

## Reforms could affect Nicholls, Fletcher

By Daniel McBride, Staff Writer

Published: Monday, March 8, 2010

HOUMA — Critics say recommendations from a higher-education streamlining group could cause rifts between two- and four-year schools. But local officials say it's too soon to tell how the recommended merger would affect area colleges.

A group of state business, education and political leaders was charged by the Legislature with improving Louisiana's colleges and universities and cutting costs. One recommendation from the group, called the Postsecondary Education Review Commission, suggested that the Board of Regents, which oversees all of Louisiana's institutions of higher education, be merged with the three boards that oversee the state's four-year schools.

But critics, like the Public Affairs Research Council, a nonpartisan group that monitors state government, say this could drive a wedge between the four- and two-year schools, whose governing body would remain separate.

A PAR news release says merging the boards would "pit the two resulting management boards directly against each other in the annual struggle for funding."

Local officials say it's too soon to tell whether consolidating the boards would affect Nicholls State University in Thibodaux and Fletcher Technical Community College in Houma. Cooperation between the two has been described as a model relationship.

"Could it save money? Yes, perhaps. Would it be more efficient? I don't know," said Travis Lavigne, Fletcher's chancellor. "A decision of this magnitude should require a great deal of study."

Nicholls President Stephen Hulbert said he would not comment until school faculty and administrators complete their review of the commission's recommendations.

The purpose of the commission, formed by the Legislature in 2009, was to review Louisiana's higher-education system and recommend ways to improve efficiency and quality. The commission met between September and February and released its final report this past month.

One of the report's recommendations is to merge the Board of Regents with the three boards that govern the state's four-year schools: the Louisiana State University, the Southern University and the University of Louisiana system boards, which includes Nicholls.

Such a move could cut costs and increase the efficiency of the state's college administration, according to the commission.

Paul Aucoin, a member of the University of Louisiana Board of Supervisors, said the merger won't cause tension between two- and four-year schools, but it could result in other problems.

"If you're going to downsize the boards, you're going to run the risk of losing local representation," said the attorney, who represents the area that includes Nicholls.

Aucoin said the review commission heard expert testimony that such a merger might actually result in a cost increase, and it could take a decade to fully merge the boards.

Charlotte Bollinger, who represents the Houma-Thibodaux area on the Board of Regents, said the board does not yet have an official response, and the final decision will be up to the Legislature. But schools like Nicholls and Fletcher are trendsetters in terms of accommodating the needs of their region, she said. Nicholls and Fletcher led the state in aligning curriculums so courses taken at one school can count at the other. Also, students enrolled at one college in some cases can take certain classes offered at the other school.

*Staff Writer Daniel McBride can be reached at 850-1148 or [daniel.mcbride@houmatoday.com](mailto:daniel.mcbride@houmatoday.com). Follow him on Twitter@BayouSchools.*