

COMMENTARY

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PAR CALLS FOR CENTRALIZED TECHNICAL COLLEGE SYSTEM

While the special session and a spicy trial continue to hold the limelight in Baton Rouge, a quiet power struggle for control of the 42 campuses of the Louisiana Technical College (LTC) is going on behind the scenes. When the Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS) Board selects a reorganization plan in mid-April, it will decide whether to unify administration of the college under a strong central office or continue a fragmented, feudal system of director-controlled campuses.

Voter approval of a 1998 constitutional amendment allowed the former “vo-tech schools” to become campuses of a full-fledged technical college now known as LTC. As a result, in July 1999, the technical schools were removed from the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) and placed under a new higher education management board together with a handful of community colleges. This move placed the new LCTCS board under the oversight of the Board of Regents—on the same footing as the LSU, Southern and University of Louisiana management boards.

The new LCTCS Board must now create a structure to administer a statewide, multi-campus technical college. Among other things, the board must set up an LTC central staff; prepare an evaluation system; determine staffing and funding allocations; and adopt a funding formula. It also must allocate functional responsibilities among the levels of organization—the central office, the campus and a possible district mechanism of some type.

Traditionally, vo-tech school directors exercised a great deal of autonomy in managing their individual schools, often with the support of local legislators and/or local elected BESE members. PAR studies over the years have decried the resulting lack of uniformity in many aspects of the schools’ operation. This was reflected in inequitable staffing and widely varying per-pupil costs which continue today.

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PAR Says, Add One

For two decades, PAR strongly recommended a systematic approach to all aspects of vo-tech school administration—structure, planning, budgeting, data management, curriculum, operating policies and program and school evaluation. When the vo-tech schools were restyled in 1995 as campuses of a new technical college system under BESE, the tradition of director-autonomy continued.

At recent meetings, the LCTCS board was presented two draft reorganization plans. One, by the central office staff, proposed strong central office control and supervision over administrative support personnel that might be used on a district basis. A counter plan, drafted by the school directors' association, proposed a stronger role for the directors who would voluntarily assign district level personnel among their campuses to achieve staffing equity.

The central office has been working with the campus directors to develop a compromise plan. The LTC directors have agreed to a set of guiding principles including the equitable allocation of resources and administrative and support staffing. Most of the schools are too small to justify a full-time position for each of the support functions such as registration, counseling, financial aid, industrial coordination and accounting. Also, per-pupil staffing levels differ by school depending on past budget inequities. One way to equalize support staff is to have some type of district staff that serve more than one campus. The initial plans differed as to who would control this mobile staff.

The LCTCS staff continues to urge the LTC campus directors toward a plan with defined responsibilities for each LTC employee, including some from each of seven districts who would report directly to the statewide LTC office. The directors, however, are pushing a compromise plan that would use existing campus staff with one director selected as leader in each of seven districts. The directors in each district would voluntarily loan personnel to meet the needs of other campuses within their district. A council of district directors would apparently advise the district leader who would then cajole cooperation. If adopted, this so-called "compromise" would look much like the fragmented, director-centric structure of the past.

In designing a new organization structure for the system of technical colleges, PAR suggests that the board apply the following general principles:

- 1. The Louisiana Technical College should be administered as a single statewide institution with multiple campuses and not as a loose confederation of individual schools.**

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PAR Says, Add Two

- 2. The organization structure should be simple with little or no intermediate level between the central office and the campuses. Any employees assigned to serve multiple campuses in a given area should report directly to the central office and not to a campus director even if they are housed at one of the campuses.**
- 3. Functional responsibilities should be clearly delineated between the central office and campus levels. Voluntary arrangements should not be relied upon to achieve inter-campus staffing equity.**
- 4. Administrative and support functions should be centralized to the greatest extent possible to maximize uniformity, conformity and optimum utilization of personnel. Current data management and communications technologies should be fully exploited.**
- 5. Campus level responsibilities should be focused primarily on instruction, external communication (e.g. with prospective employers), basic record keeping or data entry, security and plant maintenance. The central office should provide strong functional supervision over all campus level operations and in each instructional area.**

By creating a tight-knit, closely coordinated and centrally supervised administrative system for the technical college campuses, the LCTCS board can assure taxpayers that adequate training programs are provided with utmost efficiency and economy. The board must provide the central staff with the authority and staff resources it needs to transform the 42 separate campuses into a single college. These technical college campuses are too valuable a state resource not to have their full potential realized.