



State needs a game plan for higher ed

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Every hurricane season, the governor goes on TV and radio with a couple of New Orleans Saints to urge the population to "get a game plan" to deal with upcoming natural disasters.

Bobby Jindal needs to take his own advice before he gets into the storm of changing how higher education is governed, for the winds are kicking up already.

Jindal is said to be considering pursuing a constitutional amendment to merge the four boards overseeing four-year universities into a single board and to maintain the board for community and technical colleges. That would take two-thirds approval of both houses of the Legislature and a vote of the people this fall. A broad consensus is required for such a sweeping change.

Trouble is, if Jindal was looking for some blocking from the Postsecondary Education Review Commission, it only passed its single board recommendation on a 5-4 vote earlier this month.

Worse, the ink on the PERC report was barely dry before the Public Affairs Research Council panned the plan because it would merge the coordinating function of the Board of Regents with the administrative responsibilities of the three management boards (for LSU, Southern and University of Louisiana System). Without the Regents' "over-arching, coordinated approach to the delivery of higher education," wrote PAR, policy-making control, by default, would fall to the governor. Also, the four-year and two-year boards would be pitted against each other in the annual battle for funding.

Days later, the Council for a Better Louisiana piled on, questioning how a single board could oversee the day-to-day operations of 14 universities, two law schools, two medical schools, two agricultural centers and the state's public hospital system, all while setting policies among institutions, not to mention coordinating with the two-year board.

Besides, both PAR and CABL warn that a fixation on changing the governance structure of higher education, which would take years to implement, does nothing to address the pressing concerns of low graduation rates and the disconnect between what education provides and the economy needs to meet workforce goals.

Right from the snap, what's billed as the ultimate reform for higher education gets smash-mouthed by the two leading paragons of good government. In game plan parlance, that's fumbling on the first play from scrimmage.

With plenty of natural enemies already and lacking the allies it needs, the single-board cause starts off in a hole. Does the governor climb in with it and risk defeat on what would be his boldest initiative yet? Or does he play it safe and stick to cracking down on sex offenders?

There is hope, however, for meaningful reform now followed by the big game changer. PAR, CABL and PERC all agree on the short-term need to strengthen the Board of Regents' power to allocate resources and to set policy (tuition levels, admission standards, graduate-undergraduate ratios) for all higher education.

The Constitution seems to grant the Board of Regents such authority, but other articles have been interpreted to give separate powers to the management boards that allow them to go their own ways, particularly in seeking appropriations from the Legislature beyond what Regents recommends.

So while the Board of Regents was supposed to be the athletic director, it has all the authority of the cheerleading squad.

What the governor should do is put forward a two-part game plan. Call for amending the constitution this fall to clarify and strengthen the powers of the Board of Regents to set budgets and policies for the management boards to carry out, as we voters thought the 1974 Constitution did when we passed it.

Then he should charge the Joint Legislative Education Committee, chaired by Sen. Ben Nevers, D-Bogalusa, who headed PERC, to hold hearings toward a proposed constitutional amendment next year for governing higher education. Putting that on the 2011 ballot would make it a prime issue in the gubernatorial and legislative elections.

In other words, instead of throwing deep on fourth down or punting, kick the field goal and set up to come back to drive for the winning score. That's close to what PAR and CABL have recommended, without my colorful pigskin lingo.

Now if Drew Brees would just lead us in the pre-game chant . . .