

Positive signs point to growth for LSUHSC-Shreveport

LSUHSC

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When you review the early history of the LSU Health Sciences Center in Shreveport, it reads like the biblical story of David and Goliath. Although the idea for the school was first conceived in 1950, the medical school did not welcome its first students until 1969 – almost 20 years later – because a handful of powerful people thwarted the attempt repeatedly.

But it stands in Shreveport today because of a group of indefatigable local visionaries who never gave up on their idea.

The LSU Health Sciences Center in Shreveport comprised of the LSU Medical, Graduate and School of Allied Health Professions, is one of only 141 medical schools in the nation. It is one of the largest employers in our community and has not only trained more than half of the physicians practicing in Northwest Louisiana but medical professionals in practice across the state and around the country. LSUHSC-S has had a tremendous impact on the economic, civic and intellectual life of this community for more than 40 years. But, as we look to the future it is important to remember further growing our medical school in Shreveport will continue to take vision, leadership and a concerted community effort.

The early years were not the only hard years for LSUHSC-S. As those working at the school will tell you, the last eight years have been among the most challenging as well, due in large part to Gov. Bobby Jindal's policies which have taken a toll on higher education and health care organizations across the state.

Between 2008 and 2014, Jindal cut state funding of higher education by 43 percent, which was the second largest percentage cut by a state during that period. If you look at spending per pupil, Jindal's cuts led the nation as the largest with a reduction of \$5,000 per student. During this period Jindal also privatized all of the state's public hospitals and forced a breakup of the unique partnership between the medical school and the public

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The LSU Health Sciences Center in Shreveport is one of the largest employers in northwest Louisiana.

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LSU hospitals in Shreveport and Monroe often referred to as the “Shreveport model”.

The dissolution of the decades-long, highly effective model - that was forced to take place over just a matter of months – was tumultuous, and presented its own set of challenges, especially fiscal, to the school and its new private partner.

But these fiscal challenges have not gone unrecognized by local organizations, such as the Shreveport-Bossier Business Alliance for Higher Education. “From the inception of the SBBA in 2012, we have been focused on the needs of the LSU Health Sciences Center, and whenever we’ve sought help on the school’s behalf, business leaders and organizations gladly step up,” said Patrick Harrison, founding Board Chairman of the SBBA. “You don’t have to sell the value of the medical school. Everyone here understands how important it is to the fabric of our community.” As we enter the New Year, we at the SBBA see some changes on the horizon that we believe could be promising, positive developments for LSUHSC-Shreveport.

To begin, newly-elected Gov. John Bel Edwards is a major proponent of restoring much of the state money stripped from higher education during the Jindal administration.

During a speech at the annual meeting of the Council for a Better Louisiana Edwards said the number one reason he ran for Governor was his concern over cuts to higher education. Although he has not presented a target number for this year, Edwards has said that over the next four years, he would like to increase state funding so that it covers 50 percent of college budgets. Currently state funds are much closer to covering just one-third of college costs. Edwards is planning to call a special session in February to address the so called “structural problems” with the budget which forced the recent unprecedented cuts to higher education. With the exception of higher education and health care, almost all other areas of the budget are protected from cuts in spending, either by the constitution or statute. A goal of this special session will be to address some of these statutes so future spending cuts can be spread across more areas of the budget. “This special session has the potential to be a game changer by giving legislators more cost cutting options, if they have the resolve to make tough decisions and address one of the primary causes of our structural budget deficits – statutorily protected spending,” said Robert Dean, board chairman of the Greater Shreveport Chamber of Commerce. “It’s way past time for a comprehensive plan that protects education and private sector jobs.”

In addition to the state’s fiscal challenges, currently 87 percent of Louisiana’s parishes have a health care worker shortage. In response to the fiscal challenges, Edwards and legislators are laying the groundwork to expand Medicaid coverage in Louisiana under the Affordable Care Act to help close the current healthcare funding gap. As this moves forward, policymakers and higher education system leaders are anticipating our current shortage of primary care physicians will become exacerbated when 500,000 people, who were previously uninsured in Louisiana, become eligible for Medicaid.

To address this increasingly critical healthcare workforce shortage, it is more important than ever Louisiana produce more primary care physicians, physician assistants and nurse practitioners. To do so will require growing the number of graduates from our medical schools, schools of allied health, and nursing schools.

“This is not just a problem for our region, it is a statewide problem, and one we cannot ignore,” said Scott Martinez, North Louisiana Economic Partnership president.

LSU leadership recognizes the importance of LSUHSC-S in addressing this growing need. During the most recent LSU Board of Supervisors meeting, LSU president F. King Alexander referenced the health care worker shortage, and indicated it was best addressed by growing the two LSU medical schools we have, rather than starting new schools. While community leaders in both Lafayette and Baton Rouge have expressed a desire for new, independent schools in their regions, LSU’s preference is to expand branch campuses of its existing schools to meet these needs.

Alexander also has been emphatic in his insistence that Shreveport’s medical school is staying in Shreveport.

The departure this month of LSUHSCShreveport chancellor Dr. Robert Barish, after six years in Shreveport, means the school soon will have new leadership. Dr. Alexander has also publicly stated that he intends to conduct a national search, beginning after the first of the year, for a new leader, and that leader will carry the title of chancellor.

Because of the developments outlined above, we believe LSUHSC-S is poised for growth and increased stability. We at the SBBA look forward to supporting LSU’s search to find the best possible candidate to lead our school. In the coming months, LSUHSC-S will need all of the community, and the leaders living among us right now, to continue to champion and advocate for this unique institution, this jewel in our crown. As we move forward, we ask you to remain steadfast in your support for our school, understanding that with your help, better times will be ahead.