Panel calls on EOF to spare higher education

By CARL REDMAN
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A special committee charged with overseeing compliance with a state-federal agreement on desegregating public colleges has called on the governor to spare higher education from a recently ordered budget cut.

Every public college and university in the state has obligations and goals under the 1981 higher education consent decree, and meeting a mandated budget would put some of those goals in jeopardy, according to the committee's report. Members of the Consent Decree Monitoring Committee expressed concern that the governor's order to cut $200 million in spending would hurt higher education.

Under terms of the consent decree, the state is spending more than $200 million a year to upgrade and enhance facilities and programs at predominantly black universities so they will be more attractive to white students and will be more responsive to their current student bodies.

At the same time, predominantly white institutions have been ordered to increase black presence in their student body and faculty ranks and administrations.

As part of the decree, black universities get special "enhancement funding" to help upgrade programs and facilities, and the same amount of money has been spared in the state budget.

Deputy Commissioner of Higher Education Sharon Beard said funds earmarked for consent decree programs apparently will be spared the latest spending cut.

However, simply exempting special consent decree funding may not be enough, said committee member James White, who is also a member of the College Board of Trustees for State Colleges and Universities.

White proposed a resolution calling for the governor to exempt the state's black institutions - those in the Southern University System and Grambling State University - from the $200 million cut. Such a step would be an indication of the state's "good faith" effort at trying to make the decree work, he said.

"I don't think our responsibility is to monitor only the consent decree money appropriated," said Southern University Board of Supervisors chairman Joe Terrell, who is on the monitoring committee. "What we are monitoring is the whole consent decree. . . . Our main concern is more broader than overseeing a fixed amount of money. That was all we could have two accounts here and we would not wait our time here. . . . We have a much broader responsibility."

Terrell said the monitoring committee should be looking at how budget cuts affect an institution's ability to meet the intent of the consent decree and not simply try to keep spending consistent with the decree's provisions.

For example, Southern University is receiving consent decree funding for a new nursing degree, but the funding helps underwrite only the last two years of the nursing program, said SU Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Dolores Spikes told the committee. The first two years are part of the basic undergrad program and depend on the university's general level of state funding, she said.

"If the preparation courses are affected, the later consent decree programs are affected as well," she said.

Offering a substitute motion to ask for an exemption for all of higher education, committee member Robert Bodet said the same argument can be extended to every college in the state.

Predominantly white campuses are losing black enrollment because of recent tuition hikes, he said. Further budget cuts could prompt even higher tuition and make it harder for white students to attract black students, said Bodet, a Board of Regents representative on the monitoring committee.

While he voted in favor of the general exemption, committee member Cyrus Greco said cuts in the general appropriations of black universities do not violate the letter or the spirit of the consent decree.

"The consent decree never envisioned there would never be cuts in anyone's budget," said Greco, who is also on the Board of Trustees. "If it had envisioned it, it would have been written in there. . . . That was not done."

Mack Barham, the Regents' special consent decree council, told the committee that important thing is the state's commitment to the spirit of the decree.

If the state is released from the decree in December 1987, Louisiana will not be finished with its financial obligations under the decree, Barham said.

The state made commitments in the decree to construct buildings and fund new programs on black campuses and it must honor those commitments even if the court does not extend the decree, Barham said.

The bonds must be floated (to pay for construction), Barham said. "We also anticipate that the subsidies (for new programs at black schools) will go on and be phased out gradually."