

# T CONVERSATIONS

## Louisiana's higher education cuts could devastate local colleges

Louisiana legislators are scared right now. They should be and so should we.

In less than two weeks, the governor is expected to submit an executive budget that could literally wipe out higher education as we know it. This budget is expected to be so lethal, both legislators and higher education leaders say the cuts could send 16 colleges around the state into bankruptcy.

And some of those schools are in our backyard.

Last week, the governor's office reportedly told higher education leaders to plan for

years, cutting more than \$700 million over that period. This one-year cut is more than 50 percent of what was already cut over the past six years.

In preparation for these draconian cuts, Louisiana's colleges have submitted plans for what they would need to do to keep their doors open. The plans include furloughs, layoffs of thousands of faculty and staff, and the elimination of certain courses and even entire programs. One local school said they would lose 25 percent of their degree programs.

But for many administrators, their biggest fear is loss of accreditation. Cuts of this magnitude could jeopardize their ability to demonstrate to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools that they have a "sound financial base and demonstrated financial stability." Loss of accreditation is usually a death sentence for a school because their students no longer qualify for federal grants or loans.

Our colleges and universities were able to offset some of the cuts from the prior years with tuition increases, and may be forced to try to do so again, but they also recognize there is a limit to what students can and will pay. According to the Fiscal Division of the Louisiana House of Representatives, higher education tuition and fees have already risen 95 percent since Bobby Jindal became governor.

Our legislators are duly alarmed, as you would expect them to be, but they are also confronting a harsh reality: there is no easy fix. Most of the other areas of the state budget are protected from cuts by either the state consti-

tution or statute, and the state's continued use of one-time money to pay our recurring bills has left most sources drained. Factor in Gov. Jindal's insistence that any measures to save higher education be "revenue neutral," and you begin to appreciate how difficult a task it will be to restore higher education funding. Still, it simply must be done.

Many other states have recognized the harmful impact that their cuts to higher education have had on their ability to attract new businesses, and they have reversed that trend. Louisiana has not. Make no mistake, if cuts anywhere close to this magnitude are made, they will

decimate our higher education system, set back our community for decades, and our students, our professors and our businesses will look elsewhere for opportunity.

The Shreveport-Bossier Business Alliance for Higher Education believes that to transform our economy into a diverse platform for innovation and the engine of progress for our communities, now is the time to invest in our future, not to cut the muscle and bone of our university systems.

The SBBA is committed to advocating to the legislature, the governor and anyone else who will listen about the vital importance of our schools to our way of life, and we need your help. Whether you are an employer or private citizen, we need you to add your voice to the message we will send to

Baton Rouge. Go to <http://www.savelafuture.org> and sign the online petition that will be sent to all Louisiana legislators on the first day of the session. The danger is real and the consequences will be catastrophic. Our schools and our communities need your help, today.

*Johnette Magnier is executive director of the Shreveport-Bossier Business Alliance for Higher Education.*



**Johnette Magnier**

Guest Columnist

a state funding cut of \$420 million. Allow me to provide some context for what that cut would really mean:

» The proposed cut is 2.5 times more than this year's

entire state funding for Louisiana Tech, Northwestern, Grambling, University of Louisiana Monroe, LSU Health Sciences Center – Shreveport, Louisiana State University Shreveport, Bossier Parish Community College, Southern University Shreveport, and Northwest Louisiana Technical College combined.

» According to Higher Education Commissioner Dr. Joseph Rallo, the current state higher education budget is \$720 million, so a cut of \$420 million would be approximately a 60 percent cut in state funding for all of Louisiana higher education.

» Already, Louisiana leads the nation in cuts to higher education over the past six