Gov. charges higher ed study panel

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Gov. Buddy Roemer on Friday held out hope for bigger college budgets next year but said an ultra-political multi-board governing system stymies quality higher education even more than abysmal funding.

At the first meeting of his latest higher education study panel, Roemer made it clear he wants the panel to recommend that a single board govern Louisiana colleges.

He gave the panel more leeway in its second charge — to develop a way to gradually increase state aid for what he called the second poorest funded college system in the nation.

Roemer later told news reporters he hopes to increase college budgets by about $30 million next year, mostly to meet rising costs but also to finance a 4 percent raise for most university employees.

"I do think we underfund our universities to a startlingly significant degree," Roemer said.

However, he said, some say the lack of money is the main reason Louisiana's colleges and universities are not as good as they could be.

"That's not true. It's politics," Roemer told the opening session of the Special Governor's Task Force on Public Higher Education.

"Our governing structure, with its four higher education governing boards... pits board against board, system against system, region against region and school against school in a wasteful, senseless, political struggle for students, status and scarce education dollars.

"We are the Beirut of higher education," the governor said. "Turf is eminently more important than quality education."

Studying the governance of Louisiana higher education is one of Roemer's two charges to the 26-member panel — the third group he has appointed to look at higher education.

Roemer made it clear he wants the panel to recommend replacing the four current boards, which now share responsibility for higher education, with a single, powerful board to manage all colleges.

"A single board is one of the ways to achieve quality education, at least in our state," he said.

Asked if he might disregard a plan that does not recommend a single board, the governor said he reserves the right to do so.

Roemer was less specific about his second charge to the panel to develop a funding plan.

"Our schools need proper, adequate and long-term funding," he said. Only Vermont's state government spends less for each student than Louisiana's, he said.

In addition, Roemer said, only six states make their students pay a higher percentage of the cost of their education.

Roemer cautioned the panel that it would take years to catch up with other states.

"We're not going to get to the Southern average next year or the year after that or the year after that," he said later.

"The governor also stressed that, in seeking more money for colleges, he must be able to "ensure our taxpayers... that their dollars are being spent wisely and well."


Roemer decided to form the panel after the U.S. Supreme Court postponed a lower court's desegregation order, which, among other things, would have abolished the four college boards to make way for the single board favored by Roemer.

If the Supreme Court takes action to rescind that order, Roemer said, he wants to push the one-board idea in the Legislature.

The federal court's plan was suggested by a court-appointed expert, Paul Verkuil, president of the College of William & Mary.

Rep. Long stressed that the Roemer panel, which is considering a plan to present to the Legislature and not to a court, must be politically realistic.

"It's going to be essential that we come up with something that's sellable to the public," Long said.

"The Verkuil charge (from the federal court) did not have to stand the test of a two-thirds vote in both houses (of the Legislature)," Long said.