

## What we think

### Raising tuition PAR for course

January 9, 2010

In last year's legislative session, one bill would have wrested the authority to raise public college tuition away from the Legislature and handed it to the higher education management boards. The bill died with the session, but it has been resurrected in recommendations put forward by the state's Postsecondary Review Commission.

Given the state of Louisiana higher education funding, any move, including no move at all, is likely to be fraught with potential difficulties. Law, funding formulas, politics and economics create enough enigmas and conundrums to keep a logic class busy for a whole semester, with lab. This applies to the panel's suggestion that tuition levels are best set by college and university management.

But we feel that such a change, executed properly according to sound suggestions already put forward in and out of government, would bring us as close to a decentralized, responsive, accountable funding process as we're likely to see in a state-run system.

Just untangling this tangled web would be a help.

You've seen much of the big picture already. Declining revenue forced the Jindal administration to institute big budget cuts last year, and higher education is one of a handful of major state functions that funding dedications leave vulnerable to reductions. The Jindal administration said the cuts were merely bobbing back some of the recent growth in higher education spending. UL President E. Joseph Savoie said the Lafayette university sustained cuts in one year that were as bad as the budget-scrubbing of the mid- to late 1980s.

Whoever's closer to the truth, the situation is complicated by a Louisiana classic: an accident, a power grab and a laudable concern for the less affluent that really gummed up the works. A 1995 constitutional amendment required a two-thirds vote in the Legislature for any state fee increase. An attorney general's opinion defined the state-college tuition as a fee. The opinion was elevated to law in 2005, since which Louisiana tuition has continued to rank near the bottom among Southern states.

The Public Affairs Research Council, in a 2007 report, asked tough questions about whether the funding system can respond to conflicting needs. Those needs call upon the state to make higher education available to the greatest possible number of our people. But they also require that we provide enough money for top-notch facilities that create an educational and research environment that will attract top talent, both to the student body and to the faculty.

PAR made sensible recommendations that we endorse: Make sure the TOPS tuition program has adequate funding to cover tuition; require institutions to meet performance standards before imposing tuition increases; and allow management boards to increase tuition up to levels that are based on tuition at peer institutions in the region and household income.