January 25, 2010

The Honorable Arne Duncan  
Secretary of Education  
United States Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20202

CC: Martha Kanter, Undersecretary of Education  
CC: Robert Shireman, Deputy Undersecretary of Education

RE: “Stimulus waiver” in respect of Louisiana Higher Education Funding

Dear Secretary Duncan,

I write to you in my capacity as President of the Faculty Senate of Louisiana State University and as Chair of the Louisiana State University Council of Faculty Advisors. Louisiana State University is the “flagship” research and land-grant institution of the state of Louisiana; the LSU System is comprised of eleven campuses and numerous institutes and is the employer of many thousand highly educated professionals, public servants, and voters. Owing to their leadership position, the faculty assemblies of both “LSU” and the LSU system campuses frequently serve as the public voice for higher education professionals in all of Louisiana’s colleges, community colleges, and universities.

On behalf of the teachers, researchers, and public servants who sustain Louisiana’s post-secondary educational project, I would like to ask you to take all possible measures to suspend further actions regarding adjustments to the funds provided under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) and under the related State Fiscal Stabilization Fund (SFSF), commonly known as “stimulus
money.” As you surely know, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal plans to request a waiver to the stimulus money rules so as to make further deep cuts to state higher education. Although faculty throughout Louisiana recognize the severity of the recession and of Louisiana’s financial problems, there is nevertheless good reason to believe that the public interest would be served by delaying any such action until a public hearing may review or an outside auditor may evaluate the finances of and the fiscal decision-making process for Louisiana higher education.

Fair and wise decision-making requires an honest, stable, and consistent flow of information. To date, and despite affirmations of the value of transparency, the Louisiana Governor’s office has provided only irregular, unverifiable, and inconsistent information. Both professional norms and the standards of higher education accreditation boards require that faculty supervise both the educational services and the budgets of colleges and universities, a task that requires both a modicum of time and an array of reliable data. Within the very short time of the last two weeks, we have been told both that our schools are presently significantly above and that our schools are presently significantly below the critical 2006 funding level (obviously, one or the other of these reports must be false). Criticism of the Governor’s plans for a stimulus waiver has been mocked by the Governor’s Commissioner of Administration as “irresponsible,” yet no invitations to responsible public evaluation of budgeting plans have been forthcoming.

The purpose of the ARRA and the SFSF is the easing of financial distress to essential public agencies such as higher education systems. The hasty preemption of that mission through the discovery of technical means to reduce rather than increase higher education funding is clearly a contravention of both the intent of the stimulus program and of the public good. Proper planning for the stabilization of higher education cannot succeed in so Draconian an environment. Surely the architects of the stimulus program did not intend that public dollars would be used to threaten rather than to aid college campuses. Yet that is precisely what is happening, Louisiana’s executive branch having already warned that opposition to the stimulus waiver would result in an incautious return of the stimulus money and a heavy cut to Louisiana’s higher education systems.

Let me again stress that the faculties of Louisiana’s colleges and universities do not oppose rational, necessary, or deliberate adjustments to higher education budgets. What those faculties ask, however, is that the federal government assist Louisiana’s citizens by reserving time to examine, in a public and fair fashion, the financial problems facing our state and its higher education institutions. We ask that you condition adjustments to the stimulus program on the results of either a
series of public hearings, an outside audit, or, preferably, both.

Thank you for your consideration and for helping those who support higher education in the bayou state.

With best wishes,

Kevin L. Cope
Faculty Senate President, LSU
Chair, LSU System Council of Faculty Advisors