



THE SYSTEM CONNECTION

Greetings:

At long last, Illinois higher education finally received some needed attention last week at the State Capitol – and in the media both statewide and nationally as many of you have likely noted. Not surprisingly, I want to use today's column to make sure everyone is up-to-speed regarding developments that have been breaking with the budget situation.

One aspect from last week's scurried activity that did not receive a lot of publicity was another letter that the presidents of Illinois' public universities sent to Governor Rauner and the legislative leadership. We reiterated the same key budget priorities on behalf of all of our students, and stated yet again: "The prolonged budget impasse is already inflicting irreversible damage on our four-year public universities and each day that passes with no relief makes it that much more difficult to educate our students and fulfill our mission of service to the state."

No one is under any assumption that a single letter changes anything, although it is a marvelous feat to get nine presidents to unanimity on the wording of such a letter. But in light of the acrimonious memo released by Governor Rauner's office, which I linked to in the *Connection* last time — let alone a subsequent correspondence written by the same governor's staffer specifically calling out Chicago State University — it became necessary once again to blast the clarion call of impending catastrophe for HIED in this state. If I learned one thing during my time in state office, it was to never give an elected official the opportunity to say to you: "But you never told us it was this bad."

All that being said, many of us were gratified to see legislative efforts in both the Illinois House and Senate – with leadership from both sides of the aisle — to address the funding crisis we're facing. Multiple proposals have now been dropped into each chamber's bill hopper. Here is a brief look at the bills that were introduced:

- In the House, a Democratic-sponsored measure to fund community colleges and Monetary Award Program grants (but no operating funds for the universities) passed, but with only Democratic support. It was a step in the right direction, but nonetheless, the governor indicated he would veto it. More on that in a moment ...
- Also in the House: A Republican-backed bill would fund MAP grants and community colleges at 90 percent, and university operations at 80 percent of their FY15 appropriation (still a

whopping \$40 million less in state support for just the SIU System). However, for this proposal to move forward, a companion bill would also have to be passed giving the governor authority to sweep special funds and suspend payments to providers and entities such as local governments.

- In the Senate, a member of the University of Illinois “delegation,” Sen. Scott Bennett (D-Champaign), introduced a measure that would fund HIED at the level approved by the General Assembly last May, which included an 8.6 percent reduction in appropriations. It does not include MAP funding nor any dedicated revenue stream.
- And further on the Senate side: Sen. Chapin Rose, a Mahomet Republican (whose district covers catchment areas for both UIUC and EIU), is sponsoring a bill that includes 100 percent of the MAP funding, 80 percent for public universities, and 90 percent for community colleges — all based on the FY16 legislative budget ... which was vetoed by the governor last spring. Sen. Rose includes higher education procurement reform to help pay for the proposal and those sweeping procurement changes were proposed just yesterday.

The House Democrats’ bill for MAP funding obviously doesn’t solve all of our problems – as it doesn’t yet include desperately needed operating funds – but it at least addresses the tremendous need of the more than 6,500 undergraduates at SIUC and SIUE who rely on those grants to stay in school. That bill gets those students to the front of the line of groups and entities still waiting for a state appropriation, while providing a badly needed infusion of some cash for those colleges and universities that fronted MAP funds this year. And, the HDems are telling us they will come back again this spring to address the still-missing operating support in their bill.

Of course, there will be those who would argue that we should support legislation today that would give us 80 percent of our appropriation — the argument being that something is better than nothing. Believe me, I get it. But we can’t just lie down and accede to giving up \$40 million! Remember this too: That would be *on top of* the \$45 million (a non-cumulative figure by the way) SIU has lost in state support since FY02. The work we do and the role we fulfill is too important to simply sign off on such a devastating cut, one that would not only negatively impact our students, but also the huge portion of Illinois that we serve. Plus, the SIU campuses have already made significant cuts — all predicated on an FY16 appropriation that included that 8.6 percent reduction that we universities accepted in an effort to be good partners in our state’s ongoing budget struggle ... until it was vetoed by the governor.

As alluded to at the start of the column, most of you have no doubt seen at least a few of the stories in the state and national press about the plight of certain of Illinois’ public universities. For example, Chicago State University has reported it won’t be able to meet its payroll come March. A little closer to home, we’ve read where both Western Illinois and Eastern Illinois have layoffs pending, furloughs possible, and are exploring cuts to what all would consider their core academic programs.

Many readers know well that I spend a lot of time out and about at various SIU locations and talk to a lot of different SIU people. So I know there’s a funk out there right now that’s palpable. Uncertainty abounds in many offices ... individuals are stressed and badly needing some breathing room ... there’s worry about whether anyone is really in charge of this mess we’ve got at the state level ... and that same concern rolls down to the system and campuses.

All across SIU we made significant budget reductions coming into FY16 to get us through what we thought last summer would be the worst that we could see. Who knew then that we'd be approaching two-thirds of the fiscal year without any spending plan and still no appropriation. To carry us even further, on to this point — beyond what anyone imagined could happen eight months ago — we've borrowed internally against reserve set-asides, depleted balances in special funds and accounts (which also must be paid back), heavily reduced discretionary spending, and taken other steps to conserve every bit of cash we can.

But — and I'll argue this point with anyone — we haven't yet abandoned our core mission. If you consider the extreme responses some of our sister institutions are having to take, the “center” at SIU is still holding. I know it doesn't always feel like it, but so far we've been able to prevent the slow dismantling — the picking apart, really — of our great university. While always being responsive to the budgetary realities and demands for political accountability, we'll keep doing that and stagger through to June 30.

But what happens after that? As much as I want to offer all of our employees and students a measure of certainty about what takes place beyond July 1, as FY17 begins, there is just no way to predict how or when this budget impasse will be resolved ... and what that portends for SIU. What I do know is that we will have to deal with it — and deal with it we shall in a manner that retains as much of what “makes SIU” as we can. We're experiencing an earthquake right now. Once that's over — and it will eventually be over, even if many months from now — we'll pick up the pieces we've got and go on.

Governor Rauner is scheduled to deliver his budget address two weeks from today, on February 17. I would speculate that if he proposes a reduction to HIED funding akin to what he did a year ago, prudence will demand that we formulate a “doomsday” list of cuts — taking into account any outcomes from the budgetary and program review processes underway at both SIUE and SIUC — to share with the General Assembly during our appropriations hearings which start in March. Speaking truth to power, we may have to get even more explicit on just how bad things could get if we are to prevent the doomsday scenario from happening.

Since the date of the budget address coincides with what would be the date of the next *Connection*, I'm going to take several days afterward involving our Trustees and senior staff system-wide to digest the specifics of the governor's message, figuring out how we might best respond. As such, my return to this space will be pushed back to February 24 to explain to you at that time what it all could mean for the SIU System.

The greatest challenge in drastic times like this is not to defeat ourselves. It's easy to fall into that trap. But you've seen the T-shirts already: “Keep Calm and Carry On” is the best organizational response we can have. Every one of us needs to push on with the great work we are known for on behalf of our students, our region and our state — and no one should play into the hands of those whose destiny for us may be otherwise.

Randy Dunn

Faces of SIU

One of the folks I often encounter during my visits to the School of Medicine is Security Guard Ron Sandhaas – on more than one occasion, he has been assigned to transporting me, the dean or other



SOM personnel between Capitol Airport in Springfield and the campus downtown. He joined the Office and Police and Security in 1989, and with his commitment to service and his engaging personality, he is a great representative of SOM.

Ron is one of 10 security guards and eight police officers whose priority is the safety of our students, faculty and staff, and SOM's many patients and visitors, as well as protecting our physical facilities.

“My responsibilities can range from directing lost patients to making sure that a research freezer with 20-plus years of research and that represents millions of dollars in grants is running normally,” he said. And, though Ron and his fellow security guards can't make arrests, they respond to calls if police officers are not immediately available.

In addition to his many years with SOM, Ron has been a certified EMT for 30 years and has logged thousands of volunteer hours. He retired in 2013 as a captain from the Sangamon County Rescue Squad, which he served for 25 years. Both he and his wife, Roderica, have been EMTs in the rural community they live in just west of Springfield for the past 15 years. That's an impressive commitment.

As a Springfield native, Ron has witnessed the impressive growth of the School of Medicine and its reputation on the national level, and he makes no secret of how proud he is to be a part of that.

Though it may not always be obvious, Ron and the other dedicated members of his department are very much a part of that success story.
