What's next for the Picard Center?

Research center faced job cuts, drops in service

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The beautiful, multimillion dollar building bears the name and hosts the statue of Cecil J. Picard, longtime state superintendent of schools who envisioned better outcomes for Louisiana through early childhood education.

The center's website describes its employees as "more than data crunchers and researchers" and boasts that it has "nearly 40 employees and growing!"

Things aren't always what they appear to be.

The staff of the Cecil J. Picard Center for Child Development and Lifelong Learning has dwindled from 40 to 17 in just 2 ½ years since the $8 million building opened in the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Research Park.

It's something the interim center director calls "right-sizing."

It's something the Picard family and center's recently retired director are hesitant to comment on.

And it's something the local school

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Deep cuts to higher education have created challenges to universities across the state.

At UL, it has meant that each of the auxiliary functions of the university—such as the Picard Center—has had to re-examine the way it operates like an individual business.

Ramesh Kolluru, interim Picard Center director and the vice president of university research, says the reorganization and layoffs have not weakened the center but have forced it to re-examine priorities.

"It was not efficient. It was not effective," said Kolluru. "It was not a good use of taxpayer dollars."

Kolluru also says the center's layoffs are not as drastic as they sound.

Some of the center's former employees were transient, hired only for specific projects. Some employees were support staff who helped compose reports. Some people retired or resigned.

"Does it mean that somebody has lost a job? Yes. Does it mean the Picard Center has lost the ability to support its clients? No," Kolluru said.

"This center never could support the number of people that it had. And what we needed to do was go through a painful but purposeful process of making sure we right-sized it without losing our capability to fulfill our mission."

According to the website, the Picard Center's mission is to "improve the lives of Louisiana's children and families by providing high-quality research, education, and development opportunities that focus on the education and development of children from birth through the early years."

Although research is funded by the state of Louisiana, the Picard Center’s mission is to "improve the lives of Louisiana's children and families by providing high-quality research, education, and development opportunities that focus on the education and development of children from birth through the early years."

The center's 40,000 square foot facility features more than 80 offices, an exhibit room, a data analysis room and a distance learning and conference center.

Lafayette Parish Superintendent says has created a noticeable drop in services to the school district.

The Picard Center's annual budget from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette includes:

- 2008: $3,000,000
- 2009: $2,861,400
- 2010: $2,575,260
- 2011: $2,073,811
- 2012: $2,505,260
- 2013: $1,950,534
- 2014: $1,462,900

Source: The University of Louisiana at Lafayette

Paul McCann, a speech language pathologist, was among them.

McCann has followed the cuts to the Picard Center. He worries that the center might not be able to regain what it has lost once funding becomes available again.

"I think this center opens eyes. It helps answer questions," McCann said.

"I think the center is a real boon to us, and for us to lose it so quickly or to see it diminish so quickly is really disheartening."

Sarah Lemaire, a special education teacher at Milton Elementary School who also attended the seminar, said she had no clue about staff cuts to the Picard Center.

"It's really drastic for it to go from such a large number to such a small number," Lemaire said.

"I'm not really sure of all the logistics behind it, but it just doesn't seem like it would be logistically right to cut that many positions."

Another seminar attendee, Yvette Frazier, program supervisor in special education for LPSS, calls the Picard Center staff accommodating and knowledgeable.

Frazier said she has not noticed a drop-off in services, but she knows the staff has had to pick up extra work to make up for the layoffs.

"It think's it's the highlight in Lafayette Parish, the Picard Center," Frazier said. "I think that's the drive of Lafayette Parish with 100 percent in, 100 percent out, and the Picard Center has helped us to work toward achieving these goals."

A statue of Cecil Picard, a deceased educator and former Louisiana state superintendent of education, is outside of the Cecil J. Picard Center for Child Development and Lifelong Learning in Lafayette. PHOTOS BY PAUL KELL, THE ADVERTISER

A search is underway for a new center director with Stokes' recent retirement.

At such a tumultuous time for higher education, the new director could influence the center's direction.

Kolluru says the Picard Center will remain committed to supporting children through research on issues related to early childhood.

Although research is still a primary function of the center, Stokes worries that it will not be able to serve an activist role in the schools or influence legislation the way it has in the past.

"You've got to be out there at the schools. It can't all just be about the research," Stokes said. "If the center can't find a way to reinvigorate itself in some way, it's going to have a tough time having the impact it's been having."

Tyron Picard, Cecil J. Picard's son, has observed cuts to the center, although he has not been directly involved.

"There are some great things that have come out of UL, the center being one of them," Tyron Picard said. "And so you begin to wonder how much we're watering down the effects with the actions of the reductions in funding."

Rockholts daughter, Sharon Holder, says the Picard Center is in a transition period and she expects that things will soon smooth over.

"Hopefully, when things are re-funded or additional funding guidelines or additional funding sources are identified," Holder said, "then the Picard Center will be able to hire everybody back and do what they want to do...."

Last week, Lafayette Parish School System educators attended an autism seminar at the Picard Center.