

Colleges are once again reeling from budget cuts

By Mary Nash-Wood
mnwood@shreveporttimes.com

Budget cuts are now commonplace for Louisiana's higher education institutions, but it doesn't make them any easier to handle. And for northwest Louisiana colleges and universities, the latest round of cuts packs a punch.

For the fifth year in a row, the state's fiscal crisis has reared its ugly head, and higher education is expected to receive about \$96.5 million less in state funding than the previous year — including roughly \$19 million less for local institutions.

However, there are signs of hope. The Legislature for the first time approved \$40 million in one-time monies to be distributed among the universities, but those disbursements are not accounted for in Board of Regents figures.

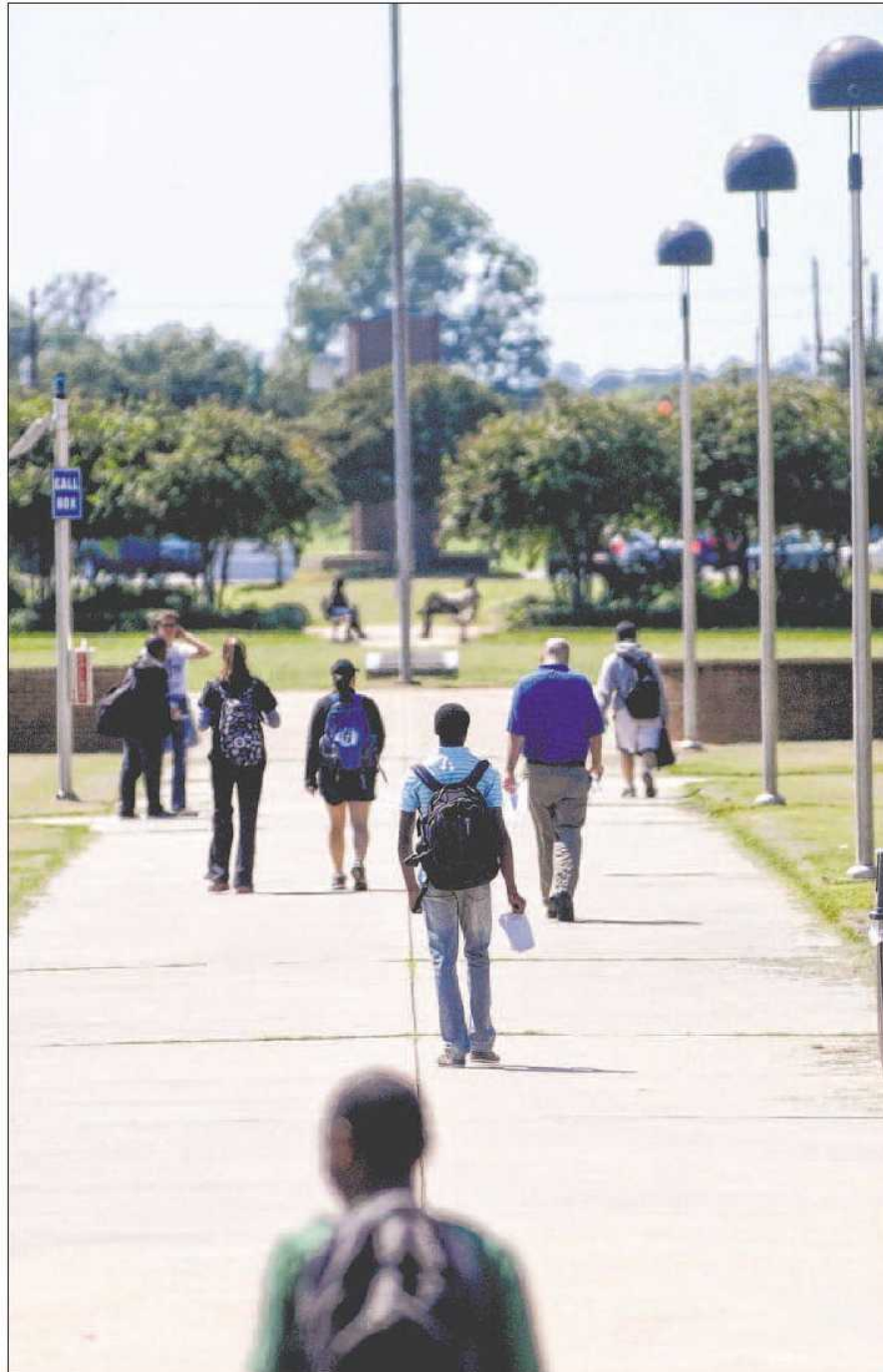
No school in the state will be hit harder than LSU-Shreveport, according to data provided by the Board of Regents. The school is scheduled to be cut 25 percent from where it was this time last year.

"Saying it's hard is only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak," Chancellor Paul Sisson said. "We've seen our work force cut by 20 percent and had to fight to maintain the degree programs we offer, and it just gets more difficult with each passing year."

As the campus works to implement new degrees, including its first doctorate in education leadership, Sisson said the cuts tie the hands of schools attempting to progress. Lack of funding also leaves staff members teaching additional classes.

Luckily for LSUS, Sisson said the LSU System is addressing the school's needs and is already working to restore some funding.

"By no means are we going to be in a great position, but I think the LSU System is working to ease the cuts as much as possible," Sisson said.



Students walk across the LSU-Shreveport campus. The school is scheduled to see more budget cuts this year. FILE/THE TIMES

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Like many schools, LSUS will see a tuition increase this year to offset costs. Statewide, the average increase for in-state students will be \$546 — bringing tuition to an average of \$6,103 annually.

Louisiana Tech University also will increase tuition this year to recoup about \$6.4 million of its \$8.5 million anticipated cut — a nearly 24 percent decrease from July 2012. Joe Thomas, vice president of finance, said students statewide are stepping up to the plate and in some ways are saving institutions.

“We couldn’t be where we are without our students,” Thomas said. “Not only have they taken on the tuition increases, but they’ve also willingly approved fees, which allowed the campus to grow and add technology. Our students are making all the difference where the state has left off.”

Thomas said student tuition and fee increases, in some cases, may be saving many schools from dramatic layoffs or program cuts.

But with those tuition increases comes students who opt not to attend because of cost or take out student loans to afford their education, said Johnette McCrery Magner, executive director of the Shreveport-Bossier Business Alliance for Higher

Education.

“As a nation, we’ve seen an alarming trend where student loan debt has now exceeded credit card debt, and with every tuition increase, that trend continues to gain momentum,” Magner said. “It is completely understandable in this time why institutions are looking to tuition increases to offset cuts, but it does come at a price to students.”

As for two-year colleges, Bossier Parish Community College’s initial cut at 5 percent is much less than most; however, the school’s latest allocation leaves the campus getting less per-student funding than any other school in the state. This year, BPCC will receive 39 percent in state funding compared to what it takes to educate a student. The average is 56 percent.

“For a growing campus like ours, it’s especially hard to handle,” Chancellor Jim Henderson said. “I appreciate the efforts we are seeing from legislators this year to handle the difficult budget challenges we continue to see, but this hurts us when we are growing at such a phenomenal rate.”

As for other schools in the region, Northwestern State University is expected to take a nearly 20 percent funding loss and Grambling State University a 17 percent hit. Southern University at Shreveport will have one of the lowest cuts in the state at 1.4 percent.