Higher education is getting a little easier these days, and no one could be happier than the University of Southwestern Louisiana president, Dr. Ray Authement.

Authement is a 17-year veteran at the helm of USL, and he sees things getting better in higher education around the state because the governor and Legislature are willing to put more money into the schools of higher education.

"I think the issues are a bit tougher," Authement said. "We have been through some rather difficult years when we did not have sufficient state dollars to run this place. Obviously, it was tough. This year, at least, we are off to a good start, and it should be getting better."

Authement was president through the good years when the economy was jumping and the bad years when the bottom fell out of the oil business and the state's economy almost disappeared, and he definitely likes the good years better.

He became acting president in the summer of 1973 and was named USL's fifth permanent president in 1974. He has the longest tenure of any president in the state's higher education facilities.

Authement says the longest tenure gives him a better audience when he speaks because the other presidents from around the state know that USL has been through most of the battles they may be facing for the first time.

"They tend to listen to me more when I speak than they did in the earlier years," he said. "But it does not add any money or any power to the position. It's simply that I have been here so long that my experience allows me to help people who may be having problems."

Authement has to be aware of what is happening every day on what is obviously a big campus that is sprawled out over the central and western parts of the city and a $1 million farm that flourishes in Iberia Parish.

USL got the big farm at Cade when it started giving up farm land for such projects as Cajun Field, the Athletic Complex, the Cajundome and University Medical Center (Lafayette Charity Hospital).

Athletics have played a big part in Authement's presidency, and he, more than any other president in the state, is more involved in the running of the athletic department.

Some two weeks after he became acting president on July 26, 1973, the NCAA gave the USL basketball team what is equivalent to the modern day "death penalty." The Cajun basketball program was suspended for two years.

"Obviously, USL had some dark days," the 61-year-old native of Chauvin said. "My job was to take the program and build it to a position of respect and excellence, and I have worked very hard doing that. We've had no problems with the NCAA or any other governing groups since I have become president."

The biggest stir in sports came in 1982 when the College Football Association (CFA) became powerful in the NCAA and forced the membership to divide Division I into Division I-A and I-AA. Division I-A was set up for the big boys, the CFA members, but several schools that had had notions of moving up made the move.

And USL was one of them.

Authement pushed the move, which meant the school would have to pull out of the Southland Conference.

Just LSU, Tulane and USL were Division 1-A, and USL being in the group caused a bit of jealousy around the state.

"I think people may have looked at us with jaundiced eyes," Authement said. "Some of them were amazed that we had done it and were hoping that we would not succeed."

Authement said the move has helped USL, a statement evidenced by Alabama's visit to Cajun Field last Saturday for a football game. He said the school is now spending less appropriated dollars on athletics.

As strongly as he has pushed athletics, Authement has been just as adamant on academic matters.

USL was considered as one of the top three computer schools in the nation along with Stanford and MIT in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The money crunch in 1983 sort of slowed the computer center down a little, but it is back flourishing as well as it ever was.

"The Center for Advanced Computer Studies is world recognized, and the biology department is coming on very strongly at this particular time, especially with the Wetlands Center here and the potential of a Fisheries Research Center," the former mathematics professor said.

Authement also cites areas he calls outcrops from the Computer Center such as the Plastics Center, the Apparels Manufacturing Center and the Productivity Center.

"All those centers are financed by major corporations around the country, and we have a uniqueness about those operations that no one can really duplicate nationwide," Authement said.

He said it was no accident that IBM chose to make USL an Alliance Support Center.

"We will be the school that teaches the other schools and the other corporations involved how to use the equipment and to advance the technology through research," Authement said.

Authement got his bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees from LSU. He has taught at LSU, McNeese State, and North Carolina in addition to USL.

USL's attendance was more than 16,000 in the good times and down to almost 15,000 in the bad times.

The enrollment is now back near the 16,000 mark, and Authement can see two things helping the good times to come back for the university.

The first is the move in the state for a one-board system that would eliminate the present four boards and then to have that board change the university's name to the University of Louisiana. With its progressive programs in place, Authement believes the name change would enhance the whole situation.

USL could have to wait a while longer on the one-board operation and the name change, but with Authement behind them, the chances are good that they will become a reality.

After all, his record shows that he completes what he goes after, and that has been good for the university, the city of Lafayette, Acadiana and the state.