



THE SYSTEM CONNECTION

Greetings:

As our state budget saga drags on — soon into its fifth month of the fiscal year — it seems wrong not to use my *Connection* column each time to provide some kernel of new information or update about the impasse.

However — since not much notable has been happening in Springfield to these many weeks — it's been a little tough to generate a column's worth of fodder on *anything* substantial that would put us on a path for solving what has become a full-blown funding crisis for Illinois public higher education. Thus, I resorted in September to doing my three-column primer series on HIED funding, followed by the free speech piece two weeks ago.

And although it didn't move the needle much toward any resolution of this mess we find ourselves in, last Thursday's highly publicized 45-minute meeting between the state university (and some community college) presidents and Governor Rauner did provide keen insight into some of his thinking — and maybe even his convictions — on the subject of post-secondary education in Illinois.

First a little background: The presidents had requested a face-to-face meeting with the governor a number of weeks ago. Our collective desire at the time of asking for what we characterized as an "emergency" sit-down was to ensure that the governor and his senior leadership team were well-versed on the range of significant fiscal challenges in front of all the state institutions ... not just for limping through the fall semester, but also keeping the doors open through the spring term.

It should be said too that the meeting with Governor Rauner came subsequent to two previous sessions with the legislative leadership — one this past May, and the other earlier last week — where many of the same issues were raised. We're appreciative of the time taken by all four leaders to meet with us as well.

So while I won't break any confidences shared, nor otherwise report on what may be considered privileged information from our executive session, I certainly came away with a richer understanding of how Governor Rauner would seek to move Illinois' higher education system forward — and what he thinks we need to do to improve our effectiveness and efficiency.

You'll see that the (lengthy) remainder of today's column is organized only slightly better than a stream-of-consciousness meditation — but I've tried here to capture some major assumptions and big ideas that the governor disclosed to our group and which formed the basis of a cordial, respectful discussion and meaningful give-and-take between our state's chief executive and the presidents.

Of course, as you will see in my laying out of these impressions, I can't help but provide a little follow-on commentary (if not rank speculation) regarding the impact of each for the SIU System. But hey — it at least gives me something on-point to write about for this week!

Herewith, my thoughts — in no particular order:

The governor is highly supportive of higher education for its role in promoting innovation statewide and providing a return on investment for Illinois, economic and otherwise.

Governor Rauner explicitly stated his desire that — once we get through this budget crisis and presumably on more stable fiscal footing — he wants to be able to provide increased resources for supporting and strengthening Illinois HIED. He realizes that a healthy public post-secondary system is a crucial element to ensure any state's vibrancy, quality of life, and attractiveness.

However, just as certain is my belief that we're going to see a concerted push from this governor for an increased reliance on performance funding — while maybe not for the FY16 budget, whenever that may be — then in future budgets. At present, PF drives only 0.5% of our general state support; look for it to play a significantly larger role in the out-years of a Rauner Administration.

While the presidents as a group are not opposed to performance measures driving some level of funding, we did take the opportunity to remind the governor of some of the common traps of these systems, such as unclear criteria and metrics (including the availability of good data to support the measures selected) or unintended consequences from schools that “game the system” (e.g., limiting access of less-prepared students solely to push up graduation and retention rates).

One dominant theme the governor views as characterizing higher education in the state is over-capacity.

Capacity can be thought of in multiple ways. One that comes to mind, certainly, is having excess seats or slots available at a given campus. In this sense, a flagship or highly regarded private university might never have over-capacity ... since enrollment demand allows it to fill every seat it has open. Governor Rauner's view of over-capacity, though, speaks more to a duplication of academic programs across the 12 public campuses in the state. How many MBAs should Illinois institutions offer? Is there an unnecessary duplication in Ph.D. programs across our public doctoral-granting universities? Should specific publics concentrate or specialize in certain undergraduate majors (e.g., agriculture, engineering, nursing, architecture, etc.) that would then not be eligible for funding support beyond those state-designated campuses? Please note: All of these are *my* illustrative questions ... not the governor's. But you get the idea. The State University of New York — SUNY — and some other large higher education systems nationally do a version of this already.

One point I shared in this vein is that if we're moving to this sort of “rationing” of state-funded degree programs, then a precondition to accomplish that goal must be a strong state agency or other honest broker to lead decision making in what would be a sea change in HIED policy for Illinois. Whether the Illinois Board of Higher Education would be in a position to guide this work is a separate question unto itself, but as I told Governor Rauner, “We probably won't get any decisions made by locking the nine presidents in a room together.” For those of us around long enough to remember the old PQP (Priorities, Quality & Productivity) process with the IBHE from 20+ years ago ... here's a hint that some new-fangled version could well be coming back.

Another dominant theme the governor views as characterizing higher education in the state is overhead.

Such as in too much of it. We pushed during the discussion to tease out just what this meant to the governor. Too many administrators? Utilization of state funds for regional service efforts? Fixed costs too high? Governor Rauner's answer was really “all of the above.” He was crystal clear that he wants the universities to maximize their dollars spent for teaching students in our classrooms, labs, studios, and other learning spaces — and that state support should be reserved only for what he described as our “mission critical” enterprises.

To his credit, though, Mr. Rauner acknowledged two things that struck me as positive notes: 1) Institutional mission will be defined in various ways, unique to each campus; and 2) research institutions, by their nature, are understandably going to rack up higher overhead costs than those that primarily emphasize instruction. There is no doubt that he understands we each do different things ... but he just as firmly believes we can all get our overhead and fixed costs down.

The governor holds Illinois' community colleges in extremely high regard.

This one may be obvious on its face, given Governor Rauner's budget proposal from last February that flat-funded the CCs ... while cutting the public universities by 31.5%.

Part of his appreciation for their mission, I'm sure, is related to the affordability issue. However, I sense his affinity for our higher education partners goes beyond only that — the governor spoke most positively of the career and technical preparation role which they own heavily. He further speculated about the possibility of moving a large chunk of developmental education responsibilities away from the community colleges — and back to the high schools — but not at the expense of limiting adult re-entry and access ... also a big part of the colleges' business.

All of this does make me wonder if Governor Rauner's affection for the community colleges will provide them increased traction as they almost certainly try another run at baccalaureate degree-granting authority during an upcoming legislative session. We'll see.

A few other notions and notables from our brief time together:

--- For reasons I won't go into here (though he has commented on this some publicly over the past week), Governor Rauner does not see the budget stalemate ending until mid-January at best ... and he acknowledges it will take a multi-pronged approach to get to a solution.

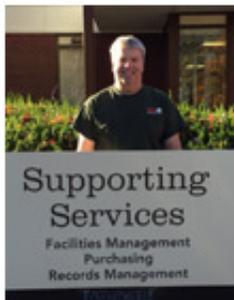
--- The governor spoke to the role of the need-based MAP grants — the universities are toting this note for the state, to the tune of millions of dollars for SIU — important to so many of our students. He messaged that from a policy perspective he would like to look at how best to utilize MAP going forward.

--- Much discussion of tuition was noticeable by its absence, and I thought that a little curious I guess. Who knows — time went quickly, and not every topic could get covered. Or maybe it signals that as a means to better get state costs under control, this governor has a little more openness to a “high tuition-high aid” model than we've generally seen from, say, the legislators here in Illinois.

Alright ... I know this has gone on too long now, and I need to close it up. I've met my share of governors from a number of states in my jobs over the years, especially during my stint as state schools' superintendent — attending national meetings and the like. You can disagree with his strategy — which I do ... and he understands that — but our gov is as smart and focused to his purpose and cause as any other I've encountered. We'll see where the political currents take him ... and us ... but I have no doubt our model is changing. And we will have to keep waiting to see what our “new normal” is.

Randy Dunn

Faces of SIU



Greg Herbeck is one of the many folks across our three campuses whose job it is to make sure the rest of us can do ours.

Greg joined Facilities Management's plumbing department at SIUE in 1999 to administer the Cross Connection Program. It's not something most of us ever hear about, but we all benefit from it: The program assures the monitoring and protection of the water supply from contamination and pollution for students, faculty, staff and campus visitors.

Greg took on even greater responsibility just about a year ago when he was promoted to plumbing foreman. He now oversees the day-to-day operations of the plumbing, heating and air conditioning, refrigeration and piping systems for SIUE, the dental school in Alton and the East St. Louis campus.

His contributions to the university extend well beyond his daily job responsibilities. For 10 years, he served on SIUE's Staff Senate, which represents Civil Service and Professional staff. He also chaired — and still serves on — the Staff Senate's Policy Review Committee, which has allowed him to be a voice for the staff. Among the most rewarding aspects of serving on the Staff Senate, Greg says, was “the fundraising efforts to provide scholarships to children of the SIUE staff.”

He also was involved in the “ConnectionsNOW” initiative --a quality service training program for staff that was implemented over the course of more than two years. And, he now is serving on the 20-member chancellor search advisory committee at SIUE. “It is an honor to be chosen to take on the important responsibility of selecting the next chancellor, who will take us through many challenges in these turbulent times,” Greg says, adding, “My involvement in this process will be a highlight of my career.”

Thanks, Greg, for your commitment and your many contributions to the growth of SIUE.
