COMMENTS CONCERNING THE PROPOSED MERGER OF LA TECH AND LSU-SHREVEPORT

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History and logic argue for the suspension of the rush to judgment to merge Louisiana Tech University (LA Tech) and LSU-Shreveport (LSU-S).

Until 1931, LA Tech and Grambling State University provided all the higher education services along the Louisiana I-20 corridor. Many LA Tech supporters were not happy when Ouachita Parish Community College opened in 1931—a concern that grew when the community college became a four-year institution. Even today, some LA Tech supporters refer to ULM as “Northeast Junior College.” Considering the growth of the University of Louisiana at Monroe (ULM), some Tech supporters were even more concerned when LSU-S opened. Thus, for many years LA Tech supporters have been overly concerned about competing for students with universities in Shreveport and Monroe because they know that when academic offerings are comparable, most students prefer to stay close to home to attend college.

One strategy which has worked well for LA Tech is the creation of an image of being “better” than the other universities; of offering “special” programs, preferably exclusive, i.e. “the first in the nation” (nano technology), implementing selective admission standards, etc. They have made changes just to be different to separate themselves from other state universities. For example, LA Tech is the only state university and one of a declining number in the country to use the quarter system. LA Tech markets the quarter system as being “superior.” Tech has forced the reorganization of state athletic programs several times, to separate Tech from other state schools and to have an excuse for not competing against them on a regular basis.

Tech has used the influence of Ruston leaders, politicians and other friends and supporters to maintain Role, Scope and Mission and funding advantages over ULM and LSUS. Through the Board of Regents (BOR) Master plan, Tech has an advantage in creating and maintaining academic programs and getting public research money. The BOR has also adopted a funding formula that gives LA Tech an operating funding advantage over their Shreveport and Monroe competitors.

As the Klein report states, “It is difficult for a university to thrive in a small town (Ruston) without a footprint in an urban area.” Tech has always worked quietly in the background to have some control over growth of higher education programs and facilities in both Monroe and Shreveport. BOR has delayed for years taking action on requests for new programs from LSUS and has rejected requests for new programs at ULM that might compete with Tech programs.

Their plan to continue to increase admission standards will significantly reduce the pool of students eligible to enroll. They need to maintain sufficient enrollment to pay fees to service debts for campus facilities. They want to invest more money in research, although they do not even have adequate funding to support the highest quality classroom instruction. Both state and federal funding is increasingly difficult to obtain. If LSUS could be eliminated as a stand-alone academic institution and some of its revenue and assets (land and buildings, foundations and library, etc.) could be reallocated to support the ambition of the Ruston campus, LA Tech's future would look better. All the discussion about expanding services in Shreveport is cover for this land-resource grab because Tech has had a statewide mission for many programs for several years while doing little more than talk about expanding services in the Shreveport area. Tech has done little in the Shreveport area that would divert students going to Ruston to stay in Shreveport. Tech has opposed efforts by Northwestern State University and LSU-S to add new
programs in Shreveport. Tech will not move premier programs to Shreveport because many of them are barely sustainable in Ruston.

Apparently if Tech has its way, LSUS will be a satellite location, offering low-cost programs, staffed with low-paid instructors, generating marginal revenue back to the main campus in Ruston. This is not the best future for people in Shreveport and Bossier. If LSUS becomes a branch campus of LA Tech in Ruston, it will soon join every other branch campus in the nation trying to become an independent, free-standing campus with a local base and an autonomous mission and identity.

Mergers are considered successful when the minor partner's assets are deployed on behalf of the major partner; and even when the minor partner's assets are not totally taken, their assets must be reduced significantly so the major partner can pay the costs of the merger. Businesses complete mergers to expand their control of the market and increase profit to the home office. Unfortunately, most of the community leaders in Shreveport do not appear to have understood how important the growth and development of LSUS was to the area and have not supported the university adequately. Unless Shreveport area legislators and other community leaders are openly opposed to the proposed merger, it may well happen. If there is opposition from Shreveport leaders, the Governor may not get involved, making it difficult to get the merger approved by the Legislature. None of the state's regional universities will support the proposed merger although they may not openly oppose it. They will see it for what it is—an effort to enhance the Ruston campus at the expense of Shreveport.

It is not unusual for the BOR to study a request for creating a new academic program for a year or more; but with no study at all, they voted to let LA Tech take possession and operate LSUS! Hundreds of questions about this merger need to be discussed in public forums before an informed decision in the best interest of the people of Louisiana can be made. For example: What programs will be offered on each campus? Will all the faculty at LSU-S be retained? What tenure issues will be involved? How will the difference in academic calendars be reconciled? Many other questions should be answered.

If this merger is approved without further study, no institution in the state can be sure of its future. Any institution could be given to any other institution by political power brokers working through back-room deals in a matter of weeks or months. We do not need to add this uncertainty to the already depressed state-of-mind on our state university campuses.

Revised April 1, 2012