

Let the Board of Governors Do Its Job!

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More than 2.8 million voters created the Board of Governors in November 2002 by an overwhelming popular vote. Despite opposition from Governor Jeb Bush, from members of the State Board of Education and from numerous public university presidents, voters gave a strong mandate to the establishment of university board to “achieve excellence through teaching students, advancing research and providing public service for the benefit of Florida’s citizens.”

The Constitutional amendment that they approved called for the Board to fully “operate, regulate, control, and be fully responsible for the management of the whole university system.”

Thus, a new chapter opened in the history of the state’s public universities. In truth, there have been few moments of stability for the public universities during the past three decades. During that period, they nearly tripled their enrollments in response to the state’s rapid population growth and burgeoning demand for a four-year degree.

During that same period, despite significant investments from the Legislature, public university fiscal strength can at best be characterized as yo-yo financial management – up and down, up and down. In three decades, the public universities have cut nearly \$400 million from their base budgets in response to state economic difficulties or political convenience.

Now state university presidents are faced again with minimum base budget cuts totaling \$100 million. The cuts could go much deeper – Governor Charlie Crist has recommended taking many millions more out of the university budget, a drastic 6.2-percent cut.

During this period, we have cut corners to make the public university system work and we are now beginning to pay the price. No wonder our student graduation rates are now stagnant. No wonder only one of our 11 public institutions is top ranked. No wonder we have lost our

competitiveness for out-of-state and foreign students. Few serious businesses would survive if they had to be run like a state university.

The 2002 Constitutional Amendment did not initiate much attention from decision-makers. In fact, it was not until three years later that a staff was finally dedicated to the new 17-member Board of Governors. A judge's ruling last year characterized the state's response as "neglectful," pointing to the many difficulties and roadblocks to hinder the will of the voters.

Now, five years after the amendment was approved by voters, the Board of Governors seeks a final determination of its status. Despite significant legislative initiatives to manage and operate the State University System, it is apparent to the Board that its fiduciary responsibility to quality and its responsibility to provide access to the State University System are at risk.

Without a legal determination by the courts, there will continue to be ambivalence about who sets tuition and how the system will be governed.

The Board of Governors has emphasized collaboration and partnership. However experience reveals that this collaboration will work best once there is a final determination by the courts as to how it will take place. Only then can we fully understand and honor the will of the voters in 2002. And only then do we have a chance, working side by side with the Legislature, to provide the stable financing necessary to ensure quality, access and affordability.

Only then do we have a chance to ensure that the public university education that we provide in Florida will be on a competitive level with the best public universities in the world.

We believe that our students deserve this opportunity. We intend to honor them through our work to achieve it!