New college board sworn in, urged to put education first

By MARSHA SHULER
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Urged to put educational needs above politics, a diverse group of men and women Tuesday took on the development of the state's new community and technical college system.

Shortly after being sworn in, however, the Board of Supervisors of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System did defer to a politician in picking its first two temporary leaders.

The board quickly and unanimously tapped Tennessee's former higher education chief — Wayne Brown — as its interim president and former state Sen. Edwards Barham as its interim chairman.

Both men were picked for the jobs by Gov. Mike Foster.

Brown, well known in national educational circles, has been Louisiana's deputy commissioner of higher education. He is not a member of the board but will serve as its top staffer, at least for a while.

Before being appointed, members of the 15-member board agreed with conditions Foster set for their service — conditions that were underscored by Foster's Chief of Staff Stephen Perry at the board's first meeting.

"Be independent. Do the right thing. Be judicious and fair and impartial. Look at the big picture. Don't be parochial," said Perry.

In the past, many institutions "have been deeply politically rooted," said Perry. "The governor has asked every member of this board to step outside their environment.

"He wants you to think with a broad-brush, make decisions based on what is right for the students you want to provide job skills to."

The board doesn't officially take control of the community college-technical system until July.

But the new board has a lot of work to do between now and then, when 50-plus vocational technical and community colleges move under its jurisdiction.

Perry said the board has the "most profound charge of any board in Louisiana because the future of ensuring generations is dependent on what you do."

Perry said 80 percent of Louisiana's young people don't get four-year college degrees, and that's who the board will affect.

Edwards Barham, first chairman of the new Louisiana Technical and Community College Board of Supervisors, raises his hand to take the oath of office Tuesday. The board takes over the state's community and technical colleges in July but is gearing up early to prepare for its task.

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Names, hometowns, and current affiliations of members of the new Louisiana Community and Technical College System Board of Supervisors:

- Board Chairman Edwards Barham, Oak Ridge, former state senator and, until Tuesday, a member of the state Board of Regents.
- Charles Alexander, Metairie, multinational manager of human resources for McDonald's Corp. and an active volunteer in welfare-to-work programs.
- Leonard Barnes, Shreveport, former chancellor Southern University-Shreveport and a member of the state Civil Service Commission.
- Gibson Chigbu, New Orleans, president of the Gee Cee Group Inc., a general contractor, who has been active in economic development groups.
- Dianne Christopher, New Roads, former New Roads council member, former job counselor at Southeastern Louisiana University and current vice chair of the Louisiana Republican Party.
- James Finnerg, Baton Rouge, former president of Our Lady of Lourdes Regional Medical Center, who has been active in workforce development programs.
- Greg Risher, Houma, corporate administrative manager of Gulf Island Fabrication Inc., who has been active in workforce development programs.
- Fred M. Stone, New Orleans, New Orleans public school teacher who has been active with the Louisiana Federation of Teachers.
- Nicholas P. Trist Jr., Chalmette, longtime chairman of the Nunez Community College Foundation, who has served as president of People's Bank and Trust Co. in Chalmette.

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"You will be shaping Louisiana society for the next few decades ... preparing people for life in the real world, preparing people to be self-sufficient," said Perry.

"The resources are going to be provided. The commitment is there," said Perry.

Barham leaves the Board of Regents — the state's top higher education management board — to work on development of the community college system.

"There are so many challenges and so many opportunities. This system will touch more lives, more homes and more businesses than any other part of higher education," said Barham.

The board asked Brown to prepare suggestions for an organizational structure for the system as well as a plan for board staffing.

The board will meet Jan. 28 in conjunction with the Board of Regents, which will oversee the board.

The Regents already oversee the management board that run the SU, Southern University and University of Louisiana systems.

The two-year and vocational-technical campuses coming under the board's jurisdiction are now governed by the University of Louisiana system or the state board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

BESE still will oversee kindergarten-12th grade education, and the University of Louisiana system will retain its four-year college campuses.

Names, hometown, and noteworthy activities of members of the new Louisiana Community and Technical College System Board of Supervisors:

- Ava D. Guidry, Marrero, former executive director of the State Council on Vocational Education and the Governor's Employment and Training Coordinating Council.
- Kathy Johnson, Alexandria, owner of Interim Personnel, which assists temporary and full-time workers.
- Ann Knapp, Lake Charles, management specialist for the Lake Charles Mayor's Office.
- Kevin McCotter, Shreveport, regional director of corporate and external affairs for BellSouth Communications and a member of the Governor's Workforce Development Commission.
- Brent Mellington, Lafayette, director of Planning of Our Lady of Lourdes Regional Medical Center, who has been active in education, business and school-to-work groups.
- Greg Risher, Houma, corporate administrative manager of Gulf Island Fabrication Inc., who has been active in workforce development programs.
- Fred M. Stone, New Orleans, New Orleans public school teacher who has been active with the Louisiana Federation of Teachers.
- Nicholas P. Trist Jr., Chalmette, longtime chairman of the Nunez Community College Foundation, who has served as president of Peoples Bank and Trust Co. in Chalmette.

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"I feel very good about what we've been able to accomplish and so many opportunities. This board doesn't officially take control of the community college-technical system until July, but we are gearing up early to prepare for its task."