Controversy hasn’t discouraged education finalists

By CARL REDMAN
Capitol News Bureau

10/24/1993

Against a backdrop of disension among members of Louisiana’s top higher education board, five finalists for the state commissioner of higher education job have been narrowing in on Baton Rouge this week to meet with a special search committee.

If some members of the state Board of Regents have their way, the selection of a new commissioner could come as early as Thursday.

Although most of the candidates are aware the process has become enveloped in a swirl of controversy, none is ready to bail out. In separate interviews last week, each of the five finalists said the Louisiana higher education post offers an exciting challenge.

The search for a new commissioner of higher education has been embroiled in controversy since outgoing Commissioner Samnie Cosper announced in April that he plans to retire at the end of this year.

On the heels of Cosper’s announcement, a special committee composed of regents and other higher education officials was appointed to search for Cosper’s successor. But rumors soon began circulating that Larry Crain, former president of the college system under the Board of Trustees for State Colleges and Universities, had the inside track.

The pending vacancy was advertised nationally, and 37 applications were received—a response that several regents said was disappointingly small.

Early this month, a screening committee of regents—led by Laffey and regent Gus Mijalis—met in Monroe and narrowed the list to five finalists.

Finalists include Crain; Gene D’Amour, a vice president at Tulane University; Betty N. James, an assistant commissioner with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board; Steven G. Olswang, vice provost at the University of Washington in Seattle; and Edgar B. Schick, a consultant with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities in Washington.

The full search committee is scheduled to interview Crain, James and Schick on Tuesday and Olswang and D’Amour on Wednesday.

Mijalis has said he hopes the search committee can settle on a

See FINALISTS, Page 6A
recommnendation or the Board of Regents name Copier's suc¬
cessor. Lafayette defended the search pro¬
cess and indicated that the Board plans to per¬
sent the regents the last name for their consideration in the next new search. Copier is still the only candidate in the list of finalists and has assured them that he would accept the post if the board isn't satisfied with anyone else for the position.

The regents also reiterated that they would not accept a finalists list to the list of finalists and would not accept a finalists list if the board isn't satisfied with anyone else for the position.

The meeting adjourned after a vote was taken to accept the finalists list to the list of finalists and a vote was taken to accept a finalists list if the board isn't satisfied with anyone else for the position.

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COMMUNITY COLLEGES WITH AN EYE TOWARD MOVING ON TO A FOUR-YEAR SCHOOL LATER IN THEIR COLLEGE CAREERS, SHE SAID.

James said she's not concerned that the federal court might eliminate the Board of Regents, and with it the commissioner's post.

"We've had a similar proposed circumstance here in Texas from the legislature that did not occur," James said. "I have years of experience in higher education... and I would by no means be unable to find additional employment."

**Steven Olswang**

Olswang, vice provost at the University of Washington in Seattle, said Louisiana's financial problems are not unique and that Louisiana colleges are not unique in being hit with cuts when the state hits hard times.

Olswang said the state of Washington has been hit with budget cuts the last few years and that voters there will decide "a tax rollback" initiative on the November ballot.

"So, I have some experience in working those issues and working with our many sister institutions in the state Legislature in trying to manage a reduction and in trying to bring forward the case of the importance to the economy of higher education," he said.

Olswang said most states have obligations in areas such as elementary-secondary school funding, corrections and social services that push higher education into a discretionary area of the budget.

"I think legislatures all over the country are faced with the reality of further reductions and balancing interests," Olswang said. "This (commissioner's) role in Louisiana is really important in ensuring that whoever holds this position is able to work with the Legislature and the governor and the citizens in communicating the value of higher education in the long term and the detriments that result from excessive reductions."

Olswang said Louisiana is not unique in criticism of program duplication.

What higher education leaders must do is balance the demand and need for programs, the quality of programs and the economics of offering particular programs, he said.

"Programs that seemingly are duplicative don't necessarily have to be eliminated to be focused and cooperative, each having its own specialty and sharing resources," Olswang said.

He said the state of Washington has an extensive network of community colleges that feed the six-year institutions in the state.

"Community colleges can be a wonderful resource, particularly providing local opportunities, (because) one has to think about student costs nowadays Olswang," said. "At the same time, whether that's the right design for a particular state needs a lot of study. The branch campus concept, which is growing also, ...is another way to look at things.

"Again, it comes down to what kind of cooperative structures can you build to serve the population... The most important thing is can you provide enough access to the population within the resources available."

Olswang said he's not bothered that federal court rulings could bring sweeping changes to the state's higher education system, including sweeping away the boards and administrators now running things.

**Edgar B. Schick**

Schick has spent the last two years as a senior fellow with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and is now a consultant to that association.

A former top administrator in Maryland's higher education system, Schick has researched and written on higher education governance and coordination. He is now studying the roles of local campus boards within multi-campus public universities.

Schick said that many of the higher education issues Louisiana faces are faced by the rest of the nation.

For example, Schick said, Louisiana doesn't seem to have enough money to meet all the needs and demands of its citizens.

One of the tasks of the next commissioner, Schick said, will be to help make the case to the public and to state leaders "how effective the public higher education system in Louisiana is."

Schick said he understands the role politics plays in higher education administration from his experience as executive director of the Board of Trustees of the State Universities and Colleges of Maryland.

"My office was only half a block from the state house, and every time I had a free moment and I was in the state capital at Annapolis, I'd walk around and see whom I could see and whose hand I could shake and whom I could answer questions for," Schick said. "I think that's one of the most interesting part of the job, that's working with people who represent our fellow citizens.

"That's the kind of position that the commissioner has down there, at that point where public policy — a nice way of talking about political life — and higher education come together. I've enjoyed that, I kind of thrived on it and made out fairly well on it."

Schick said the question of eliminating duplicate programs is being raised in all over the country. Any approach to addressing the situation, he said, must be rooted in "what makes best sense for the students who are in the programs and the people of the state."

Schick said the issue of community colleges and where they fit in higher education brings one to the structure of higher education.

"My study of public higher education has led me to believe that, while I kind of began being fascinated by structure... it kind of seems it's the quality of the leadership that determines how well it works," Schick said. "Whether you have a separate system for two-year colleges or whether they have a defined mission within another structure — I don't think the structure is terribly exciting...

"The crucial issue is how do we provide... access, quality and effectiveness."

Schick said he is aware that a federal court order is pending that could restructure higher education in Louisiana and that the situation doesn't bother him.

"I think you always assume responsibilities that have a certain risk to them. I understand there is a certain element of risk," Schick said. "On the other hand, I don't think that I as an individual or the public higher education structure of the state can stand around with one's hands in one's pockets and say, 'We'll wait and see.'"