

## **How Louisiana Can Revitalize Public Higher Education**

Testimony by Anne D. Neal, President, American Council of Trustees and Alumni  
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Louisiana's public higher education system faces a number of serious challenges, as the existence of this Commission attests. Only 40 percent of students who enroll in four-year colleges earn a degree within six years, well below national norms. And a meager 25 percent of students are enrolling in the state's community and two-year institutions, even though data indicate the state's economic needs are heavily tilted towards two-year and certification programs. At a time when students, parents, and the state treasury are hurting and every dollar needs to be used effectively, there is evidence that higher education can do a better job of employing limited public resources.

We at the American Council of Trustees and Alumni—an independent, national non-profit in Washington, D.C.—thank the Commission for tackling these issues head on. And we commend you for your efforts. While other states are bemoaning the economic challenges before them, Louisiana stands out for realizing that current budget shortages provide a unique opportunity to explore ways of reducing costs, enhancing effectiveness and improving quality. By doing so, Louisiana can set a national standard for innovative, high-quality postsecondary education. For the next few minutes, I would like to focus on four key areas that offer ways to do so.

### **Closely Review Administrative Spending**

Few people will disagree: the cost of higher education in America, both public and private, has increased exponentially in the past few decades. Louisiana is no exception. While there have been many explanations, one of the most important has been the sharp increase in administrative expenditures at many universities. These increases (often referred to as increases in “Institutional Support”) far outpace increases in instructional spending. For example, according to data supplied to the U.S. Department of Education, the Louisiana State University System's instructional costs increased by over sixty percent between 2002 and 2007. Administrative spending, however, increased by more than 87 percent. At the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, during that same time period, instructional spending increased by 21 percent, while administrative spending went up by 41 percent.

While institutions surely have their own reasons for allocating money, the rapid growth of administrative expenditures relative to instruction does raise questions about spending priorities. Institutional boards and state policymakers should find ways to reduce unnecessary administrative overhead costs, utilize resources more fully and effectively, and end redundant and wasteful programs—and they should reward institutions when they do so. The University of Missouri Board of Curators in 2006 identified nearly \$20 million in administrative savings, including eliminating unnecessary nonacademic programs, improving efficiency and productivity, reducing costs in the administrative service areas, and enhancing the use of technology without increasing costs. Given these operating efficiencies, in 2007, the Curators unanimously approved a 1 percent efficiencies account for contributions to university compensation, funded through dollars saved.

We understand that, at your November meeting, this Commission recommended a “rigorous statewide review of academic programs for unnecessary duplication and excess hours required for degree completion.” We urge you, at this juncture, to recommend a similar review of administrative spending.

## **Build on the Strength of Your Core Curricula**

One of the best ways to ensure a quality, affordable education is to enhance the general education curriculum. Students need exposure to college-level writing, mathematics, science, literature, American history, and foreign languages if they are to become educated citizens and productive members of the workforce. And Louisiana's public universities already do a better than average job at meeting these requirements. For instance, Louisiana State University receives a grade of "B" on ACTA's general education website WhatWillTheyLearn.com for its strong requirements in English composition, foreign languages, math, and science. Other Louisiana institutions fare comparatively well in the area of general education. For example, the Board of Regents of the University of Louisiana System mandates 6 hours of English composition, 6 hours of Mathematics, 6 hours of Behavioral Science, 9 hours of Natural Science, 9 hours of Humanities, and 3 hours of Fine Arts. Grambling State University even requires its students to complete an introductory course in Macroeconomics, a requirement that sets it apart nationally for thoughtfully preparing its students for life after college.

The best strategy for Louisiana's public university systems is to preserve worthy core requirements, and find out ways to improve and strengthen them system-wide. Flagships and other top colleges in neighboring states of Arkansas and Texas already have strong core curricula in place that provide students with the basic skills and knowledge they will need at a time of ever-changing job demands. Revising general education in a way that minimizes the number of narrow, trendy courses that count for requirements can reduce costs and also help facilitate transfers between institutions. Some states, such as Minnesota, Colorado, and Illinois, have statewide articulation agreements, with a certain set of general education courses that are interchangeable at all institutions.

Improving the quality of general education does not require a large expenditure of resources—often, the courses necessary for such a core curriculum already exist—the task is simply to devise and articulate a framework that allows for a coherent body of general knowledge and skills for all students.

## **Align K-12 Standards with Postsecondary Expectations**

As Louisiana's woeful graduation rates indicate, far too many high school seniors in Louisiana—not to mention across the country—are simply not ready for college or workforce training. When they enroll and then fail to graduate in large numbers, they do so at immense cost to the taxpayer and to themselves, often leaving the institution with a mountain of debt, and nothing to show for it. Colleges and universities can help address these issues by establishing or strengthening partnerships between secondary and post-secondary institutions. There needs to be close alignment between the curricular standards of secondary and post-secondary institutions.

Several states have already offered positive examples of how to align standards in this way. The University of North Carolina Board of Governors in 2000 voted to increase the high school course requirements for admission into the four-year universities, as it has been shown that students who have completed more high school coursework are nearly always more prepared than students without the same background. The new admissions standards instituted a foreign language requirement and additional required courses in mathematics, the first time the university had raised such standards in nearly ten years. Likewise, the Connecticut State University System has raised admissions standards, tightening high school course requirements in mathematics and world languages. In Colorado, the state higher education coordinating board, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education, similarly adopted rigorous new college admissions standards. The goals of the reforms included the improvement of

graduation and retention rates and a reduced need for remediation at the undergraduate level—goals that positively impact costs to the student and to the state.

In Louisiana, kudos are in order to the University of Louisiana System Board of Supervisors, which has already taken important steps to address quality and cost by raising high school admissions requirements—at your urging. Students who have stronger academic backgrounds upon enrolling in a postsecondary degree are less likely to need costly remedial courses, more likely to complete their programs in a timely fashion, and more likely to use their newfound skills and knowledge to advance the social and economic well-being of the state. Meanwhile, those students who cannot meet four-year college standards can benefit by attending a community or a technical college, at considerable savings to the students, parents, and taxpayers. At the two-year colleges, some students can acquire skills needed to enable transfer to and completion in a four-year school. Others can obtain the expertise needed to fill skilled jobs. In too many states, including Louisiana, economic development is hurt when a sufficient number of technically skilled and trained people are not available to meet employment demand. Ensuring the vitality of the two-year education system can thus be of critical importance to the state's economic welfare, potentially prompting rethinking about what combination of two-year and four-year institutions can best meet the state's higher education goals. Dual enrollment programs, such as those included in the 2008 General Appropriations Bill and those already in place at several Louisiana institutions, can also be effective in better preparing students to make the transition from secondary to postsecondary education.

### **Learn from CUNY**

Finally, we urge the Commission and Louisiana policymakers to take heart (and perhaps some pointers) from the example of the City University of New York. Indeed, since the 1990s, CUNY has taken on challenges that were certainly not identical, but similar to Louisiana's—and its example is one of considerable and continuing success.

Largely as the result of an open-admissions policy dating back to the early 1970s, CUNY faced problems with inadequate student preparation, dismally low student retention and graduation rates, and the academic and fiscal costs of providing high-school level remedial courses to students who were not ready for college work. In 1999, its Board of Trustees voted to eliminate remediation at the senior (four year) colleges and to institute tighter admissions criteria.

In addition, the trustees and the chancellor concentrated on three promising initiatives that are today markedly increasing the quality and prestige of CUNY. The Honors College, founded in 2001, concentrates on giving a challenging intellectual experience to the most academically gifted CUNY students. College Now, a high-school partnership program, now collaborates with the New York City Department of Education to help prepare high school students for college academics. Most recently, the New Community College Initiative promises an innovative approach to the two-year college model, focusing on degree completion, a solid core curriculum, and programs directly relevant to the workforce needs of New York City.

The results? Enrollment at CUNY is at its highest point since the mid-1970s, and as CUNY board chairman Benno Schmidt has pointed out, diversity remains strong. More students pass state exams for teaching certification. Average SAT scores for incoming freshmen are in the top third of scores nationwide, and twice as many incoming students have high school averages of 85 percent or higher than was the case ten years ago. The Honors College is thriving. Students, parents, and taxpayers are

getting much better bang for their buck—with students who need the extra preparation completing their developmental coursework in less costly two-year colleges before going on to four-year programs.

Not only that, another institution—the University of the District of Columbia—is following in CUNY’s footsteps. UDC’s board recently voted to split the university into two institutions: a two-year community college that would retain UDC’s open admissions tradition, and a four-year “flagship” campus with admissions standards. The community college is making new opportunities available to DC students that will enable them to enter key fields such as health care. The transformed UDC opened in August, with students expressing an optimistic view of the school’s future.

More than anything, the CUNY experience—and other models I’ve outlined—teach us that true higher education reform requires commitment on the part of policymakers, governing boards, and administrators to achieve a common goal. In most states, as here in Louisiana, it is the governor’s responsibility to appoint trustees (often with the consent of the State Senate), and the boards choose the presidents or chancellors who will carry out their vision.

To improve cost, quality, and accountability, it is imperative that Gov. Jindal appoint trustees who will actively engage with the mission of providing a quality, affordable education. Trustees may think that their main job is to advocate for their institutions. In fact, they are public officials with a fiduciary obligation to represent the interests of the taxpayers. They are uniquely positioned to develop incentives that will reward and promote better performance at the lowest possible cost.

## **Conclusion**

The State of Louisiana has a tremendous opportunity on its hands to develop a coherent vision about the future of public higher education in the state and how it can better serve the educational needs of its citizens. State policymakers, governing boards, and administrators need to articulate a clear mission for higher education—especially as it concerns the balance between two-year programs and four-year comprehensive universities. Louisiana should also foster the growth of a strong general education curriculum and academic and professional programs that address the particular needs of the state, or that build on strengths of the various institutions. The Governor has spoken repeatedly about fostering these “centers of excellence,” not only to enhance academic quality, but also to utilize resources more effectively.

The boards of the different university systems also need to lead the way in pursuing measures that provide the public with greater transparency and accountability for student learning and how resources are spent. Governing boards of institutions such as those in Virginia have helped to develop accountability mechanisms for assessing student learning in areas such as writing, mathematics, and other core competencies. As the experience of CUNY and other public universities have demonstrated, when policymakers, boards, and other leaders come together, the sky is the limit in higher education reform.