



November 17, 2009

Barbour: Economy demands mergers

Two historically black universities, MUW eyed in cost-cutting measure

Elizabeth Crisp

elizabeth.crisp@clarionledger.com

Facing growing budget constraints, Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour wants to save money by cutting the state's public universities from eight to five.

On Monday, Barbour proposed combining historically black universities Mississippi Valley State and Alcorn State into Jackson State, also an HBCU.

He also called for merging Mississippi University for Women into Mississippi State.

But some lawmakers, alumni and students say the mergers won't happen without a fight.

"I think it would send one of the worst messages possible to the rest of the country," said Carver Randle, an Indianola attorney and MVSU alum. "I'm completely against it."

Following Barbour's announcement, several university leaders released statements stating that money should not be the only motivation for ending programs at three institutions that serve a total of about 8,640 students.

Barbour said that even with mergers, the Mississippi Valley State, Alcorn State and MUW campuses would continue to be used and would still serve students in those areas.

"I believe mergers are preferable to closures," he said.

It's unclear how much traction the proposals will gain in the Legislature. Lawmakers are charged with approving the state budget.

Barbour said he hopes lawmakers will "bite the bullet" during the legislative session that starts in January so the consolidations can be put into place ahead of the 2011 elections.

"I would disagree with the governor or anyone who would suggest that closing universities or reducing access and opportunity to a variety of educational course options is the way to go," House Universities and Colleges Committee Chairman Kelvin Buck, D-Holly Springs, said in a statement. "While this may appear to some to be the answer, it is my view that this method would serve as only a short-term approach and would do considerable damage to the state's future long-term economic viability."

Senate Universities and Colleges Chairman Doug Davis said he will listen to the consolidation discussions because he's concerned about the future of all universities.

"We have to keep in mind the quality of education students receive at our universities," he said. "If not consolidations, then what?"

By 2012, state funding for universities is expected to fall more than 20 percent from 2008 levels.

Still, the Legislative Black Caucus has vowed to oppose any merger proposals that involve the historically black universities, and MUW alumni have started organizing their lobbying efforts.

In a statement, MUW President Claudia Limbert questioned the savings that mergers would produce.

Barbour admitted the mergers would not provide significant savings in the first year. His report estimates the mergers would save \$35 million in the 2012 fiscal year, though and continue savings over time.

MUW alum Beth Aldridge of Jackson said she did not think that amount was enough to justify merging three of the state's smaller schools into larger ones.

"Naturally, I'm very concerned about our state and the budget issues it faces," she said. "But there is such a need for smaller universities in our state."

Universities already have braced for funding cuts and have been working to create efficiencies and eliminate duplications, Higher Education Commissioner Hank Bounds said.

"I think we've taken the best first step we can take," he said. "Right now, we are looking at everything."

The state College Board is expected to discuss Barbour's proposal this week.

Barbour said he thinks now is a good time for MUW's merger because of several issues, including the fact that the university will be without a president after Limbert retires in June.

The call for a merger of the state's three historically black universities came as a surprise to many.

Barbour said Jackson State would benefit from his consolidation proposal, but JSU President Ronald Mason is opposed.

"The governor's proposed budget cuts will change the face of higher education in Mississippi for decades," Mason said. "While the full meaning of the proposal concerning the historically black universities is unclear, what is clear is that Mississippi needs historically black colleges because they are dedicated to serving the needs of the state's most underserved," he said in a statement.

Barbour said he was not worried that his proposal to merge the HBCU's would appear racially insensitive. The decision, he said, was based on the best option for administrative consolidation.

But his suggestion brought about several concerns for the students - including the fate of the three schools' NCAA athletic programs, competing marching bands and student activity groups.

Alcorn State and Jackson State are often seen as rivals.

"I just think it's not a well-thought out decision," Alcorn senior Ryan Martin said. "I think (Barbour) should come up with some more innovative ways."

Martin, who serves as ASU's Student Government Association president, pointed to each of the universities' unique missions: Alcorn was started as a land-grant institution, Jackson State is an urban university and Valley serves the impoverished Delta region.

"These are unique universities," Martin said. "You can't just look at the money."

It's also unclear what effect the consolidation would have on the state's \$503 million Ayers desegregation settlement.

Additional Facts

Governor's proposals

- University mergers:
Consolidating Alcorn and Valley into JSU and merging MSU and MUW.
 - School districts consolidating:
Mississippi's 152 school districts into about 100
 - Mental Health
locations: Closing six crisis centers and four Department of Mental Health facilities
-