

## **Public policy groups call for strengthening of higher education coordinating panel**

By Ed Anderson, The Times-Picayune

February 18, 2010, 6:54PM

The Legislature should enhance the authority of the state's higher education coordinating agency, not diminish it, at the lawmaking session that opens March 29, two of the state's public policy and research organizations said today.

The Public Affairs Research Council said in a study prepared by researcher Cheryl Serrett, that the Board of Regents should not be abolished as a special legislatively created higher education study commission has recommended.

Meanwhile, Barry Erwin, president of the Council for a Better Louisiana, said in a separate report that if a new governing structure for colleges and universities is adopted by lawmakers, it will not be a viable entity for about a year. In the meantime, he said, the governor and legislators should support measures "to strengthen, clarify and better define the current authority of the ... Regents to allow it to more effectively enact the policy changes" the study commission urged.

The Post-Secondary Education Review Commission, a panel of out-of-state and Louisiana educators created last year, recommended in its final report that the existing structure of running higher education should be changed.

Under the present structure, separate management boards run the Louisiana State University System; the Southern University System; the University of Louisiana System that operates the smaller, regional colleges; and the Louisiana Community and Technical College Board, which oversees the two year vocational-technical schools and community colleges.

The Board Regents now coordinates the operations of the four management boards and oversees financing and program changes at the campuses.

In its report, the commission recommended abolishing Regents and merging the other four boards into two: one to oversee the two-year campuses, the other to manage the four-year schools.

"The ... recommendation to merge boards would eliminate the only state entity dedicated to developing an overarching, coordinated approach to the delivery of higher education," said Jim Brandt, president of the research council. He said the proposal "would move Louisiana in the opposite direction" from meaningful change.

"It would increase the politicization of higher education policy in the state and reverse recent progress toward better student outcomes,"

Brandt said. Without Regents, he said, higher education policy-making would be placed "more under the political sphere of operations" of the governor's office" and pit the two proposed management boards "directly against each other in the annual struggle for funding."

Brandt said the two-board system would also "discourage coordination of strategies among the four-year and two-year institutions."

"Without a single board focused solely on policy coordination for the entire system, that role would likely default to the governor's office," the report said. "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 (achievement) outcomes."

The study of the structure and functioning of the university boards and systems should be done "without delay" by Regents, Brandt said, because the coordinating agency has the "staff expertise and experience ... to recommend an optimal organizational structure for the systems of institutions it oversees."

The report said the Legislature should give Regents full power as the statewide policy-setting agency with the authority to enforce a master plan for the campuses. It also called for Regents to make recommendations to the Legislature for a "comprehensive study and public debate" on the barriers and merits to consolidation of programs, campuses and management boards.

"The Legislature should not respond by threatening to dismantle" Regents, Brandt said. "Instead, the power of the Board of Regents should be strengthened."

CABL's Erwin said that a major question that is not answered in the commission's recommendations is how the two proposed boards will be able to set policy as well as operate the colleges on a daily basis -- such as hiring faculty and coaches, running athletic programs and approving contracts.

"The question that arises is how effective can this new board be if it has to do all of that and more for 14 universities, two law schools, two agricultural centers, two medical schools, various research centers, the state's public hospital system and establish overall policies and coordination among all of these institutions?" Erwin said. "More review and clarification is clearly needed."

Erwin said that state needs "a strong policy board to move boldly for change in the next year to deal with short-term, immediate budget issues while establishing long-term policies."

He said even if all of the boards are rolled into one or two, lawmakers would have to send the issue to voters -- possibly this fall . That would mean that "a viable, operating board would not be in place" for possibly another year.

"Higher education in our state cannot wait that long for decisive action," Erwin said. "It needs to start working better sooner rather than later," and enhancing Regents' authority now is the answer .

Ed Anderson can be reached at [eanderson@timespicayune.com](mailto:eanderson@timespicayune.com) or 225.342.5810.