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## MUW alumni vow merger fight

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Keeping the Mississippi University of Women as one of the state's publicly funded universities is a battle some alumni say they are ready to fight.

Recent talk of a possible state-mandated merger with Mississippi State University prompted MUW alumni to begin strategizing to prevent such a move.

A group known as Friends of The W held a two-hour brainstorming session Sunday in Madison to develop plans, including reaching out to state legislators, businesses, alumni and students, to help preserve the university's independence.

"We're going to fight any merger or closure, while also hoping to find the funding the school needs to stay open so it can continue to honor its mission," said Linda Ross Aldy, a 1973 graduate and one of the coordinators of the meeting.

Rep. George Flaggs, who recently revived the discussion of consolidating Mississippi's public-funded universities, said legislators should know today if mergers are necessary when Gov. Haley Barbour releases his budget.

Flaggs said the state may no longer be able to afford eight universities.

"The budget is so dismal, we either have to cut deep or raise revenues. There is no in-between. It's just that bad," said Flaggs, a member of the legislative budget committee.

Discussions have also mentioned combining Mississippi Valley State with Delta State, a move that would have to be approved by the Legislature.

Some MUW supporters attending Sunday's meeting plan to contact members of the state College Board.

Gus Argrett, a 2002 MUW grad, said he hopes a campaign to show MUW's economic potential will foster new business relationships.

"Businesses see MSU (Mississippi State University) as a marketable brand. We have to show them MUW is also marketable and can bring dollars and cents to their registers," he said.

Part of the group's planning centered on financing their campaign for the Columbus university, located only 25 miles from MSU.

Founded in 1884 as the first public college for women in the United States, MUW began accepting men in 1982. It has an enrollment of about 2,470, compared with MSU's 18,600.

Dr. Patricia Ainsworth, a 1970 graduate, said there is a need for small public universities.

"Sometimes you don't get to shine at bigger universities. My son went to a large university, and he was invisible. I went to The W, and I was not allowed to be invisible," she said.

Bridget Smith Pieschel, a 1979 graduate and director of the MUW Center for Women's Research and Public Policy, said the university faced closures or mergers in 1898, 1922, 1932, 1954, 1986 and 1994.

A College Board proposal in 1986 was quashed by intense lobbying by alumni and students. In 1994, the College Board recommended MUW merge with Mississippi State as part of its desegregation remedy, but a federal judge rejected the plan.

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