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HIGHER EDUCATION IS LIKE A TEENAGE MALE: BOTH HAVE INSATIABLE APPETITES

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The precipitous drop in the price of oil once again is creating a crisis in Louisiana. On the revenue side, the State budget depends heavily on royalties paid on the oil produced in Louisiana. The lower the price, the smaller the royalty revenues. On the expenditure side, the hands of Louisiana officials are tied as to where cuts can be made, with the burden falling mostly on health care and higher education.

Advocates and lobbyists for both constituencies predictably will argue that all of the fat has been trimmed from their operating budgets and that further cuts seriously threaten their ability to offer essential services to the public. In the following, we focus entirely on higher education.

Higher education is expensive for several reasons. First, American culture insists that every youngster should have access to a college education. However, many 18 year olds are not able to function effectively at the college level and have to be accommodated in various ways. Open enrollment and low admission standards get them into college and grade inflation, along with easy courses like bowling and ballroom dancing, helps keep them there. Other help for struggling students is available at on-campus counseling centers and through administrative offices that specialize in retention.

Spending on those who are not ready for college drives up operating costs with little or no return to the taxpayer. For all the good that it does for capable students TOPS enables some of those who are not good candidates for a college education to enroll and attend. Enrollment and retention matter.

Second, to compete successfully for students colleges and universities are systematically replacing dormitories with apartments, and adding or upgrading sports and wellness centers. Comfort and conditioning matter.

Third, a campus that has grown haphazardly over the years requires serious reconstruction in terms of entrance archways, quadrangle, clock tower, trees, shrubs, and flower beds, fountains, ornamental fencing, lighting, benches, dedicated brick walkways, all of which drive up operating costs. Appearances matter.

Fourth, many colleges and universities understand the importance of successful athletic programs, and actively pursue costly program upgrades in terms of recruitment and facilities. Winning programs in football and men's basketball draw tens of thousands of fans and lead in some cases to participation in generous television revenues. Consider Saturday night in the fall at Death Valley. Entertainment matters.

Fifth, university administrators very often are smitten by the promise of enhancing the institution's reputation by adding cutting-edge programs. What's an engineering school without an advanced-degree program in biosystems engineering? A business school without a business incubator or entrepreneurship center? A school of nursing without a doctoral degree program? A school of physical and biological sciences without state-of-the-art lab facilities? Colleges and universities are driven inexorably in the direction of academic program expansion. Reputation matters.

Sixth, cities and towns across the State are eager to host and vigorously support a college or university campus because they know that those institutions are engines of job growth and income without the nasty side-effects of environmental contamination. Development matters.

Graduate degree courses typically are taught by faculty with doctoral degrees, making those courses very expensive especially when they have small enrollments. To deal with the stress on the budget undergraduate courses, with very large enrollments, often are taught by low-paid graduate students for whom English may not be their native tongue. Parents expect and pay for a quality education for their sons and daughters who are taught by graduate students who in turn free up doctoral-degree faculty to teach those very same graduate students and direct their research. One reason that undergraduate students are not completing their degree programs in four years is that the undergraduate courses required for graduation are offered less frequently, perhaps once a year instead of two or three times a year.

Further, as more and more doctoral-degree faculty are needed to cover graduate-degree courses, faculty salaries rise in order to recruit and retain that faculty leading over time to higher salaries for the department heads and deans who supervise them. Teaching loads are reduced to allow that privileged faculty time to complete the research needed to get published in peer-reviewed journals. Ironically, a faculty member with an impressive publication record becomes much sought after by other colleges and universities.

Many academic programs are subject to accreditation from outside organizations in which course content, course sequencing, student qualifications, and faculty credentials are scrutinized. It's a real challenge to operate accredited programs on the cheap and it's downright embarrassing to lose accreditation. Accreditation matters.

Common sense tells us that the State cannot continue to finance a system of higher education that promises more than it can reasonably deliver. Limits are necessary, especially on approval for new degree programs, every one of which adds to operating costs. Under this kind of regime, some programs would be dropped and some Louisiana

undergraduates would have to leave the State to pursue their desired graduate degree. However, the vast constituencies for which enrollment and retention, comfort and conditioning, appearances, entertainment, reputation, development, and accreditation matter will fight to maintain State spending on higher education. Given their numbers, they are likely to prevail.

The harsh reality of Louisiana's ever-growing educational establishment is that additional taxes are necessary to feed the system, especially when the State's oil and gas business hits a bump in the road. To sell the new taxes to the public, legislators and other public officials may call them investments. Recalling what has been said about a rose, a tax by any other name is still a tax.

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