



THE SYSTEM CONNECTION

Greetings:

Regular readers of *The Connection* know that I like to use this space to provide background following meetings of our Board of Trustees. The Board tackled a weighty agenda last week while meeting at SIU Edwardsville, and I want to touch on a couple of the key topics.

In my report to the BOT, I mentioned the plans for Gov. Bruce Rauner to speak at SIUC's 1:30 p.m. commencement ceremony on May 16. By now, many of you are aware of the controversy this has generated since the governor proposed a 31.5 percent cut to our state appropriation. I have said many times, including in this space, in the press and before legislative appropriations committees, how devastating those cuts would be to our campuses, the regions we serve, and the state. And I will continue to press our compelling case.

It is true that I extended the invitation for the governor to speak at commencement back in January, before he delivered his budget address in February. And while I appreciate everyone's right to express their opinions about his visit, I stand behind my invitation. Few other images can make as powerful an impression on the governor than seeing the results of the state's investment in higher education in person.

Gov. Rauner will address 700 graduates of the College of Business and the College of Education and Human Services, along with thousands of proud family members and friends who will pack the SIU Arena to celebrate this milestone. Though we strongly disagree with him on funding for higher education, I encourage everyone attending that ceremony to be respectful of the governor. That is no different than what we expect with the free exchange of ideas every day on our campuses – and which serves as the foundation of our institution ... indeed, of all of higher education.

The Southern Illinoisan said as much in an editorial on April 14, and I want to share a bit of that here, as I did last week with the Board of Trustees: "Universities, by their very nature, are unique bastions of society's most important form of liberty. Ideas drive civilizations. Limited information and oppression of expression, not armies, are what leash the populace ... Universities are the ultimate defense against repressed minds. Free ideas, especially those found disagreeable by the mob, must be aired and debated. That's how this works."

The biggest news from the BOT meeting was the 5 percent tuition increase for new undergraduates and transfer students for next fall. This was not a hasty decision by the Trustees; in fact, they studied the issue over a two-month period. We all are firmly committed to SIU's proud legacy of accessibility and affordability, but we also must be cognizant of current realities and future possibilities.

We had previously shared with the Board tuition scenarios ranging from no increase to a 10 percent increase. You may recall that last year, the Board held the line on tuition, meaning that we have to live with no additional money for those students for all four years they're here even though we know there will be increased costs to educate them, such as with utilities and other costs we cannot control. The 5 percent increase is like a 1.25 percent increase a year over the new undergraduates' four years on campus – since they are guaranteed the same tuition rate for four consecutive years. That is less than inflation and we'll have to absorb the true cost of educating these students over their four years on campus.

We are continuing our extensive budget discussions system-wide and we are diligently working on plans for reductions, believe me. We are waiting for a definitive percentage cut so we can make informed decisions. At the same time, we have had no choice but to respond to the suspension of a number of state grants as part of the state's effort to plug the current fiscal year's budget gap. Those include \$3.5 million that supported the Illinois Clean Coal Institute, and by extension, several sub-contractors, including SIUE (though no personnel are affected there). In addition, unless something changes by June 30, SIUC's Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders, which serves 150 children and families in central and southern Illinois, will close.

The result of these grant suspensions is that we notified seven Administrative/Professional staff members at SIUC that their positions are being eliminated, and we sent a layoff notice to one Civil Service staff member. Two other Civil Service employees will be reassigned. We also eliminated two temporary extra help positions, and 24 graduate assistantships will be eliminated effective May 15. A number of faculty also are affected by the suspension of the coal grant, mostly through the loss of summer salary funding for projects, so their research is impacted as well.

Some grants that support SIUC's Office of Economic and Regional Development, as well as WSIU Public Broadcasting, also have been cut. We also learned that the \$2 million in state funds we were expecting to support construction of SIUC's new greenhouse – which is a vital part of our agricultural program – have been put on hold, and the Illinois Board of Higher Education will not fund SIUE's RN-BS nursing program next year. All told, the reductions add up to more than \$10 million.

I will close this edition of *The Connection* with a piece of good news: The proposal to eliminate the 50 percent tuition discount for children of university employees appears to be off the table for the spring legislative session. That is a benefit that helps us attract quality employees – and their talented sons and daughters – so we can all breathe a sigh of relief.

Randy Dunn