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UPDATE FROM 2011 FISCAL LEGISLATIVE SESSION

SENATOR LONG ADDRESSES THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

As the legislature continues to try to address the problems caused by the \$1.6 billion deficit in the state's budget, lawmakers are keeping a close eye on funding for higher education. Since the funding for higher education is not protected either in state law or in the State Constitution as is almost 70% of the state general fund budget, the higher education system is often at the top of the budget cutting list. Lawmakers are focused on maximizing the use of the funds available for higher education with an eye to building a stronger and better performing higher education system. Senator Gerald Long (R-District 31) said, "We must address the larger issues which hurt our ability to help both students and also those employees of the state's higher education system. I remain dedicated to making Louisiana's universities institutions of excellence which provide affordable, high-quality education and training to our students."

In an effort to build upon the higher education reforms during the 2010 Regular Legislative Session, Speaker Jim Tucker (R-District 86) is proposing LA GRAD Act 2.0 which gives universities greater flexibility to deal with internal budgetary and employment practices in exchange for their commitment to meet higher performance standards, including increased graduation rates. These higher standards are designed to ensure that students receive the practical skills needed to succeed in an increasingly competitive national workforce. Sen. Long said, "With LA GRAD Act 2.0, Northwestern, LSUA and our community and technical colleges will be given the tools they need in order to take responsibility for ensuring their own success. Our schools will now be encouraged to work toward greater student performance, while at the same time ensuring their own efficiency and streamlining. This is what is needed to produce a durable and competitive system capable of benefiting both Louisiana's students and higher education employees."

The legislation proposed by Speaker Tucker passed the House of Representatives on May 11 and is currently pending Senate Education Committee approval. Coupled with plans to ensure adequate funding for the state's TOPS merit-based scholarship program, currently pending before the House Appropriations Committee, these proposals are designed to promote comprehensive reform of Louisiana's higher education system. The proposals seek to encourage both higher performance as well as greater institutional autonomy and efficiency in order to strengthen the higher education system long-term and lessen the effects of the difficult budget constraints currently placed on Louisiana's universities and community colleges.