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How to create the state we deserve

Who among us believes the public discussion we're having about higher education and health-care funding is productive? It's a reflection of this difficult state budget situation, but is it really productive?

How many potential undergraduate, graduate, legal or medical students are we alarming with the prospects of shrinking higher education and health-care systems for the foreseeable future? How many professors and health-care professionals are we driving away or failing to attract? Can these groups bank their futures on a Louisiana that can't guarantee a stable source of funding for its higher education enterprise or health-care delivery system?

Funding two of government's most fundamental missions should be straightforward: How we educate young adults beyond high school, hopefully giving them the knowledge to become productive citizens, and how we provide basic health-care services to citizens in need of those services?

When Blueprint Louisiana's reform agenda was introduced in July 2007, we put forth a simple one-sentence slogan that we thought succinctly summarized our reason for being: "It's time to create the state we deserve."

That slogan was the outgrowth of a feeling expressed by several of our founding Board members: How can we build a state that will make all of our citizens proud to say, "I live in Louisiana."

We believe a vibrant higher-education system and a robust health-care community make our citizens proud of the state they live in. These elements should be part of a better Louisiana to which we aspire. That's why in this time of financial challenge, Blueprint Louisiana has urged our Legislature to explore every idea to preserve higher education and health care as best as it can for the upcoming fiscal year.

We haven't asked for the proposed funding reductions to be eliminated completely. We're not that naïve or tone-deaf to the funding realities facing the state.

We've simply asked the Legislature to consider all options, and not be constrained by politics or history. Lawmakers' only motivation should be to their constituents, not partisan politics or whoever happens to be in the governor's mansion.

We've made that request respectfully while also presenting recommendations to make higher education and health care more efficient and more responsive to the constituencies they serve.

For higher education, we've advocated for a performance-based formula to fund our institutions. We've expressed our belief that the formula can play a key role in producing a "right-sized" higher education system that's smarter, leaner and better at turning out qualified graduates that can compete and succeed in a global, knowledge-based economy.

We've also stated our preference to phase in the formula over a few years to give institutions time to thoughtfully adjust to the incentives embedded in the formula. In the out years, we believe we'll have a system that's right-sized through performance, instead of decimated by rushed and short-sighted cuts.

For health care, like many stakeholder groups in the state, we've consistently been on record for

improving access to care and the financial efficiency of care delivery for Louisiana's uninsured.

Our recommendations have focused on expanding coverage for low-income adults; redirecting state funds from underutilized charity hospitals to people; revamping LSU's health-care role; and reallocating some Disproportionate Share Hospital funding to local providers that focus on preventative and primary care. These basic concepts underpin Blueprint's call to better address Louisiana's health-care needs.

So for those wanting a plan, we've put forth several ideas. Other groups have also offered suggestions and recommendations for both overall reform and specific to the current financial challenges facing the state. We recognize that none of this is easy or simple. All we urge is careful consideration of all options, with our citizens' best interests at heart.

Robert Penn Warren said "the past is always a rebuke to the present." At this crucial time in Louisiana's history, we should not repeat the mistakes of the past.

We must press forward and fund higher education and health care as well as we can fund them, even in this challenging fiscal environment. And we should, in exchange, expect and require follow through that delivers to Louisiana a better and more efficient higher-education enterprise and health-care delivery system in the coming years.

Those two accomplishments are essential to "creating the state we deserve."

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