



## THE SYSTEM CONNECTION

Greetings:

I heard from about as many folks as ever after my last column, when we debuted the “WTH Segment,” highlighting some of the more head-scratching developments we run across in HIED. So even though I said this would be only an occasional offering -- the bulk of today's column kind of fits that billing as well. See if you agree when you read the following ...

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Some of you who follow the higher education trade press – such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or *Inside Higher Ed* – perhaps recently read about the growing effort to persuade the U.S. Department of Education to revoke the status of the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (or ACICS) as a recognized accreditor of for-profit institutions. ACICS is essentially the fed's regional institutional accreditor for that specific college and university community, much like the Higher Learning Commission serves the public and non-profit private institutions throughout the Midwest.

The WTH aspect of all this, of course, is simply that ACICS has even been allowed to continue “overseeing” institutions that destroy the hopes and dreams ... and bank accounts ... of thousands of students. Think Corinthian Colleges. Or Westwood College. Or Daymar. Many of the investigations and settlements involving the for-profit bad actors resulted from allegations of falsified job placements rates of graduates, who were often forced to max out on student loans to complete the programs ostensibly preparing students for those jobs.

Postsecondary institutional accreditation in this country is a three-legged stool involving states, accrediting agencies and the federal government. The U.S. Department of Education defers to a host of approved regional and special accreditors around the country to determine that colleges and universities are delivering on promises of excellence in teaching, research and public service. As alluded to above, SIUC and SIUE are among 1,200 educational institutions in a 19-state region accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. (The School of Medicine also is fully accredited, but by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education, one of the special accreditors.) Importantly, it is only through accreditation from one of the recognized accreditors that students are able to access federal financial aid. Obviously, those funds are key to the profit part of the for-profit institutions.

Among those involved in the move to stop ACICS renewal as an accreditor for USED is Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan, who joined with 12 other state attorneys generals to send a letter earlier this month to the Department of Education. Of ACICS, they wrote: “Its decisions to accredit low-quality for-profit schools have ruined the lives of hundreds of thousands of vulnerable students whom it was charged to protect. It has enabled a great fraud upon our students and taxpayers.”

Once you learn more about some of the worst transgressions of ACICS, you will understand why I took a few minutes last week to send a personal thank-you note to AG Madigan.

In the same vein, a large coalition of national HIED organizations has also written to the Department of Education in opposition to ACICS. In the words of their collective letter: “We come to this conclusion as firsthand observers of the substantial damage to the lives of hundreds of thousands of students across the country caused by choices made by ACICS that have allowed low-performing, predatory institutions of higher education access to billions of dollars in taxpayer funds.”

Both letters cite an [analysis](#) of ACICS by *ProPublica*, which is a non-profit, independent newsroom involved in investigative journalism. Here are a few of the issues:

- Just 35 percent of students at institutions accredited by ACICS graduate – 16 percentage points worse than any of its peer agencies.
- 60 percent of borrowers at ACICS institutions had defaulted or failed to make progress repaying their loans within three years of leaving school – 13 percentage points worse than any peer agency.
- From the attorneys general's letter: "ACICS' most spectacular failure was its decision to extend accreditation to several dozen schools operated by Corinthian Colleges. Corinthian's practice of offering extremely expensive degrees of little value to low-income students has been the target of more than 20 state and federal law enforcement agencies. Yet ACICS continued to provide accreditation to Corinthian's schools until the day Corinthian declared bankruptcy. The U.S. taxpayer provided approximately \$3.5 billion to Corinthian, made possible by ACICS' accreditation."
- ACICS has representatives of many of the "problem" schools on its own board and committees ... a serious conflict of interest that casts significant doubt on its ability to impartially evaluate those and other schools. A February 2016 *ProPublica* analysis found that two-thirds of ACICS commissioners are current or former college executives. One out of every three are representatives from institutions that have or are facing legal challenges from the state and federal governments.

I am probably most familiar with one of the for-profits cited in the attorneys' general letter from my time as president of Murray State. Daymar College had a storefront operation in an old building in Paducah. For anyone who had any background in our business, you knew it was a pitiful operation. As cited by the 13 AGs: "Daymar College employed dozens of unqualified faculty as determined by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education and the Kentucky Attorney General, yet ACICS took no action to rebuke the school or require remedies for students." Daymar did eventually settle with the Kentucky AG, providing \$11 million in debt relief and \$1.2 million in "student redress."

The Department of Education is expected to conduct its review of ACICS in June.

And in late-breaking news that some of you may have seen announced Monday, the head of ACICS has decided to step down. I guess we'll see if that move does anything to improve the ACICS case for continued recognition as the USED heads into its final decision making. I would hope it won't. That organization has made a travesty of the institutional accreditation process ... and all of us who take it seriously, and try to do it the right way (sometimes frustratingly so), also take a hit on our own credibility when these organizations and institutions escape accountability.

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### **News From the Front**

Since we last talked, there have been some continuing signs of hope from Springfield on the budget front -- especially within the last 24 hours. Right now, there are a number of legislative proposals being discussed, and one in particular seems to be gaining good steam. Rep. Mike Fortner has proposed a stopgap plan for higher education funding that would be a kind of "continuing resolution" to fund the public universities through August 31 in addition to providing a semester of MAP funding. For SIU System operations, that would push out about one-third of the regular annual appropriation, or close to \$62 million, for us.

Too, fortunately, there is an immediately available (though not recurring) funding source for that roughly half-billion dollars that would be needed to provide a similar funding level for the other publics. The state's Education Assistance Fund, which receives certain tax revenues that are split between K-12 and HIED, has just enough of a fund balance to cover the dollars needed under the Fortner plan.

Interestingly, the community colleges are seemingly not included in this "33% proposal," though it is important to remember the CCs have both the ability to levy a property tax as well as do short-term borrowing ... which the universities don't on either count. The governor's office appears to be open to the Fortner proposal and (as of my writing this late yesterday afternoon) three Republican House members with public universities in their districts are even signing on as co-sponsors — Dan Brady at ISU, Bob Pritchard at NIU and Reggie Phillips at EIU.

This is far from a perfect fix, I acknowledge. As I said above, this is a stopgap measure to buy time and continued viability for the state's system of public higher education while work continues toward a grand-bargain solution as we approach Fiscal Year 17. Certainly, a recurring revenue source is going to have to be addressed as part of breaking the impasse for good. Whether or not this becomes a fatal flaw with the Fortner bill remains to be seen. Other avenues also remain. Senate Bill 2046 passed last week and would provide substantial funding for SIU, although the governor has indicated

he would veto it. The bill did not receive a sufficient number of “yea” votes in the House to sustain a veto override. (See SB2046 House roll call [here](#).)

But we have arrived at a place where we now have to get into the queue. Just as Illinois Comptroller Leslie Munger announced Sunday that she is going to make the legislators and statewide elected officials suffer the same delay on their monthly paychecks as other state non-employee payees experience (typically about two months now on most warrants sitting at the comptroller's office), SIU is willing to take its turn in line with others if need be. But we at least have to be allowed in the line!

We need an appropriation ... we need an authorization ... so we can keep staving off the worst of the outcomes we've been forced to announce if no deal is otherwise figured out. And for one or two of our sister publics, this potential short-term patch holds existential importance.

There seems to be as much cautious (read, *extremely* cautious) optimism as we've seen in months, so light a candle ... rub your lucky rabbit's foot ... say a chant ... put on your lucky socks ... or do whatever works for you in these situations in hopes that progress will keep moving forward. Time is running out on all of our institutions, and the students and regions we serve -- so while this isn't a permanent solution by any means -- it at least buys us time until the larger answer emerges. Stay tuned.

Randy Dunn

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## Faces of SIU

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Connie Becerra is one of the thousands of front-line employees across the SIU System who make each day a bit better for our students. She's a Dining Services cashier in the center court area of SIUE's Morris University Center, and having gone through her line a couple of times, I know how much the students appreciate her – and how much she enjoys the students.

Connie, who is one of 11 cashiers, started in the job in 2000, shortly after her family moved from Chicago to Edwardsville; husband Phil is in the Air National Guard and he was transferred to Scott Air Force Base.

The interaction with students is the best part of the job for Connie; she enjoys watching them “grow up” during their time on campus.

“I feel like a surrogate mom for them,” she said. “When I see them, I give them a smile and a hug. They don't have a whole lot of time. They will come back when they're not as busy to talk – sometimes it's about boyfriends and girlfriends, sometimes it's about parents. I had a student-athlete who really wanted to drop sports so he could focus on academics, but his parents wanted him to stay with his sport. He didn't know what to do, and I just told him to be honest with them. He came back from Christmas break so excited because he was able to convince his parents to let him drop the sport.”

And there are the students who talk with Connie about skipping classes. They don't get a sympathetic ear from her.

She also appreciates her fellow cashiers – “one big team,” she calls them. Connie had to miss significant work time last year due to back surgery, and her colleagues pitched in to cover for her.

Connie may retire in four years ... though she might instead try to scale back to part-time. “I really like my job, and I would miss the students,” she said.

SIUE's students are fortunate to have more than cashiers in the lines at the Morris University Center; they have good friends and advocates in their lives.

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