

## Week of March 6

Like so often happens during times of great need, the NSU family rises to the occasion. Reatha Cox's Freshman Connectors, who had just learned their trip to North Carolina would not happen because of flooding, responded in large numbers to help prevent a neighbor's home from flooding. Football player Ryan Woehlert jumped into a kayak to assist College of Business and Technology's Adrion Knight save a boat on the Cane River that neither of them owned. Several baseball players helped clean out a threatened camp. The stories go on and on...

Our campuses will be ready to open for business as usual Monday morning, but numerous faculty, staff, and students will still be dealing with the aftermath of the historic flooding we experienced. Leah Jackson distributed a series of messages yesterday to these stakeholder groups that captures our approach during the coming days.

In Baton Rouge, the legislature returns for the 2016 Regular Session Monday. While some progress was made during the special session, we have work to do. The special session began with a ~\$930 million current year deficit and a ~\$2+ billion deficit for FY2017. After a series of budget cuts, revenue increases, and the use of one-time funds, the current year deficit is somewhere between \$30 and \$60 million (if you do not count the \$28 million non-payment of TOPS, the accounting for which is still up in the air). Next year's deficit is \$800 million or so.

While advocates for higher education and healthcare were key to narrowing the budget gaps, those two remain the most imperiled should solutions to the remaining deficit not be found. Those solutions exist, but I am not overly confident our legislators can overcome the influence of narrow special interests or pull back from the new culture of ideological partisanship. On one side, nearly every discussion of rolling back one of the nation's most generous and complex systems of tax waivers and exemptions was met with wailing and gnashing of teeth. The other side seemed to believe asking consumers to pay an extra \$10 on a \$1000 purchase is fine, but asking them to pay \$12.50 on that purchase is morally repugnant. Both sides were unwavering, so we find ourselves with several more weeks of uncertainty.

Governor Edwards has said solving our chronic state budget challenges will

require shared sacrifice. Perhaps the governor is correct that cutting \$800 million from next year's budget will prompt both sides to participate with more earnestness.

We will continue to push the higher education apparatus in Baton Rouge to adopt effective messaging. Our story is a compelling one:

We know that the vast majority of job opportunities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century require a college education. We also know Louisiana ranks 48<sup>th</sup> in educational attainment. If we continue to disinvest in our students, we will ensure another generation of missed opportunity.

In 2008, for the first time in our history, Louisiana reached the Southern Region Education Board average in higher education funding per student. Since then, our investment in higher education has plummeted. Louisiana now ranks 16<sup>th</sup> out of 16 southern states in funding per student. The red herrings about too many universities, too many boards, too much duplication, etc., cannot change the fact that the 15<sup>th</sup> ranked southern state funds each student by \$1200 more than Louisiana.

Higher education remains the best way to achieve economic competitiveness for employers and economic viability for citizens. It is the path to escape generational poverty. It benefits society at both the individual and collective level.

In my opinion, the higher education enterprise erred in arguing defensively against cuts instead of aggressively advocating based on the fruits of our work. We will do everything we can to ensure higher education is prioritized in the regular session. Meanwhile, we at NSU will continue to build toward our vision of becoming that premier regional university.

### The Week

Monday morning, we conducted our monthly Leadership Team meeting. In addition to hearing updates from each area of the operation, we talked about the strategic planning process, clarifying this will not be a "check the box" effort to say we have a strategic plan. Rather, it will be a true plan of action that will lead us through the next five years. Finally, we talked about how every transaction (formal or informal) with a student, potential

student, or other stakeholder is a moment of truth. We need to treat each as if our future depended on it.

After the meeting, I headed to Baton Rouge. We had made significant progress toward budget stabilization in the prior days, but word came that the solutions were unraveling. Our Natchitoches state representative, Kenny Cox, did successfully pass an increase in the alcohol tax. It was the first increase since 1948, but ran into significant opposition from the industry's lobbyists. I know those of you who drink beer will suffer from that extra 3 cents or so on each bottle come April 1, but please remember you are doing it for the greater good...

I visited with Senate President Pro Tempore Gerald Long in his office on several matters concerning NSU, including the budget. We also visited with representatives from a local employer on scholarship opportunities and other ways the employer can support us.

By the end of the day, higher education was facing a ~\$77 million cut (including the nonpayment of TOPS). We still lacked a clear plan to eliminate that cut.

Tuesday morning, I substitute taught for Tonia. Just FYI, I will happily substitute for any faculty member who goes on a beach trip...as long as I am married to said faculty member...

The departmental visits continued, starting with Business Affairs in St. Denis Hall. We talked about the monumental accomplishment of completing the Banner transition. I got some skeptical looks when I suggested they would grow to love the system in time. We talked about the importance of growth. I received some great recruiting tips. We also clarified the potential size of the Fall 2016 freshman class. There is no reason this class will not be 300-400 students larger than last year. It could potentially be more than that.

Research and Sponsored Programs was next. It took me just a moment to find them in their new digs on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of TEC. Carla Howell and Alysia Jones have done a fabulous job of prospecting funding opportunities and assisting faculty in the pursuit of grants. I was pleased to hear Carla describe an increased interest in grant development from our faculty.

Downstairs with Teaching, Leadership, and Counseling, we started with a quick object lesson on effective communication. I had just received a note from a student inquiring as to why we would cancel classes “regardless of whether(sic).” Wouldn’t we only close if we had to? The student’s inquiry was a response to a message that read “regardless of whether classes are canceled...” The visit continued with a discussion of the state budget. We talked about progress in early childhood education and touched on the successes in the literacy intervention with Natchitoches Parish Schools.

After lunch, Assistant Volleyball Coach Collin Wallace (a graduate student in health and human performance) brought volleyball recruit Hannah Brister and her mother Scottie by to visit. The Bristers are from Napoleonville. Hannah is interested in becoming a physical therapist.

Later, I visited with Bruce Dyjack and his team in the campus post office. He showed me equipment that I do not understand, but it seemed kind of cool. He and his team have a true consumer focus, and they are a real asset to our students.

That afternoon, Margaret Kilcoyne, Curtis Penrod, Begona Perez-Mira, Jerry Pierce, Cole Gentry, and Darlene Williams met with me to discuss promoting our post-baccalaureate certificates. I firmly believe we have very marketable offerings that have extraordinary growth potential. We need a sound strategy to market them, and we are getting very close to having one.

Wednesday, I headed back to Baton Rouge for the last day of the special session. It was a frustrating day. Alternating conversations centered on how a 1.25% sales tax increase was our only solution and how a 1.25% sales tax increase would never pass. Still, there was reason for optimism. Senator Long and I talked about the possibilities for the day. It looked like we could get the current year deficit to near \$0 or at least to a manageable level. For next year, we hoped to get close to the \$250 million mark. Remember, the deficit is dependent upon the revenue forecast. That forecast has a number of variables. For example, the price of oil in the forecast is set at \$30 per barrel. Today, the price is close to \$40. Each dollar in the price generates ~\$12 million in the state general fund.

After numerous conversations with various legislators, it became apparent any solution would come in the last minutes. Those solutions came in a

flurry of bills that were voted on, sent to conference, and passed with little or no time to read or analyze. At the end of the day, we ended up with a current year deficit somewhere between \$30-60 million and a FY2017 deficit in the neighborhood of \$800 million. Both were unnecessary. Both create challenges. Both can be addressed with minimal impact on higher education if our legislators do what is right for Louisiana.

Please contact me with any questions, comments, or concerns.