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Baton Rouge, Louisiana

### LSU SELECTION CONTROVERSY SIDESTEPS MORE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEMS

For weeks, the LSU Board of Supervisors has been embroiled in a controversy over the selection of a new president for the LSU system. Rumors have been flying for months that incumbent head William Jenkins was being pushed aside by a handful of the present Board with his successor already handpicked.

In a recent special session of the Louisiana Legislature, questions were raised about the process, and a resolution was unanimously passed urging “an open, above-board process” in picking any successor.

But here is a more fundamental question. Are major financial and philosophical issues that determine the long-term growth and success of any major state university being sidestepped, as the Board becomes embroiled in personality issues? Maybe so.

Here are some of the things the LSU Board should be talking about, but you have not seen on its agenda.

First, endowments – LSU could well have the lowest endowment of any major college of its size in the country. As much as 15 percent of the total amounts spent by major universities to cover costs can often come from its endowment. Income is build up over a number of years by actively encouraging alumni to make regular contributions to a university fund. Successful college endowments grow through investments and are a significant income source for any major university in the country. Not so at LSU.

As you would expect, the nation’s top-rated universities also have the highest endowments. Harvard leads the country with an endowment approaching \$26 billion a year. That’s some 15 percent higher than last year. A number of state universities have endowments that are significantly above \$1 billion. My alma mater, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has topped the \$1.5 billion level gaining some 13 percent in one year on investments of new funds into the endowment.

How about the Southeast Conference? The University of Florida comes in strongly at almost \$850 million with a 14 percent gain in the last year alone. The University of Alabama has an endowment approaching \$800 million. The University of Tennessee system is now at \$720 million. How about our backwards friends up in Arkansas to the north? \$700 million endowment. The University of Kentucky? \$580 million. The University of Georgia comes in at almost \$520 million. Any number of smaller southern schools is above this level. So where’s LSU? Just topping the \$500 million mark with only a 9.7 percent rise in income within the last year, one of the lowest percentage increases in the country.

Former LSU Board of Supervisors chairman Bernie Boudreaux urged the Legislature last month to give more funding to LSU. He stated flat out: “Our only sources of income are from tuition charged and funds the university receives from the Legislature.” How true, and how disappointing. A strong endowment should be a major “third source” of income for any university that aspires to be a flagship and make a significant difference in its self funding effort. When it comes to developing the endowment potential, LSU has, simply put, been a failure.

Rarely a week goes by when Louisiana papers are not filled with some exploit of a successful LSU graduate, both in the business world as well as the field of sports. Yet it is hard to point to any major effort encouraging these same individuals to be major benefactors to a university that gave them a foundation to be successful in the first place. What a missed opportunity.

**NATIONAL RANKINGS** – a few months ago, *US News and World Report* published their annual guide to the nation’s top schools. One would assume that any college that aspires to be a flagship institution and a major university of higher learning would fight to make the nation’s top 100. Tulane University in New Orleans came in at 43. A number of SEC schools are in the top 100. The University of Florida made it in at number 50, Georgia listed at number 58, and both Auburn University and the University of Tennessee tied for 85<sup>th</sup>. The University of Alabama was listed at number 104, and number 109 was University of South Carolina. No LSU mentioned anywhere on the list.

You would have assumed that some member of the Board of Supervisors would have opened up the magazine, and raised a few questions. But nowhere was heard a discouraging word.

**THE SMART FINAL FOUR** – March Madness has begun and you won’t find a more diehard LSU fan cheering on the Tigers than me. I have had front row seats at Pete’s Palace for years. But have you noticed, year after year, the same teams are always in that “final number” moving towards the championship game. It’s always Duke, Michigan State, Kansas, and Syracuse. Year after year, these teams seem to always be there. What’s the one thing they have in common? They all have a graduation rate of their players exceeding 60 percent. Simply put, there seems to be a correlation between brains and brawn.

I have the single honor of being Dean Smith’s first recruit at the University of North Carolina. (Now don’t get excited, I wasn’t that much of a basketball player, and didn’t last long.) I remember Coach Smith saying that if he had two solid athletes, with one being a little smarter, but the other being a little more athletic, he would go for the brains. His point was that being smart enough to recognize options on the field or on the court can often make a difference between success and failure.

Coach Nick Saban on the LSU football field seemed to recognize this point, and built a program based on some savvy football players. But if you want to be there year in and year out, academic success is obviously an important component. I’m sure Athletic Director, Skip Bertman would argue, with some justification, that Louisiana recruits heavily from the state and that our kids are getting whatever level of education that is being taught in local schools. Good point and a whole different issue. All I’m doing here is pointing out what the facts show. Better academics produce better athletes.

A good choice for the next university system president is extremely important. Lots of time and discussion should take place in filling this position. It just would be refreshing to see a concerned Board of Supervisors rising to the occasion and asking some tough questions of administrators who ought to be held accountable for these annual surveys that rightly put LSU towards the bottom.

The track record so far has been questionable. Maybe there is a courageous Board member who will put some of these items on the agenda. And Governor Blanco will soon have here chance to make a difference. She has six picks to the Board coming up in the months to come.

It would be refreshing to hear more analysis of the rankings at the academic level, and less debate about an increase in the cost of your football tickets. We shall see.

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*“However beautiful the strategy,  
You should occasionally look at the results.”*

- Winston Churchill

Peace and Justice.

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Jim Brown’s weekly column appears each Thursday here at Politicsla.com, and in a number of newspapers throughout the State of Louisiana. You can read Jim’s Blog, and take his weekly poll, plus ready his columns going back to the fall of 2002 by going to his own website at <http://www.jimbrownla.com>.

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