



THE SYSTEM CONNECTION

Greetings:

The last couple of weeks have been incredibly busy — albeit rewarding — with a multitude of events and meetings on all of our campuses. As I finish this column on Tuesday evening, I've just come back from a meeting of the Illinois Board of Higher Education in Springfield; the IBHE is our state agency for HIED, which in that role performs a number of functionary duties and compliance actions involving the state institutions.

One doesn't have to go back too far (well, roughly a quarter century) to when the Illinois Board was a true "policy board" — among the strongest in the country in setting an aggressive post-secondary agenda, ensuring high-quality programs at the campuses, advocating for — and obtaining — the resources needed for what was widely viewed at the time as a highly successful and influential higher education "system of systems."

For those who need a quick history lesson: Until Illinois' higher ed last reform period 20 years ago, all public universities were under a system board. In addition to the University of Illinois and Southern Illinois University systems, which still exist, the remaining universities fell under one of the other two systems at the time, the Illinois Board of Regents or the Illinois Board of Governors. In 1995, then, all the BOR and BOG universities created their own stand-alone boards to govern their activities.

Of course now, the political dynamic for higher education has changed all over the country. In large part, the country's governors — of both political parties — have seized significant elements of the HIED agenda and placed those at the center of their campaigns and platforms. Across many of the states, the role of the true policy board has been carved away to a citizens' board charged with advancing a governor's policy agenda.

Sorry to go wandering off on this little treatise of Illinois political history. And with my comments here I certainly don't mean to dump on the IBHE — either the board itself or the eponymous state agency. Both are populated by good and hard-working people who know the social value of a vibrant state post-secondary system. But every time I go to any number of meetings like these, I am reminded of how much educational governance and control has changed: A governor's agenda often equates to the higher education agenda ... and it's not just true in Illinois.

Our current circumstances in the Prairie State also mean I spend a great deal of time thinking and talking about the short- and long-term challenges we face here. Please don't misunderstand ... this is not a message of pessimism, but rather one that acknowledges the realities we are facing right now. Not to get too hyperbolic in my rhetoric, but for all of us who make up public higher education in Illinois, we are navigating uncharted waters. We've seen similar dramas play out in other states — and now we're

on the same stage here in Illinois. Nonetheless, I am extremely confident that we have the talent throughout the whole of the SIU System to successfully navigate what is ahead of us.

These days, of course, the biggest elephant in the room is the state budget crisis. Actually, until just a couple of weeks ago, there were two crises. Before legislators and the governor could continue their work on the FY16 budget, they had to address the shortfall in *this year's* budget. They were able to reach agreement going into their spring break hiatus, and fortunately, we will be able to absorb the across-the-board 2.25 percent cut to our budget without a hugely noticeable impact on our operations.

But in terms of those governance issues ahead of us in the longer arc, we first need to be aware of what we're facing in order to mount the best response to those challenges. The citizens and taxpayers of Illinois will rightly be watching to see how we in the HIED community answer the calls to change that are in front of us *right now*:

- State Sen. Bill Brady's proposal to **privatize** all of Illinois' public universities. Though he withdrew the legislation a week after introducing it, Sen. Brady has said he hopes it generates discussion about the state's future role in funding HIED, and has promised to bring back the bill during the 2016 legislative session.
- The out-migration of Illinois students. By some estimates, Illinois is the second largest **exporter** of students to other states. Obviously we need to keep our home-grown talent right here, not only to pursue their degrees, but also their careers to build back the state's economy. While we are grateful for our ability to attract sizable numbers of out-of-state students, elected officials uniformly want to know that their investment of public funds is with Illinois students.
- The push by **community colleges** in Illinois to offer baccalaureate degrees. It appears this drive from the community college presidents will get relegated to a six-month study for this session — but mark my words that it will be back again soon as a legislative proposal. The colleges also suffered no reduction in state support under the governor's FY16 budget blueprint.
- **For-profit colleges**. Many are facing pretty substantial challenges of their own, such as the level of debt their students incur and increasing (and well-deserved) federal scrutiny. But this sector remains a threat and their operational models are ones we frequently get pushed to replicate where we can.
- **The value proposition**. Despite very legitimate studies that document the value of a college degree, there is no shortage of detractors.

Add to the aforementioned what the *Chicago Tribune* reported yesterday as one of Gov. Rauner's "8 Talking Points" coming out of the governor's sit-down with the Trib's editorial board on Monday:

State universities in Illinois are a microcosm of our state government — broken with work rules and administrative bureaucracy. The money is not getting to the classroom ... We have too many universities that want to try to be great in everything ... We need some economies of scale, and we really need to get a handle on the administrative bureaucracy. It's out of control ... I wanted to send a message to the universities that they need structural change.

Now, many of you may applaud the lines about administrative bloat. I get it. However, please remember that "administration" can be defined to include things like IT ... student affairs programs ... advisement ... you get the picture.

When the General Assembly goes back into session next week, the focus will be on how to manage the state's finances for FY16, including the governor's proposed 31.5 percent cut to higher education. We take our responsibility to contribute solutions to Illinois' fiscal crisis seriously, and we are making good-faith efforts to plan for some reductions. But as I have said many times, that level of reduction — taken all in one year — will be devastating to SIU and the entire southern Illinois region. So we will continue to make our drumbeat ever louder given the decisions that lie ahead for our state. In fact, today we are hosting a joint hearing of the Senate Appropriations Committee in the Student Center at SIUC. We appreciate the senators' willingness to come to campus to hear from us, local governments and health care providers on the impact of the proposed cuts to the local economy. SIUE will host a similar hearing on April 17.

But, focused as we are on the immediate future, we always need to be thinking about what we could be facing just a few years out — both in Illinois and nationally. There is no doubt in my mind that even more waves of change we see impacting other states also will affect us. That means a willingness to consider and adapt to approaches such as accelerated programs or completer programs ... in other words, appealing to more than the traditional student, but also becoming more attractive to the traditional student.

Technology already plays a large role in what we do, and I think we all recognize it will be even more critical. But it is only part of the solution. How do we adapt our curriculum to meet society's needs? Many of the folks who question the value of our degrees now point specifically to the liberal arts, suggesting we should concentrate primarily on preparing students for the high-tech jobs of the 21st century. I'm a strong advocate for the "learned person" approach we take because of how well we do just that — inspiring those we mentor to develop creative and critical thinking skills essential to any career. Though I haven't read it yet, everything I hear about Fareed Zakaria's new book, *In Defense of a Liberal Education*, suggests it is very persuasive. Wesleyan University President Michael S. Roth's book, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*, makes compelling arguments as well. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published a piece by Dr. Roth last May on this topic, "The False Promise of 'Practical' Education," that remains timely. I especially appreciated his observation:

"The calls today for a more efficient, practical college education are likely to lead to the opposite: Men and women who are trained for yesterday's problems and yesterday's jobs, who have not reflected on their own lives in ways that allow them to tap into their capacities for innovation and for making meaning out of their experience."

We have much convincing to do ahead of us. At the same time, we should not be content with simply maintaining the status quo. Unless we undertake a rigorous review of the priorities of our academic programs and continuously re-think what we are doing, we may well risk being left behind and perpetually under-funded. We have to be willing to go "there" and see what changes might comport with that which will always define us as SIU ... if we are to remain relevant.

Randy Dunn