

LSU not bluffing on funding cuts, chancellor says

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Four Pulitzer Prizes and the publishing of the famed “A Confederacy of Dunces” may not be enough to keep the LSU Press from being shuttered because of budget cuts.

In order to protect its “academic core,” LSU leaders are threatening to cut or even close many of its ancillary units unless the Legislature significantly reduces proposed budget cuts of up to 15 percent of the state’s appropriations to colleges.

Among the units on the proverbial chopping block are the LSU Press, the Southern Review literary journal, the LSU Museum of Art, Rural Life Museum, Hilltop Arboretum, Louisiana Library Network and the Center for Advanced Microstructures and Devices

So is LSU bluffing with fear tactics to convince the Legislature to reduce budget cuts or are these threats legitimate?

LSU Chancellor Michael Martin said that “probably” none of the LSU units will be completely shut down.

However, he emphasized that the fears are “legit” and substantial funding cuts are likely.

“We’re not trying to use scare tactics, in all candor,” Martin said.

“We don’t want to draw if we’re not willing to fire.”

Martin said he is not trying to turn the LSU Press and other popular LSU entities into “human shields.”

Martin admitted a “very delicate balancing act” exists in portraying how much budget cuts could hurt LSU, while also avoiding scaring away potential students and faculty from the university.

The main LSU campus is facing up to a \$35 million cut beginning July 1, not counting about \$10 million already sliced in January, because of the recession and declining state revenue.

What has resulted at LSU is that many officials from the at-risk museums and research units are waging their own unofficial publicity campaigns to get the attention of the public and Legislature about the people they employ and their respective cultural and scientific values.

LSU mass communication professor Bob Mann, who has published with the LSU Press, is among those attempting to spread the word about the worth of the press.

“I have a strong sense this is not just some kind of hostage the chancellor is taking to generate outrage,” Mann said.

Mann calls it “horribly misguided” that the LSU Press is being threatened. The press, which publishes about 80 books a year, brings more “international acclaim” to LSU than anything else besides sports, he said.

LSU’s preliminary budget-cutting plan from April recommends cutting \$9.2 million from research units such as CAMD and the LSU Center for Computation and Technology. Another \$4.1 million could be cut from entities like the press and museums.

“Because of the nature of some of these entities and their fixed cost of operation, it is very possible they cannot generate the revenue needed and will close,” the plan states. They could be “closed or materially downsized.”

But there is some reason for optimism. Thus far, the Legislature has restored more than \$60 million of the proposed \$220 million in cuts to higher education. The Senate could still further reduce the budget cuts.

LSU Press Director Mary Catherine Callaway said she is just trying to stay “focused and hopeful.”

She emphasized the press is not about profit, but rather about contributions to the state. That is why the press publishes a wide array of fiction, history, art, poetry and photography.

“As we like to say, we’re Louisiana on paper,” Callaway said. “We tell Louisiana’s history.”

Martin said he does not want to shut down the press or anything else. He said he just wants to ensure LSU’s academic quality suffers as little as possible.

Much of the hard part may be determining the financial “breaking point” of units such as the LSU Press and CAMD. That way they could be cut near that point without being shuttered, he said. Then they can seek other external funding and revenue sources, Martin said.

“We don’t want to harm any of them,” Martin said. “We think they’re all extremely important.”