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Postsecondary commission must point us toward hard choices to improve higher ed's effectiveness, efficiency

In all the streamlining rhetoric that is being tossed about ahead of impending budget shortfalls, one point rings out when it comes to Louisiana higher education: "If all we do is cut across-the-board, we condemn ourselves to a mediocre system across-the-board."

That's a comment from the citizen group Blueprint Louisiana in remarks prepared for the Louisiana Postsecondary Education Review Commission. Though there's little argument with the comment, the real conundrum comes, as most know, in determining what is most critical or, in the political sense, in deciding whose ox will be gored.

Setting priorities, sticking to budgets and making the hard choices have never been easy in Louisiana, and the choices are especially difficult since higher education and health care remain about the only areas not constitutionally protected from cuts.

But the deadline for choices is at hand and the initial recommendations of PERC offer a starting point — even if some suggestions mirror activities that are already in place for the most part. The four recommendations that followed PERC's meeting on academic programs two weeks ago are that the Board of Regents:

- Undertake a rigorous statewide review of academic programs for unnecessary duplication and excess hours for degree completion.
- Review the role, scope and mission statements of institutions with the aim of eliminating or minimizing "mission creep."
- Continue to conduct regular reviews of academic quality — assessing alignment with workforce needs, student completion rates and more.
- Establish a formula to uniformly allocate funding for all associate degree programs and to implement the formula no later than the 2010-11 school year.

PERC proposes that this would all be done in consultation with the management boards for the various postsecondary systems and the institutions.

Meanwhile, independent groups like Blueprint Louisiana are weighing in on the issues and the public is able to add its thoughts early by clicking on the "Tell Us what You Think" section of PERC's Web site (www.laperc.org).

In testimony Nov. 16, Blueprint Louisiana's written comments defined two central issues that, we concur, must be considered: an unacceptably low graduation rate in the state's four-year universities and an underdeveloped community and technical college system. Let's hope that future PERC meetings adopt some of the group's recommendations:

- Fully implementing the performance-based funding formula for higher education

- Raising university admission standards
- Establishing Centers of Excellence within the community and technical college system
- Providing higher education systems greater freedom to raise revenue
- Removing all chronically failing postsecondary schools from their governance system — a move similar to that in the state's public school arena.

The review commission meets again on Dec. 14-15 on the hot-button issues of funding and the makeup of the state's higher education systems (a decades-long source of debate all by itself). Then, presumably following other meetings, its written report is due by Feb. 12 to the Board of Regents, which must submit comments to the Legislature by Feb. 26.

There is much to be done in the coming weeks as those who hold higher education issues close to heart seek the best ways to improve institutional efficiency and reach a system that, as Blueprint Louisiana puts it, is "right-sized through performance instead of decimated by across-the-board cuts."
