

Week of April 3

The release of the executive budget was expected this week, but will instead happen Tuesday. We expect to see a budget that includes a 10-12% cut to the state budget for higher education and a much larger reduction to funding for TOPS. Please remember these reductions are based on anticipated revenue for next year and do not include any contingency funding for increases in revenue that may occur in a second special session. Other variables, like the findings from the Revenue Estimating Conference, the price of oil, and cuts or reconfigurations to other areas of the budget are all in play. We should expect some uncertainty with bits of good news and bad news until June. Our best approach is to focus on retaining our existing students and closing the deal on a promising freshman class.

On Tuesday of this week, you received a message from the Chair of the Strategic Budgeting Committee, Dr. Ben Rushing. I hope you will review the information carefully. Dr. Rushing and the committee have developed what I believe will be a robust, transparent approach to ensuring we deploy our resources in an effective manner. Our ability to achieve our strategic intents, even in this prolonged period of scarcity, will be greatly enhanced through the approach the committee developed. I am grateful to them all for their exemplary work. As we move further away from dependency on the state and closer to self-sufficiency, we will adjust appropriately, but the framework and principles will remain.

The Week

We held our monthly Leadership Team meeting Monday morning. In addition to receiving updates from each area of the university, we talked about our continuing work to ensure process does not become governance. We simply cannot accept a business practice, administrative process, interpretation of a rule, or simply the desire to remain comfortable if it creates a barrier for a student, inhibits responsiveness to an employer, negatively impacts student life, or detracts from our academic mission.

Following the meeting, the Student Government Association hosted a lunch with the Leadership Team. Students were invited to participate in small roundtable discussions with university leaders. At my table, we talked about academic majors and favorite foods.

Tuesday, I traveled to Baton Rouge for the House Appropriations Higher Education Subcommittee hearing. The Commissioner of Higher Education and the four system heads gave overviews of their respective operations and answered questions from committee members. Members asked a number of questions about efficiencies, board diversity, and the funding formula. They also asked about “big ideas” from higher education, and lamented the fact that there seem to be none. I have to tell you this conversation is becoming increasingly frustrating. We are spending far too much time focusing on process and “administrivia.” Marginal efficiencies will not fix the \$2.8 billion deficit looming five years from now. Here is a bold idea: the legislature should determine what level of investment we will make in higher education, then get out of the way while we craft an enterprise that delivers the optimum return on that investment in the form of access to transformative, empowering education for students and value for taxpayers.

Back in Natchitoches Tuesday evening, I was delighted to attend one of the most remarkable events I have seen on campus: a student-led discussion about “Being Black at a PWI (Primarily White Institution).” We talked about a lot of things we are doing right at NSU and a number of things we could do better. As we strive to create the optimum student experience, we must have many more conversations like this to ensure the voices of all students shape that experience.

Wednesday morning, Harriette Palmer and Chris Hynes provided an update on our Advance Program. This extraordinary summer program brings the most talented of students to our campus. In addition to being an enriching experience for young scholars, it introduces them to us!

Later Wednesday, Drake Owens, Van Erikson, and Kim Gallow provided me an overview of the Graduway Platform. This tool that provides greatly enhanced networking connectivity for our alumni and other stakeholders will launch soon.

Afterwards, Drake and I participated in a phone call with the producer of “Behind the Scenes with James Earl Jones.” This PBS program is preparing a series on higher education.

Wednesday afternoon, I traveled to Alexandria to visit with Darlene Williams and the faculty and staff of our CenLA campus. We talked about

the considerable potential for growth at the campus. Space, or at least the management of the space by external parties, is our largest challenge. The Learning Center for Rapides Parish is a great facility, but the state is not utilizing it effectively, in my humble opinion. We also talked about the concept of inclusion in our operation. While our main campus is in Natchitoches and we have a substantial presence in Shreveport, the faculty and staff in Alexandria, Marksville, and Leesville/Ft. Polk have much to offer in terms of experience and creativity. Ensuring those voices are included in our planning and execution betters the entire university.

On Thursday, I traveled back to Baton Rouge for several advocacy visits. Senate President Pro Tempore Gerald Long and I were honored to meet with Governor Edwards in the Governor's office. We talked about the capital outlay process and the governor's desire to prioritize the use of scarce resources. The deferred maintenance challenges continue to grow and our infrastructure is in dire need of investment statewide. New facilities are certainly needed, but shoring up prior investments must come first. Specific to NSU, we talked about the multi-purpose assembly center that has been in the queue for two years, Kyser Hall, Warrington Place, and our roadways. We also discussed the state budget challenge and the fragile financial condition of higher education.

Tonia joined me that afternoon for a trip to Leesville. We toured the beautifully remodeled and enhanced Leesville High School, then enjoyed dinner with the Leesville High School Quiz Bowl team. Team Co-Sponsor Donna Adams is building a solid Quiz Bowl program while helping young high schoolers prepare for the future. For the past two years, I have enjoyed attending the Vernon Parish Quiz Bowl competition. Let me tell you, the competitors are beyond impressive and carry great promise.

Friday morning, Mike Land dropped by to update me on the community garden concept and the applied microbiology degree proposal. Afterwards, I headed to KZBL to record a promo for the April 29th CASA Awareness Event.

Carl Jones, Jerry Pierce, and Drake Owens joined me on the weekly ULS conference call. System staff updated us on the status of legislative instruments related to higher education. We talked about...efficiencies...sigh...

Later Friday, Drake and I joined Mayor Posey, Tony Davis, and others at City Hall for a meeting with CPEX, a firm that specializes in community development.

After lunch, graduating student leader Chantasia Grasty came by the office for a visit. At risk of being repetitive, our future is bright!

That afternoon, I made it to Magale for the junior recital of Daniella Isabel Angulo Martinez. She did a wonderful job performing some very difficult pieces. You can catch these student recitals throughout the year, and I strongly encourage you to do so. We are often treated to amazing performances from various CAPA ensembles. Seeing the individuals who make up those ensembles in solo demonstrations of their progress and learning is really cool.

That evening, Jana Lucky and the NSU Recruiting team hosted a President's Reception for Priority Students in the Orville Hanchey Gallery. This event was rescheduled from its original date during the Great Flood of 2016. We made a final push to ensure these highly qualified students join the Class of 2020 this fall.

Saturday morning, a huge contingent from all areas of the university hosted an Org Browse for potential students prior to Spring N-Side View. Nearly 400 students and their families were treated to performances from spirit groups, theater students, and the Spirit of Northwestern. The performances were separated by testimonies from student leaders, Freshman Connectors, and Recruiting Ambassadors.

At noon, I was honored to visit briefly with the attendees of the Kappa Sigma 50th Anniversary Reunion. Over 500 alumni and active members attended festivities on campus and at various Natchitoches venues over the weekend.

After a couple of innings of Demon baseball, Tonia and I traveled to Shreveport for the 2016 Easter Seals Lily Award. Dear friends of Shreveport, North Louisiana, and NSU, John and Jane Hubbard were the honorees. We were honored to be joined by Representative Alan Seabaugh and his wife Laura (NSU Alum), and NSU Alum Mike Wilburn and his wife Devora.

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