USL Continues To Fight For Name Change

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In 1898 Southwestern Louisiana Industrial Institute was created. In 1921 the name was changed to Southwestern Louisiana Institute. Thirty-nine years later in 1960, the institute's name was changed to the University of Southwestern Louisiana.

The name change met with opposition, primarily from LSU's President George Middleton who argued that any name changes required approval from LSU's Board of Supervisors and the State Board of Education.

This first objection to USL's name change wouldn't be the last.

At the time SLI became the University of Southwestern Louisiana, University President Joel Fletcher considered the name "University of Louisiana," but decided against it since he believed that name would not be politically successful.

In 1979, a student referendum concerning a name change to "The University of Louisiana," showed a majority of students favoring change.

A second SGA referendum in 1982 resulted in over 80 percent of the students approving the change. One year later USL's Faculty Senate voted unanimously to encourage the administration to seek the name change.

In 1984 USL's administration was ready to pursue the name change. But there was a question as to whose authority was needed to change a university's name. Since the establishment of a three-management board system for Louisiana universities in 1974, only universities under LSU's board had changed their names. (The 1974 state constitution established a board of supervisors for LSU-Baton Rouge as well as its sister LSU universities, a board of supervisors for Southern University, and a board of trustees for all other Louisiana universities.)

USL administrators and Bob Wright, a board of trustees member, reasoned that if LSU's board could change the names of universities under its jurisdiction then USL's board (The Board of Trustees) could change USL's name.

On March 23, 1984 state Attorney General William Guste ruled the board had the authority to change the names of universities under its jurisdiction, including USL.

Days later USL's administration sought the opinion of the executive committee of the alumni association and later the board of governors of the alumni association. Both groups voted unanimously to pursue a name change.

A resolution to change USL's name was placed on the agenda for the next board of trustees meeting. On April 27, the board met and approved the resolution, thus changing USL's name to The University of Louisiana, despite opposition from LSU's then-Chancellor James Wharton, and Sen. Cliff Newman from Lake Charles.

The day after the change, the word "Southwestern" was painted over on signs in front of Blackham Coliseum and at the corner of Bertrand and West Congress, making the signs read "University of Louisiana." (The signs remain this way today.)

Two days later Newman introduced a bill to the state Senate which would change the name back to USL and would take the authority to change universities' names away from the board of trustees and give it to the legislature. On May 10 the bill was approved by the Senate. Baton Rouge District Judge William Guste issued a temporary restraining order stopping the university from spending any money to advance its new name.

Since money had already been spent on diplomas and programs, USL was allowed to proceed with previous graduation plans. On May 13, 1984, over 1,100 diplomas carrying the name "University of Louisiana" were handed to graduates.

Newman's bill was unsuccessfully appealed in several courtrooms including the State Supreme Court. In the past few years USL has had several bills introduced to the state legislature in an attempt to restore the "University of Louisiana" name.

Opponents of the name change argue USL is primarily trying to acquire more state funding in seeking a new name. USL President Ray Authement and alumni literature explain they want a new name because USL is a progressive university which wants to attract top students and faculty from across the nation, but is hindered by a regional name. National statistics seem to support the stance against a regional name for a university the size of USL.

There are 15 other American universities which use the name "Southwestern." The average enrollment in these universities is 1,096 students. USL's enrollment of 15,500 is more than the undergraduate enrollments of The University of Alabama, The University of Arkansas and The University of South Carolina. John Landry, past-president of USL's Alumni Board of Governors, said perception is important when it comes to faculty, student and athletic recruiting. "Small sounding institutions are a 'hard-sell' to those who are geographically distant and have no knowledge of a particular program. USL's administration...should be commended for achieving such excellence with the severe handicap of a regional name," Landry said. Alumni literature states a less regional name would better represent the state of Louisiana and attract out-of-state money to improve students' education.

E. Joseph Savoie, Director of the USL Alumni Association, has been involved with the name change for over six years. Savoie said for now USL is "considering it's options." He explained that now is not a good time to reintroduce name-change legislation because of the many other issues which the state legislature is considering.

However, he said he does have hope. Gov. Buddy Roemer is proposing a bill which would change the three-management board system in higher education to a one-board system. Savoie believes this system may help USL restore it's name.