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Universities fear effects of merger talk

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University leaders say they worry that talk of mergers will impact their ability to recruit students and raise money during a time when both are needed.

"This kind of publicity puts a kink in what we're trying to do," Mississippi Valley State University President Donna Oliver said. "It certainly doesn't help us any."

Citing the state's growing economic constraints, Gov. Haley Barbour has proposed a merger of Mississippi Valley and Alcorn State University into Jackson State University, as well as Mississippi University for Women into Mississippi State.

But his recommendations come as universities try to bring in additional revenue through growing enrollment and soliciting more private funds to offset shrinking state appropriations.

School budgets were cut 5 percent in September, and the system is bracing for an additional cut, along with a budget that's about 12 percent smaller for the fiscal year that starts July 1.

"I think this is a moment in Mississippi's history when we need higher education more than ever," MUW President Claudia Limbert said. "We need to add, not take away."

From 1998 to 2008, enrollment at MUW fell 25 percent. In recent months, leaders have been working on a proposal to change the university's name in an effort to attract more students. The campus saw enrollment increase 4.8 percent between fall 2008 and this semester.

Mississippi Valley's enrollment has declined from 3,621 in 2004 to 2,819 today. This semester, enrollment is down about 3.8 percent compared to fall 2008.

"We feel that if given the opportunity, we will see an upward swing within a year," Oliver said. "In two years, we'll see an even greater increase."

Alcorn State President George Ross said his concern over the announcement extends beyond student recruitment.

"We are in the process of recruiting several senior-level staff members," he said. "It does make it difficult."

Students from Jackson State, Alcorn State and Mississippi Valley - Mississippi's three historically black universities - plan to rally at the state Capitol today in protest of Barbour's proposal.

"We all have our own missions and our own personalities," JSU sophomore Tiffany Smith said of the universities. "It's nothing against the other schools; I just don't think they should merge them."

Barbour said JSU would be the school to benefit most, as it would increase enrollment and gain two

satellite campuses.

"I wouldn't mind an increase in size," Smith said. "But I applied to go to Jackson State in Jackson. Those students on the other campuses applied to go to their schools."

State College Board leaders discussed Barbour's budget recommendations Thursday but took no formal stance.

"This board works every day with the assumption that each of these institutions are vital," board member Amy Whitten said. "Just because we are not having that discussion today doesn't reflect a lack of concern or energy on our part."

Whitten and other leaders said it's important to consider timing.

"I think it's premature to even have a conversation about it," Higher Education Commissioner Hank Bounds said. "We're going to stay the course and see what else comes out of this process."

Bounds said he hopes the recent questions over three universities' futures won't keep students from applying and enrolling.

"We have eight vibrant campuses today," he said. "(Potential students) shouldn't let this deter them one bit."

The Joint Legislative Budget Committee will release its own fiscal 2011 recommendations next month. The full Legislature will hash out a final budget during the session that begins in January.

JSU President Ronald Mason said he thinks there is only a "slim" chance Barbour's proposal could make it through the Legislature. Lawmakers would have to approve any university mergers.

"I just don't know if that's the best way to start the conversation," Mason said of Barbour's announcement.

Mason said he had heard ahead of the Monday announcement that JSU would be included in the mergers.

Others were caught by surprise.

"We learned of this on Monday," Ross said. "We're reacting to something without the benefit of having much information."

Ross said he has asked for a breakdown of Barbour's estimated savings, but he has not yet received it.

"So many rumors were floating around," Oliver said. "We knew that the governor was going to recommend something, but I did not anticipate it being the joining of the three historically black universities."

Oliver became Valley's president about 10 months ago. She said she's surprised to be tackling such an issue - particularly in her first year.

"I don't think any president anywhere expects to face something like this," she said.
