The Board of Regents decided only last month to take a grassroots approach to creating a community college system in Louisiana, and state lawmakers already are making hay with the approach by proposing six new two-year colleges.

But at least one higher education official said the regents' plan is going haywire because it doesn't provide a comprehensive plan for a community college system.

James Caillier, the president of the state’s community college system, said the regents' plan to let individual communities come forward with plans for community colleges has “opened Pandora’s box.”

The problem is that legislators are “going in different directions” with community college proposals, Caillier said.

For instance, Acadiana lawmakers have unveiled a proposal to convert technical schools in Lafayette, New Iberia and...
opelousas into community colleges.

And, Sen. Louis Lambert, D-Prairieville, has filed SCR55, proposing a "community college in Ascension Parish that would not be linked to any existing technical school.

In SCR26, Sen. Francis Heitmeier, D-New Orleans, has proposed creation of a new community college for the New Orleans West Bank by merging a technical school and a branch campus of Delgado Community College.

Sen. Jay Dardenne, R-Baton Rouge, has filed SB1206 to create a community college in Baton Rouge to fulfill part of the recent settlement in the long-running federal lawsuit over the desegregation of the state's public colleges.

Dardenne's bill does not specify how the Baton Rouge community college is to be developed, except to echo the settlement requirement that it be placed under the joint control of the LSU and Southern University boards of supervisors.

The legislative proposals cover a wide spectrum of approaches, but Caillier said the biggest problem is that some areas of the state may be left with no community colleges at all.

There's also a danger of creating a community college where one is not needed, Caillier said.

"I would have liked to have seen a more organized approach that started with each one of the metropolitan areas, such as Lafayette, Monroe and Lake Charles," Caillier said.

"State Higher Education Commissioner Larry Crain said the regents' community plan is intended to keep turf battles out of the process.

"It's a piecemeal approach, but if we approach it any other way, it's going to die on the vine," Crain said.

"Crain said a special task force appointed last year to 'mess with' the grassroots approach will allow turf battles dealing with vo-techs to be fought on the local level.

"By the time the proposals get to Board of Regents, the political battles will have already been fought," Tremblay said.

Bertrand said a community college can have no more than 20 percent of its enrollment in vocational courses in order to get accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

"Nunez is held up as a shining example, but they're teaching a welding course down there that only has three students in it," Bertrand said.

The bottom line, according to Bertrand, is that the purpose of a vocational technical institute is different from a community college.

"The majority of community colleges are preparing students to transfer to a four-year university," Bertrand said.

Bertrand said a community college can have no more than 20 percent of its enrollment in vocational courses in order to get accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

"Bertrand noted one of the proposals before the Legislature is to convert Lafayette Regional Technical Institute to a community college even though the school is full and has a waiting list.

Larry Tremblay, the regents' assistant higher education commissioner for planning and research, said the grassroots approach will allow turf battles dealing with vo-techs to be fought on the local level.

"By the time the proposals get to Board of Regents, the political battles will have already been fought," Tremblay said.

"The plan calls for at least one community college in each of the state's eight planning districts.

"But, even if all six proposals now pending in the Legislature are approved, three of the eight regions will still be left without a community college.

Sen. Cecil Picard, chairman of the state Senate Education Committee, said a statewide approach to community colleges is unrealistic, given the state's political climate.

"This is Louisiana and you do what you've got to do to get the process going," said Picard, D-Maurice.

"Once you get the concept going and you have the semblance of a community college structure, then I think we can forget about piecemealing it — at some point in time, this is all going to come together."