an economic advantage is attained by increasing investment in their



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colleges and universities. We need to have the same conversation in Louisiana. On behalf of the SBBA and its partner organizations, we offer the following principles as a guide to that discussion:

» We believe postsecondary education is an investment, not an expense. For Louisiana to be a key player in the global knowledge economy, we must preserve and expand on the vibrancy colleges and universities bring to our communities. Government action demonstrating this mindset is essential to sustaining and recruiting the best and brightest talent to our state.

» We believe Louisiana should allot predictable resources that provide the core of higher education funding. As we have been cutting state funding to higher education, we have been increasing tuition, which has only partially covered the state losses. This year,

the legislature is considering a state budget for higher education largely on contingency funds that may or may not materialize. We need to rethink what we are doing. Predictable state funding is key to planning and is important to produce and retain excellence in our postsecondary education enterprise.

» We believe the accountability and autonomy provided by the GRAD Act; standards for our four year universities; investment in building a 21st century community and technical college system; and legislation to build better course credit transfer policies provide a great foundation for continuous improvement of the postsecondary education enterprise. We should stay the course in these postsecondary education reforms.

» We believe Louisiana should maintain consistency and predictability in accountability through continued support of the principles defined in the GRAD Act. At the same time, we should continue to improve the funding formula in a thoughtful, deliberate way. Colleges and universities should be given ample time to develop strategies to

meet the challenges before substantial changes are made.

» We believe Louisiana should have a well-defined outcomes-based component to the formula governing the distribution of the state's portion of postsecondary education resources. The metrics used should be carefully structured to reflect the most important outcomes in a way that is fair to our diverse group of colleges and universities.

» We believe the fiscal reality for higher education institutions in our state and nation is a greater reliance on market-based principles. The move from "state supported" — where the state funds a majority of education expenses — to "state aided" — where the state portion is below 25 percent — is based on the realities of national and state economics.

We are the only state in the union where college tuition

changes require a two-thirds vote of the Legislature. As a result, we ask colleges and universities to compete in a market-based economy while heavily regulating them. Autonomy is needed in that it allows for reduced bureaucracy, wiser use of public dollars, and more effective operations. To accomplish this, Louisiana should move tuition-setting authority and decisions concerning pricing for credit hours from the Legislature to the management boards with considerable input from the individual postsecondary institutions.

Moving to a market-based approach will require real conversations that link the roles and purposes of our schools with the amount and structure of college funding provided by the taxpayers of Louisiana. Other states have had these difficult discussions, and we should do the same. The SBBA and

its partner organizations are committed to sponsoring and facilitating these important discussions.

A report from the National Governor's Association noted that "21st century places will survive because of the assets they create, not because of the assets they inherit." Louisiana has long depended on assets of oil and gas, timber and the Mississippi River to sustain us.

These assets will always be important, but future success will require creating new assets. This will require the development of our people. We believe postsecondary education is a critical part of that successful future.

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