

# Education body tackles graduate-school closures

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LOUISVILLE — Leaders of the state Council on Higher Education agreed yesterday to tackle three volatile issues: closing a law school and a dental school and merging the state's two university medical centers.

The council's executive committee ordered studies to determine whether the state should close one of its three law schools and one of its two dental schools.

The committee also directed the council staff to outline ways of studying a medical center merger. As proposed yesterday, a merger would combine the medical units of the University of Kentucky and the University of Louisville into a two-campus state medical center with its own governing board.

The executive committee met yesterday in Louisville to prepare for the full council's Jan. 13 meeting in Frankfort.

At that meeting, the council will receive a study of the factors involved in closing the law school at UK, U of L or Northern Kentucky University.

The council staff will also give a schedule for completing studies of professional programs in other fields, including engineering, architecture, pharmacy and some allied health fields.

The executive committee told the staff to present a study 60 days later on the question of closing either the UK or U of L dental school.

A proposal to study a medical school merger will be presented to the council at its July meeting.

The General Assembly must approve any recommendation to close a state university and approve closure recommendations for some of the professional programs.

All three proposals have been discussed at various times in recent years, but they have never gotten far because of their politically divisive nature.

But the seven-member executive committee expressed serious concerns yesterday about the state's ability to continue paying for its current number of professional programs.

Council chairman David Grissom, a Louisville banker, said there is a "gap between reality and perception" about what the state may be able to afford for higher education in the next decade. Grissom said the council might have to recommend "radical surgery" for the state-university system and put the matter before the General Assembly.

"We're talking about a different era," he said. "Maybe it's time when we do what we think is right, and if

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the political system throws it out, so be it."

The committee's action came after an unexpected hourlong discussion about the potential financial problems the state and its universities will be facing in the next decade. On Wednesday, Gov. John Y. Brown Jr. announced a 3 percent budget cut — the fourth reduction in his administration — though the universities were spared from any cuts.

But the discussion began in earnest when council member Al Smith, a London newspaper publisher, came before the committee to propose a study of the medical center merger.

Smith, who also serves on the council of supervisors of the teaching hospital at UK's Albert B. Chandler Medical Center, said he was worried about duplication and escalating costs at the two university medical centers.

Smith said controversies about cost overruns at U of L's newly constructed teaching hospital and about the heavy load of indigent care that the university medical centers are bearing should force the state to examine the problems.

"We are up to our necks in health costs because we run two medical centers in a state that is in the throes of a recession," Smith said. "We learned one thing: U of L didn't know how to build a hospital. After they built it, they didn't know how to run it."

Smith said that "until people in the legislature face up to the cost of indigent care, we're in a bottomless pit."

The costs of indigent care have contributed heavily to operating deficits at the two university hospitals. Officials at the two universities have expressed concern about having to di-

vert money from academic programs to cover the costs of indigent care.

The operation of medical centers is the most expensive part of the universities' budgets and is generally considered the most cumbersome administratively.

"There are probably more administrators per square foot in medical centers than anywhere else in higher education," said Harry M. Snyder, the education council's executive director.

The studies proposed yesterday appear potentially more drastic than a recently completed study of dental education and another under way on the law schools.

Two months ago, the council voted to reduce the enrollment of first-year students to a total of 110 at the UK and U of L dental schools, although the two schools had already voluntarily taken that action. The limitation was prompted by a council study that said the state was headed to an oversupply of dentists by the year 2000.

The dental school study precipitated intense behind-the-scenes lobbying by supporters who wanted to ensure the survival of the two dental schools.

The current law-school study is examining whether the state will also produce too many new lawyers by the year 2000. But several council members said the manpower studies are inexact at best and urged that they consider the more drastic step of closing one school.

Last year, the blue-ribbon, Pritchard Committee on Higher Education in Kentucky's Future proposed closing one of the law schools. That proposal was generally considered aimed at NKU's Chase Law School — the state's newest — and aroused sharp reaction from NKU supporters.

Snyder initially suggested yesterday that the council staff complete a study of all professional programs before the council members review any single program.

But committee member Morton Holbrook of Owensboro said the law school and dental school studies should be considered as "test cases" of political opposition before the council tackles the most politically charged issue — the medical school merger.

"I'd like to take on a lightweight before we take on Joe Louis or Muhammad Ali," he said.

Committee member William McCann, a Lexington lawyer, also said the issues were serious but observed that the debate was similar to discussion of older proposals to restructure the state's higher education system.

"You can study this thing to death," he said. "Sometime we've got to decide we're going to do something or not."

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