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LOUISIANA HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE STATE BUDGET: IRRESISTIBLE FORCE MEETS IMMOVABLE OBJECT

Edward J. O'Boyle, Ph.D.

Mayo Research Institute

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The heated public dialogue in Baton Rouge today regarding the State budget for FY 2010 in which Governor Jindal called for massive cuts in expenditures in order to bring the budget into balance has one important and desirable outcome. It forces the citizens of Louisiana through their elected representatives to re-examine their values and align the State's financial resources to those values. The current budget crisis in which there are deeply entrenched forces, one calling for higher taxes to maintain funding levels, the other insisting on spending cuts to achieve the necessary balanced budget, means that the budget in effect has become the immovable object..

The public universities in the State which operate on the premise that more always is better -- more faculty, staff, enrollment, facilities, administrators, land, equipment, programs -- are the irresistible force. Since the public universities are not constitutionally protected from cuts in State funding, it is essential to re-examine the values associated with higher education and match them as best as possible to the State's available financial resources.

The collision of the irresistible force with the immovable object raises the following kinds of questions regarding the premise that more always is better.

Does an expensive new entrance to the campus make it better?

Does new carpeting in faculty offices make it better?

Does additional parking on campus make it better?

Does replacing dormitories with university-operated apartment complexes make it better?

Does buying more land to erect new classroom buildings with bigger lecture halls to accommodate larger class sizes make it better?

When the irresistible force of the public university system smashes into the immovable object of the State budget important issues are raised.

How does one judge the performance of university and its students? Entrance exam scores? Success in achieving/retaining accreditation? Enrollment? Graduation rates? Successful complete of board exams such as nursing? Acceptance in graduate school or professional

school? Job placement? Scores on standardized exams in the student's major field of study on completion of the degree program? Development of new graduate degree programs?

Ultimately, how does one measure the *value added* by the university to the student's realization of his/her full potential? Does the student who performs well indicate the effectiveness of the university or a student who is long on talent and well motivated? Conversely does the student who performs poorly reflect the ineffectiveness of the university or a student who is short on talent or poorly motivated?

Here's a novel idea. How about a public university focused strictly on undergraduate instruction, where students are mentored throughout their course of studies ideally by a faculty who share the same on-campus living quarters. Where every student is challenged to study rhetoric, literature, philosophy, history, natural science, and languages in addition to their chosen major field of study. Where they are required to write a senior thesis in their major. Where no student graduates bragging that "I never had to crack a book."

Where the university actually provides the full range of courses necessary for competency in every major field of study offered such that students are not forced to substitute courses from outside their major because the university's budget cannot support the advanced courses necessary to complete their major. Where faculty performance evaluation depends importantly on their commitment to mentoring students. Where the senior theses are double-blind reviewed by outside specialists to assure that the faculty is making appropriate demands on students.

Such a specialized public university would do at the higher education level what the Louisiana School for Math, Science, and the Arts in Natchitoches does at the secondary level.

A final word to the Louisiana Legislature. The university justifies its budget requirements in part on the basis of its role as an engine of economic development, and rightly so. Each one, however, should be expected to present hard evidence as to the return to economic development from the taxpayer dollars in its overall budget. Does that return compare favorably with the returns from other public expenditures on, for example, highway construction and repair, health care, pollution abatement, water conservation? Finally, is the return on the economic development dollars spent through public enterprises sufficiently high or absolutely necessary so as to deny the State's taxpaying residents and businesses opportunities to invest those dollars in their own personal development and the growth of their businesses?

Edward J. O'Boyle is Senior Research Associate with Mayo Research Institute.
He completed his doctorate in economics at Saint Louis University in 1972.

Mayo Research Institute
Offices in Lake Charles, New Orleans, and West Monroe
www.mayoresearch.org cell: 318-381-4002 edoboyle@earthlink.net
