



THE SYSTEM CONNECTION

Greetings:

Systemwide strategic planning is back on the front burner once again.

Long-time readers of the *Connection* may remember that I utilized this column back in January 2015 to provide an update on some strategic planning work the SIU Board of Trustees had engaged in for the first time in over a dozen years -- starting about 24 months ago now.

Veteran SIU faculty and staff from many years back might recall the *2020 SIU Vision Plan* that was adopted in 2002, developed for the SIU System at that time by a national panel of 25 or so leaders and experts across higher education, business, and government. While that plan was probably relevant for its era, the circumstances of our reality at SIU are now very different. For some time, our Trustees have understood that we need to renew direction and re-position ourselves to respond to different regional and state needs ... as well as to a different national conversation around higher education.

It's important to bear in mind here that we're talking about some version of a strategic or long-term planning document specifically for the SIU System *as a whole*, as contrasted with individual campuses or programs that follow their own planning regimens employing any variety of planning models (e.g., strategic, project, scenario, contingency, etc.) in the process. So while the planning function across SIU is far from being a centralized one, any long-term plan for an organizational unit throughout the System should comport with -- or at least not be in conflict with -- other plans impacted by it in the organizational hierarchy.

But any concerns about not achieving some sort of tight "command-and-control" structure around planning are rarely my worry -- it's often just getting various administrative units in big organizations such as SIU to do planning at all! As with so many complex organizations -- not just universities -- there are always other demands impinging upon the time and resources it takes to do meaningful, effective planning. And the budget mess in Illinois makes salient long-range planning near impossible.

Nonetheless, I believe strongly in a couple of things: 1) By whatever name it goes, organizations and their underlying units should at least have what Reeves, Love, & Tillmanns (*Harvard Business Review*, September 2012) refer to as some strategy for adapting, shaping, or visioning; and 2) Organizational units -- read, the people who comprise them -- should be free to follow their own strategies, as long as there is a tie to broad organizational objectives.

The latest iteration of a systemwide plan for SIU is an attempt to hold true to those principles.

Two years ago, at their annual retreat, our Trustees functioned as a Committee-of-the-Whole to draft a planning document that would set broad direction for guiding new efforts and initiatives that they felt would be vital to the progress and growth of the SIU System over the course of the next few years.

From their initial effort in August 2014, the discussion draft of a System Plan was distributed to Trustees in late September of that year, and then made publicly available following that. The draft was posted to the Board's website at that time, and also put out for preliminary review and comment through the spring of 2015. However, as I took on the acting chancellor's role at SIUC for much of that year, the Board decided to table any further work or refinement of that draft plan; while some comment was indeed received from various individuals and groups on the campuses -- which remains on file presently -- the draft wasn't advanced for final adoption.

However, now that I'm back to one job again, and the state crisis has quieted for a few months, the Board of Trustees determined it's time once again to move SIU System planning back to the forefront of their governance agenda. Following a two-day retreat held last month (and involving a few new Trustees compared to 2014), the draft System Plan was revised and updated, and it can now be reviewed by you [here](#).

A couple of additional points are probably worth mentioning at this juncture:

The plan is generative in its perspective. The intention is NOT to specify upfront a huge set of discrete action steps from the outset of the planning cycle (by comparison, Carbondale's former *Southern at 150* plan had right at 150 action steps!), but rather to have those initiatives develop over time as opportunities emerge that advance one of the strategic themes -- and as capacity and resources allow.

Also, this is admittedly a "Board-centric" plan to minimally get some early progress underway -- planning is a key governance function that has been lying dormant at the system level for some time. But as initiatives are developed, and we look toward an eventual next round of systemwide planning to take place, I believe you'll see Trustees desire a more deliberative and broad-based process for Version 2.0 of the SIU *Strategic Improvement Plan*.

Any comments, thoughts, and other feedback about the plan draft can be directed to me at rdunn@siu.edu or to BOT Executive Secretary Misty Whittington at mistyw@siu.edu, or by hard copy to my office at the Stone Center. Further, I'll soon be contacting campus constituency leadership to see if there is any interest in my presenting an overview of the *Strategic Improvement Plan* at a meeting of each constituency group over the next couple of months. The Board hopes, if possible, to do a final approval at their next regular meeting on December 8.

If you haven't already, you'll likely soon be seeing information from your respective campus's Human Resources Office regarding an important change to the state employees' group insurance program.

As many of you know, our health benefits (including dental, life, and flexible spending plans too) are managed by the Illinois Department of Central Management Services.

CMS is currently implementing a new web-based platform for insurance and benefit needs. The platform will be known as "MyBenefits Marketplace" with the website address of MyBenefits.illinois.gov. CMS is in the conversion process through the remainder of this month -- working with the state agencies (including SIU) -- to clean up any employee file discrepancies and test payroll runs. Obviously, it is essential to validate data accuracy in the changeover to the vendor for this project, and its success is of the "utmost importance" as stated in a recent communication from CMS Acting Director Mike Hoffman.

This new online system will ostensibly allow you to complete such things as the following once up and running:

- Facilitate enrollment in and changes to your state benefit plans.
- Allow you to change or correct your personal information.
- Enable access via computer, smartphone, or tablet.
- Provide the option to receive electronic communications instead of paper from CMS.

Covered employees are to receive a postcard and letter to your home address. This letter will provide important information, including the web address, customer support phone numbers, and an employee identification number assigned by CMS that will be needed to access the MyBenefits system. Please know, though, the online system and customer support phone line will not be available until October 1.

Believe me, I absolutely understand the need to go "high tech" in this arena ... I just hope we don't lose "high touch" in the process, which is important as well. Our HR shops -- including the staffers who handle benefits -- in Springfield, Edwardsville, and Carbondale work hard to provide timely and responsive service for all of us at SIU, so I hope this changeover enhances -- not hinders -- what they are able to do on our behalf.

The HR offices will handle specific questions or concerns as they arise. As always, your patience will be appreciated...

Randy Dunn

Faces of SIU

Taylor Onion knows first-hand the challenges that student-athletes face in staying on track to graduate. That's what makes her such a good fit as an academic advisor in SIUC's athletics department.

A native of Industry, Ill., Taylor was a four-year member of the volleyball team at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where she earned a bachelor's degree in advertising and a master's



degree in sport management. Prior to joining the SIU family in July, she worked in the athletics academic unit at Western Illinois and at the University of Memphis.

At SIUC, Taylor shares advising responsibility for 450 student-athletes with an assistant athletics director and a graduate assistant. Taylor specifically works with the volleyball, baseball, women's basketball and men's and women's tennis teams.

"The majority of what we do is monitor grades, interact with faculty on progress reports, and work with campus advisors to make sure the student-athletes are on track to graduate," she explained, adding that they also recruit and assign tutors based on the students' needs.

Taylor also serves as the life skills coordinator, so she tracks all of the community service performed by the student-athletes. During her time at the U of I, she and her volleyball teammates especially enjoyed interacting with students at local schools during pep rallies, reading nights, back-to-school nights, and other similar events.

"The value of student-athletes doing community service is huge -- especially in college towns like Carbondale," Taylor said. "It is not only a way to build up excitement around the athletics teams, it's a fantastic way for the athletes to give back to the community members who come out to support them every weekend."

Not surprisingly, time management is among the biggest challenges facing student-athletes.

"That's a tough task for any college student, but it is especially difficult when you factor in academic and athletic commitments and community outreach events," she said. "It's a tricky schedule to navigate."

Taylor appreciates the opportunity to help our students achieve their goals.

"What's most rewarding for me is to be able to see the growth, personally and academically, of our student-athletes over time," she said.

Other Voices

Chicago Tribune: [Black studies struggle at state universities under current fiscal climate](#)

Washington Post: [Op Ed: The coming era of consolidation among colleges and universities](#)

The New York Times: [Trigger Warnings, Safe Spaces and Free Speech, Too](#)

NPR: [New College Rankings Are Out: NPR Ed Rates The Rankings](#)

Washington Post: [A telling experiment reveals a big problem among college students: They don't know how to study.](#)
