

EDITORIAL

Give Louisiana colleges more tuition flexibility

Thus far the legislative effort to give Louisiana higher education a more competitive edge in an ever-growing global marketplace seems to be making headway in the Legislature.

We are watching the progress on two bills, specifically — House Bill 194, sponsored by Walt Leger, D-New Orleans, and House Bill 87, sponsored by Thomas Carmody Jr., R-Shreveport. Both seek to change the state's long-standing policy of requiring that two-thirds of the Legislature must approve any college tuition increase.

It's about time. Louisiana is one of only three states in the nation where the legislature holds that authority, and the *only* state that requires a two-thirds vote, according to the Shreveport-Bossier Business Alliance for Higher Education. SBBA, an alliance of business organizations in north-west Louisiana, supports any effort to give our colleges the tools they need to respond nimbly and quickly to a changing education market.

"During our higher education strategy retreat this spring, our local chancellors made it clear they needed the freedom to become more market-driven," said Patrick Harrison, chair of the SBBA, in a news release last week after the state House Education Committee voted in favor of HB 194, 13-4.

"If the state is not going to adequately fund higher education, we need to take the shackles off of our chancellors and give them ability to do what they must to keep their institutions strong and their doors open," Harrison said.

HB 194 is now scheduled to go before the full House for debate Wednesday.

There are many in this state, and we are among them, who think approval of either HB 194 or HB 87 (or something like them) will help better prepare our state colleges to compete and become less dependent on state funds that are already being hacked away annually via mid-year budget cuts paired with budget reductions at the start of the fiscal year. The simple truth that lawmakers need to acknowledge here is that the path we are on no longer works.

This is the time for a legislative reality check ... and change. Either HB 194 or HB 87 offer our state that opportunity.

HB 194, in addition to shifting tuition authority, would also bring such changes as allowing higher tuition for more expensive majors and impose tuition and fees on a per-credit-hour basis. HB 87 primarily only addresses the matter of legislative authority over tuition increases being moved to the college management boards. HB 87 is currently in the House Committee on Civil Law and Procedure.

Even Gov. Jindal has expressed support of the idea of tuition flexibility for colleges as long as the boards are willing to accept performance standards and increased accountability from the Legislature. As he pointed out earlier this year, it's a "good dynamic for our state, our students and our universities."

While no one likes the idea of tuition increases, the truth is without the ability to nimbly set them at levels that work best, Louisiana's higher education system will be sentenced to lag behind a market that demands high quality.

To quote a recent commentary by Barry Erwin, president of the Council for a Better Louisiana: "Cheap tuition at a crummy school is not exactly a bargain. The last thing we need is for Louisiana to become a state that's home to a lot of crummy schools."

Louisianans don't want that. Neither should our Legislature.

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PATRICK HARRISON
SBBA chair