

## PAR says don't abolish Regents

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Guest Columnist

Published: Wednesday, February 24, 2010

Two of the recent recommendations by the Post-Secondary Education Review Commission (PERC) offer conflicting advice regarding higher education governance. One would strengthen the authority of the Board of Regents (BoR) specifically as recommended by the Public Affairs Research Council (PAR) in a 2009 report. The other would merge the BoR with three of the four higher education management boards in a move to simplify the governance structure. BoR should not be eliminated.

The PERC recommendation to merge boards would eliminate the only state entity dedicated to developing an overarching, coordinated approach to the delivery of higher education. It would consolidate the policymaking and administrative functions of BoR and the Louisiana State University, University of Louisiana and Southern University systems. It would leave the Louisiana Community and Technical College System board to stand on its own.

This plan would move Louisiana in the opposite direction from the reforms PAR supports. It would increase the politicization of higher education policy in the state and reverse recent progress toward better student outcomes.

PAR's major concerns with the recommendation are that it would:

- Concentrate power in the governor's office as the default policymaking body for higher education;
- Pit the two resulting management boards directly against each other in the annual struggle for funding;
- Discourage coordination of strategies among the four-year and two-year institutions; and
- Divert attention from the most pressing problems with higher education: poor student outcomes and lack of coordination between education and workforce development goals.

The distinction between policymaking and administrative management is an important one, and separate boards should be reserved for each. Without a single board focused solely on policy coordination for the entire system, that role would likely default to the governor's office. Whether some or all of the system management boards should be merged to streamline administrative functions is a matter to be decided through careful study of the legal implications and likely effect on student outcomes.

Such a study should be conducted without delay by the BoR, which has the staff expertise and experience necessary to recommend an optimal organizational structure for the systems of institutions it oversees. Should all four-year institutions be managed by a single board? Do the historically black institutions need to be managed separately? Does the flagship university require separate management? How long would it take to transition to a new organizational structure? These questions will be relevant not only during the upcoming legislative session but also throughout the year leading up to the 2011 legislative session when the budget problems will be more severe.

The following recommendations made in PAR's "*Higher Education Governance Structure: Louisiana's Options for Keeping Pace*," published in 2009, relate directly to the question of what changes need to be made to the structure of power and authority among the state's institutions, system boards and the Board of Regents.

1. Clarify the Constitution and statutes to establish the Board of Regents as the statewide policy-setting agency for higher education with clear power and authority to enforce the master plan agenda at the system and institution levels.
2. Conduct a comprehensive study and public debate to evaluate the merits of and barriers to consolidation or elimination of programs, institutions or management boards. The Board of Regents should recommend changes to the Legislature in time for consideration during the 2010 legislative session.

BoR is expected to release its own set of recommendations for legislative action. A clear and thorough call for change designed to support a more efficient, better coordinated and more successful higher education system in the state is long overdue. BoR should lead the charge and fulfill its constitutional responsibility for developing, coordinating and regulating higher education policy in the state. The Legislature should not respond by threatening to dismantle it. Instead, the power of the Board of Regents should be strengthened.

To download a copy of the PAR report [click here](#).

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