



THE SYSTEM CONNECTION

Greetings to all as we are now fully underway with the Spring 2016 semester! No matter how many days you had off from your labors on behalf of SIU, I hope everyone was able to enjoy a holiday break that was restful and renewing. It's critical for almost anyone (though I'm sure there are a few who are the exception) to take some time away from work to decompress and regroup; at the same time, I'm always ready to get back to the established routine that work provides. A creature of habit, I guess.

So not having written this column for about six weeks now, I'm also eager to get back to that particular task once more. I reckon that most people either like writing ... or they don't. And while I must confess that during some stretches of the semester this biweekly deadline to get my column copy submitted seems to be in front of me again before I know it — the time I take to compose this thing is not only a welcome diversion at times, but (depending on the topic) doing so forces me to better articulate a decision, position, agenda, or whatever and that is helpful for clarifying my own thinking and values on a variety of items. (And, as regular readers of the *Connection* column know, we normally "publish" on Wednesdays, but this edition was delayed for a day due to glitches in the distribution system.)

For this inaugural column of 2016, then, I'm going to hit on a couple of different things. The calendar change always brings with it a variety of predictions about the top issues facing HIED for the coming year — this year is no different and if you follow higher education in the media at all, you can probably predict at least half of the topics cited for 2016. One of the better annual lists is published by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and can be reviewed [here](#) if interested.

I don't have enough time on my hands to develop my personal "Top 10" list for all of you, but in the following section, I highlight three national topics (admittedly, one of those kind of being out of left field) that I think will affect higher education generally, including our SIU campuses. Following that, I close this week's rather lengthy *Connection* with an update from the front of the state's continuing budget battle as it now stretches into the eighth month of the fiscal year — and coming on to nearly a year since his budget address where Governor Rauner laid down the gauntlet in front of Illinois' public universities and challenged our funding model. If you haven't been watching the news ... the governor doubled down last week.

On the federal side, we are closely following — as are our colleagues across the higher education landscape — three key areas that stand to have a significant impact on our campuses. Though it's difficult for me to whittle things down from the sundry lists that all the major HIED organizations seem to be putting out right now, these three could bring some impactful change to us in pretty short order, I think:

- A U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the *Fisher v. University of Texas* racial diversity-in-admissions case, expected this summer: Justices heard arguments on December 9 on the lawsuit — known as Fisher II, as it is the second time this case has come before the court — which challenges UT's consideration of race in admitting undergraduates. Questioning by the justices suggested that a majority may not be buying institutions' "educational benefit" argument that makes student diversity a compelling interest. Though no one can be certain how the court will rule, I agree with many observers who are predicting it will impose new restrictions on universities' ability to give additional consideration to minority applicants. We may well see the end of affirmative action in HIED enrollment with this decision.
- The reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, which was supposed to expire at the end of 2013 but has been extended by Congress: The HEA is the massive, sweeping law that

governs federal financial aid programs and other federal issues related to higher education. Tennessee Sen. Lamar Alexander, a former U.S. Secretary of Education, chairs the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions and has said he believes reauthorization is “possible” this year. The final version of a bill likely will incorporate a wide variety of issues many of us in HIED have been working to address: student loan programs; affordability and college costs; access, persistence and completion; the burden of federal regulations and oversight; and better information for consumers. Of course, election years get dominated by partisan fighting (well that’s pretty much all the time now ... not just election years) that can freeze up major legislative proposals — let alone other prickly debates on such things as gun control, military action against ISIS, the TPP trade deal, etc., etc.

- This last one has few people paying much attention yet (other than budget and HR directors) ... but we all could soon enough: New overtime pay requirements could be imposed later this year that have the potential for a huge impact on our campuses. In 2014, President Obama ordered the Secretary of Labor to make changes to regulations that govern exemptions to the Fair Labor Standard Act’s overtime pay requirements for executive, administrative and professional employees — otherwise known as “white collar” exemptions. Right now, individuals must meet three criteria to qualify as white collar employees, presently exempt from federal OT requirements: They must be salaried; the salary must be at least \$455 per week, or \$23,660 annually; and their primary duties must be consistent with executive, professional or administrative positions as defined by the Department of Labor. However, the new rules would increase the salary threshold by more than 100 percent — to \$970 per week, or \$50,440 annually. That would mean any currently exempt employee making less than that would be eligible for overtime pay and such would have to be paid on an hourly basis ... *regardless of job title or duties*. As you might expect, this new rule would create a sea change on our campuses, especially taken in context of the state’s budget chaos and overall lack of funding for HIED. All of this is finally starting to sink in and become part of the national conversation. Eighteen of the major associations representing university presidents, HR, finance, and other professionals on campuses have filed extensive comments on the proposed rule. While I can’t argue that the current minimum threshold of \$23,660 (which, by the way, dates to 2004) is probably too low, the proposed increase can’t help but have a negative outcome, lessening employment opportunities for many staff and students in this fiscal environment.

We can all check back in on these once another year has passed, seeing how well my prognostications held up on these “Big 3” issues.

Now to the state side of things. As alluded to in my opener, the Illinois budget crisis still remains to be resolved — as the implications for higher education in our state become even more dire. We open our doors for this spring semester behind by almost \$100 million in operating support for the SIU System — in addition to millions more that sit as receivables on our books for MAP grants to needy students and funds that are owed for myriad grant and contract work we undertake for the state.

I have been employing similar versions of a stock quote in an increasing number of news interviews — some national — that I’ve been giving about this mess. To wit: We are watching this incremental, piece-by-piece dismantling of Illinois public higher education ... a system that just 20 years ago was viewed as one of the very best in the country. If we’re not careful, we’re going to turn around at some point and wonder where our universities went.

Over the coming weeks, a few of our sister institutions will no longer be financially viable. Chicago State University has publicly declared that it will not be able to operate after its March 1 payroll. Another university — seemingly not too far behind CSU — has been intently shopping a plan for short-term borrowing authority in Springfield. That approach appears to not be getting much traction in the halls of the capital.

Let me reiterate an important point we’ve been making: The SIU System has identified the means for all of our operations to limp through to the end of the fiscal year without major disruption or resorting to drastic actions that negatively hit our students and employees (e.g., furloughs, shortened semester, halting vendor payments, etc.) — but this can’t go on forever. As some colleges and universities could reach the point of no return this spring — exhausting all available fund sources though bills and payroll cannot be met — they will close. When that happens, we will see regional economies permanently damaged and a level of crisis in higher ed that is unprecedented. And this being Illinois ... that’s saying something.

Just as a bill was introduced in the Illinois Senate last week that would go ahead and reimburse all institutions for the MAP dollars we fronted for the fall semester, a deputy chief in the Rauner Administration released a letter to members of the General Assembly. That letter can be viewed [here](#).

SIU and every other state university has consistently responded to multi-year budget reductions while doing everything possible to retain a comprehensive inventory of academic offerings, research projects, critical student services, and public service programs — and this includes the significant reductions made just this past year. Not yet knowing how and when this budget fight will end for us, both SIUC (utilizing campuswide academic and non-academic program reviews) and SIUE (with the budget “congress” that’s been convened) are in the thick of respective processes for identifying longer-term changes by rethinking priorities, tightening costs charged to state dollars, and gaining efficiencies — adjusting our operating assumptions and core functions. All this ... hopefully ... without giving away that which defines us as a great university system.

Is there room for reform in Illinois public higher education? Certainly. Just go back and read the HIED news for this past year — both statewide and nationally — if you’re not sure about that. Is there too much duplication and inefficiency? Hard for me to disagree. But to quote a highly followed, well-informed, and non-partisan writer and blogger from his daily political newsletter last Friday:

He’s [Gov. Rauner] also forcing a showdown with universities over what he believes to be their profligate spending habits (and he’s not alone), particularly on administrative costs. Rauner strongly signaled this week via a memo sent to legislators ... that he will not go along with funding MAP Grants and higher ed operations until he gets some significant university spending reforms ... the governor has long itched for this fight, so it’s on.

Believe me ... I get it. Eventually, though, the people of Illinois — her citizenry, taxpayers, parents, students — are going to have to decide what kind of public higher education they want. Are we to turn a large swath of our state universities into (basically) large community colleges by default ... or is it too late to regain some of the stature and parity we once held with outstanding state higher education systems such as California and Wisconsin?

Only time will tell.

Randy Dunn

Faces of SIU



Many of us – too many – have been affected in some way by Alzheimer’s disease, whether in our own families or among friends. The Alzheimer’s Association estimates 5 million people are living with the disease, and 15 million more serve as caregivers.

Ken Witt and his colleagues in SIUE’s School of Pharmacy understand the magnitude of the problem, and they are focused on finding long-needed solutions.

Ken, an associate professor in the Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, joined the faculty shortly after the pharmacy school opened in October 2005.

He earned his doctorate from the University of Arizona’s Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology.

The pathological characteristics of Alzheimer’s are well studied. But, as Ken notes, there is no treatment to prevent, stop or reverse the progression of the disease. The only treatments available are drugs that temporarily slow the worsening of symptoms for six to 12 months for about half of the individuals who take them. The goal of Ken’s program “is to advance a viable drug to not only slow the symptoms but to halt the actual disease progression.”

“I and others in the Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences are uniquely positioned for this goal, being very well accomplished scientists with the critical expertise and necessary know-how to develop, evaluate, and optimize drug candidates,” Ken said.

The National Institutes of Health clearly agrees. Ken is the lead investigator on two grants awarded last year. One of the grants, which started in June, is for five years; it is focused on bringing forward a viable new drug candidate (or candidates) to treat Alzheimer’s.

“At this stage, my collaborators and I are in the process of design and initial testing of compounds in non-human models of Alzheimer’s disease progression,” Ken said. “The work involves numerous approaches and technologies, which includes the disciplines of medicinal chemistry, computational chemistry, pharmacology, toxicology, and pharmaceuticals.”

The second grant, awarded in August, is for two years; Ken describes it as “more of a primary scientific discovery-driven grant.”

“This award focuses on the impact of diet on the health of the brain vasculature,” he explained. “The impact of diet and specific forms of dietary fat on the health of the brain through changes in the brain’s vasculature has broad implications, given the corresponding surge in obesity in Western society. Moreover, the correlations and contributions of obesity to brain-related illnesses (e.g., stroke, dementia, etc.) have been well documented.”

Thanks for your commitment to finding solutions to this dreaded disease, Ken. Lots of folks are rooting for you and your colleagues.
