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Commentary

The Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana

Tulane Scholarship Reforms

Proposed changes would improve the process but the best reform is the example set by legislative leaders

Proposed legislation and related reforms by Tulane University follow several PAR recommendations and constitute a worthwhile package of changes to the college's Legislative Scholarship program. PAR's commentary on April 8, 2014, explained the facts behind the program and showed the many problems with the current process. PAR identified needed improvements to benefit the state and the students.

Senate Bill 1 by Sen. Dan Claitor, in combination with new methods employed by the university to administer the program, will expand the applicant pool to more Louisiana students and make the state more competitive in retaining top talent. The reforms could lead to greater diversity in the applicant pool and open doors to more of those with real financial need. The proposed process has transparency provisions not much different from the current system but the measures will assist the public in evaluating whether the program is being abused through conflicts of interest.

While the proposed changes are laudable, the more meaningful development is the example being set by legislative leaders who have asked separate institutions to take responsibility for selecting scholarship recipients, thereby placing the welfare of the student applicants clearly ahead of any potential self-interest of the state lawmakers. Sen. Claitor was the first to pledge the use of the Open Competition program to pick his next student. With this system, Tulane determines the recipient from a legislator's district based on various criteria, including financial need. No lawmakers have used this resource although it has been available to them for many years.

Sen. Jack Donahue has been using the Northshore Community Foundation to take charge of his selections. With a small contribution from the senator's campaign account, the Foundation conducts an independent process to choose a student from among the qualified Tulane applicants in Donahue's 11th District. The senator does not pick the winner. Other northshore legislators are welcome to use the Foundation's help.

More legislators should follow these examples. If a majority of legislators used an independent process to select recipients for these exceptionally valuable scholarship awards, then the negative image of the program would be vastly improved and students and the public would be less inclined to view the scholarship system as an insider's game. Especially as the applicant pool grows under these proposed reforms, more legislators may discover that they want to take the step of turning their selection over to an independent process. That would be the greater and more preferred type of reform.

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