



## THE SYSTEM CONNECTION

Greetings:

Since there is NOTHING new to report on the progress of negotiations that would break loose the “titanic” political stalemate in Illinois we are witnessing — a struggle that now has over 90 percent of normal state spending taking place, albeit a few billion dollars short of the necessary revenues to fund that spending, and with no higher education appropriation in sight — I’ve decided to do a little editorializing (soapboxing, maybe?) over the course of the next two *Connection* columns.

Actually, my diatribe here might even end up becoming a three-column series depending upon how wound up I get — I’m not sure because I haven’t written the entire thing yet. But I do want to take the opportunity during this prolonged budget interregnum to share a few of my thoughts on some larger national issues regarding university costs, affordability, how we pay for it, and what it all may mean for things we’re going to have to undertake across SIU to manage those costs and demonstrate the public accountability now demanded of us.

I’ve known I was going to do this short series of columns for some time now, and I’ve sort of had them framed-up in my mind, but I wasn’t sure how to kick the discussion off. Like many of the ideas I get, though, the spark that eventually got me moving on it originated in a short, random exchange that took place this week.

So a few SIU senior administrators a couple of afternoons ago must have been doing some web surfing (I won’t name us all out here) and we got into a little email discussion that started with the sharing of an article posted by NBC News:

<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/education/middle-class-squeeze-elite-education-worth-170-000-debt-n212811>

If you link to the article, you can imagine how the brief email conversation unfolded — trying to figure out the best way to help cost-conscious families balance their kids’ (or their own) future earning power versus the cost of a university education. Both the Edwardsville and Carbondale campuses utilize the quality-with-value message in different ways at different times (e.g., “go to a respected state school ... it is affordable and you won’t have as much debt ... you’ll get an education of solid value followed by a good-paying job”) — and that no doubt resonates with many.

On the other hand, I've witnessed a number of instances over the years where a fairly non-exceptional state university has made a strategic decision to get aggressive on pricing — and then sees enrollment *grow* markedly over a, say, five- to seven-year period. How is that you say? Generally speaking, the premium from the higher price that students and families at such schools choose to pay in turn gets invested in things like greater campus amenities, improved recruitment practices, increased scholarship support, better student housing, and other benefits which ... you guessed it, can build enrollment significantly over time.

Quality and value in higher education are relative measures that get viewed in a variety of ways by people. And we certainly see this debate playing out right now with our elected officials here in Illinois ... and elsewhere. Some of you have watched this same movie as you've followed the plight of the vaunted University of Wisconsin System during this past legislative session. (For an insightful read on how gutting a once-great flagship university can negatively impact the quality of life in a state in the smallest of ways, take a look at the August 27 edition of the online magazine, *Salon*: [www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com))

Well, the point of my rambling thus far is not to determine the perfect balance of quality and value in higher education, but rather to illustrate that society has, in large part, reduced HIED to a commodity. This is a radically different conceptualization of the post-secondary experience than was dominant when this country's outstanding state systems of higher education — in Illinois, Wisconsin, California, Maryland, and others — came into their own 50-plus years ago.

We are bystanders to a move nationally that is defining what we all do not as a public good or benefit (value), but rather as a commodity (cost). It is this same thinking that is driving the question asked more and more frequently in media and policy circles now: Is college worth it? The federal "gainful employment" standard — which I acknowledge does provide one necessary tool to rein in the worst of the for-profit charlatans in our business — is another variation on the theme.

Of course, this commodification of higher education has been talked about by many for some time already. Hunter Rawlings, former leader of the American Association of Universities who additionally served as president at Cornell and Iowa, penned a column on June 9 for *The Washington Post*:

*First, most everyone now evaluates college in purely economic terms, thus reducing it to a commodity like a car or a house. How much does the average English major at college X earn 18 months after graduation? What is the average debt of college Y's alumni? How much does it cost to attend college Z, and is it worth it? How much more does the "average" college grad earn over a lifetime than someone with only a high school degree? (The current number appears to be about \$1 million.) ... Even on purely economic grounds, such questions, while not useless, begin with a false assumption ... most public discussion of higher ed today pretends that students simply receive their education from colleges the way a person walks out of Best Buy with a television.*

This treatment of college as a commodity, then, has an impact on how states — and the elected officials who represent their citizenry — look at paying for higher education. And that isn't good, because more and more states are essentially trying to get out of the higher education funding business ... and they have been for over a quarter-century now. In this space next time, we'll talk about the ramifications of that sea change, how it is pushing a growing reliance on federal grant and aid programs, and what it all may mean for us at SIU.

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You might remember that two weeks ago when we debuted the “Faces of SIU” piece in this column, I had hoped we would have a little logo or insignia by now to highlight that addition and introduce it each time. Alas, nothing is easy, so that minor graphic element is still pending given some formatting issues. Nonetheless, that fact does nothing to detract from our featured individual this month, SIU Carbondale’s Mythili Rundblad.

Some of you know that earlier this year, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching awarded SIUC its prestigious Community Engagement Classification. Only 361 colleges and universities have earned that recognition for their commitment to service and outreach. Mythili Rundblad is a key person who helps us maintain our close connections to the communities we serve and gets students involved in providing valuable service to others. She is the coordinator of the Center for Service-Learning and Volunteerism at SIUC, which is the primary link with more than 65 non-profit organizations in the region.

A native of Bombay, India, Mythili came to the U.S. for graduate studies, earning master’s degrees in political science and in college student development from Eastern Illinois University.

She joined the SIUC staff in 1999 and oversees the Saluki Volunteer Corps and is the campus coordinator for the Land of Lincoln chapter of AmeriCorps — now in its 20th year and the oldest chapter in Illinois. She also directs the Women’s Civic Institute, which focuses on developing women in leadership and public service.

She appreciates the opportunity to interact with our students: “Encouraging students about their own potential, mentoring them when they feel overwhelmed and seeing them learn, grow and chart their course makes my work rewarding.” Mythili also draws inspiration from people in the community “whose vision, perseverance and efforts have made a significant impact on Carbondale and Southern Illinois.”

The programs offered by the center, she points out, are designed to develop students as citizen-scholars. "A central tenet of American democracy is the belief that each of us can make a difference," Mythili said ... and to that, I would add that Mythili definitely is doing that for our students and university!

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I will close with an invitation to my State of the System Address later this month:

- Tuesday, September 22, 3 p.m., School of Medicine in Springfield, South Auditorium
- Wednesday, September 23, 10 a.m., SIU Edwardsville, Meridian Ballroom
- Thursday, September 24, 9 a.m., SIU Carbondale, Student Center Ballrooms

Randy Dunn