

Editorial: Higher ed cuts shortsighted

Times get tight for the state budget, and once again we demonstrate how misplaced our spending priorities can be.

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With thousands of Louisianans pondering career changes due to layoffs or the threat of downsizing, state budget keepers order \$109 million in cuts to universities, community colleges and technical schools.

The Jindal administration and others will say their hands are tied, that the two biggest buckets of unprotected money are in higher education and health care. To that we say, now's the time to fix it. Call a constitutional convention, if that's what it takes, but let's zero base the budget, examine the tax structure and start all over.

Voters, distrustful of their state politicians over the years, have protected a number of budgets from potential cash raids. Non-discretionary expenditures last year made up 53 percent of the general fund, according to the Public Affairs Research Council. And of the discretionary budget, health care and higher education last year totaled 63 percent. In short, these are key pieces of evidence for why we need to retool our budget system for the 21st century.

Health care is one of those basics that heeds no fiscal cycle. And that's one of the reasons that it has often been played as a pawn in the politics of budget cuts, with lawmakers and the administration seeking leverage to raise taxes or move around what dollars they can.

As for higher education, when you're trying to stay afloat with a potential revenue loss of \$1.2 billion this year, you probably don't care that the person you want to toss overboard holds a doctorate in engineering. But what if she wrote a paper on water displacement?

We need people who both can help us survive the moment and build us a better ship for the future. The threat of periodic cutbacks don't attract the best faculty or students.

And what about the line worker at a plywood plant who can no longer ply his trade? He needs to retool for the jobs that are available, whether in welding or diesel mechanics.

"When the economy slows down, the demand for higher education grows," says Alan Richard, communications specialist with the Southern Regional Education Board. "It's the time when more people want to go to school."

In recent flush times of high-dollar oil and gas revenues, inroads were made in workforce development strategies as well as investments in higher education. Budget cuts, however, now threaten to short-circuit those plans.

With a \$50 million cut in the LSU System, for instance, LSUS faces a \$1.3 million mid-year cut that could reduce adjunct professors as well as make cuts in equipment and operational services. Bossier Parish Community College could have to trim a million or more from its budget.

Such cuts are playing out across the South, according to SREB's Richard. Whether trimming higher education is a short-sighted necessity or gambit, it's still short-sighted. It's time to challenge our lawmakers and the governor to step up and show the leadership needed to make the fiscal changes that better prepare us for the future.