



THE SYSTEM CONNECTION

Greetings!

Unbelievably, I'm now well into my sixth month as SIU's president. In these initial months — returning after an absence of ten years — you might be surprised to hear me say that I've been impressed with the ongoing strength of our university system. Let me try to explain.

No doubt, each of our campuses will always have their own challenges to wrestle with — such is the nature of large, complex organizations — and our financial future will have to be carefully navigated, but all of us can be tremendously proud of what SIU has accomplished in its nearly 150-year history...while remaining excited for all that is to come.

What I've witnessed in these six months — in meeting, talking and otherwise interacting with literally hundreds of people representing every avenue of our university's endeavors...both internal and external to SIU...and across all of our locations in Illinois — is that our *people* continue to ensure our organizational health and strength as we head into a formidable period for higher education.

Like every human capital enterprise (and what is a university, if not that?) SIU's strength must come from its people. Educating students — our core work — is ultimately about making connections...connections require relationships and commitment...and the focus of any such relationship or commitment is other individuals and groups. In the end, the most successful universities by definition are about people — and about what the institution does to contribute to their success.

Since students are our first focus, this responsibility resides heavily with faculty. They directly engage our students in classrooms, studios, laboratories, clinics, stages, athletic fields, offices, hospitals, schools, and numerous other venues on our campuses and in our communities.

Of course, the 5,200+ staff who make SIU run each day also undertake countless actions that build our students' backgrounds and contribute to their success way beyond the academic context — in residence and dining halls, counseling centers, work-study jobs, student organizations, extracurricular activities, and the like. Alumni, too, provide our students opportunities for knowledge transfer and skill enhancement in real-world settings, while contributing to their career and leadership development through internships, professional

seminars, off-campus experiences, and other projects. Students even do this for other students on a peer-to-peer basis as they come together to create community on our campuses.

The mentoring that we *all* provide our SIU students across myriad settings is a big part of preparing students to be full participants in a global society. Certainly, the state-of-the-art educational experiences and guidance our faculty provide are invaluable. But a university education — in the words of a former presidential colleague of mine from Ohio — is more so an amalgamated “series of...spaces where students come together to invent and remix knowledge and approaches.” Even for a younger, traditional-age student, the totality of the “SIU experience” provides a foundation for the formation of autonomous thinking...and even wisdom. And that wisdom leads to a richer, more fulfilling, and more meaningful life for our students.

So all of us at SIU share an important job: Developing the human capital necessary for the coming generations. As such, that means that every interaction we have with our students matters.

But as I alluded to earlier, this is a tough time for public higher education. For the first time that nearly any of us can recall, our basic operating model is being called into serious question for its cost and return-on-investment. At the same time, the communities where SIU has locations always want us to do more — improving the civic and economic life of the places we impact in central and southern Illinois. Those of us working in HIED are trying to make sense of a flurry of challenges arising from revenue restrictions; rising costs of technology, healthcare, and other fixed expenses; heavy governmental regulation; new competitive markets; and a host of other factors. I might go so far as to say that I don’t think we’ve seen a time of more tension and collective worry in higher education since the campus strife and crises of the late 1960s.

Admittedly, I don’t know where all of this will eventually take us. But I am positive that one thing will endure, no matter the waves buffeting us in the years to come: SIU will remain a people enterprise. I firmly believe the creativity, innovation, enthusiasm, passion, and energy of our faculty, staff, students, alumni, and friends — if we can maintain that as a constant — will carry us through the struggles that are in store for us. (More about some of those in future columns...)

Our people have historically been SIU’s strength...and they will be in the future. As I reflect on these first few months, let me say how proud I am to be associated with all of you...the people of SIU.

A Follow-Up Note: I’ve had questions come up around a couple of different items since my first *Connection* column. If I could, I wanted to take a minute to address those:

- A few folks have asked about inviting me to attend, speak, give a greeting, or whatever at a class, event, activity, meeting, or other happening — both internal to SIU as well as out in the community. While I can’t accept every invitation I get, I will always do my

best to accommodate these requests wherever they may be as my calendar will allow. Paula Keith does all the scheduling and she can be reached at 618.536.3471 or pkeith@siu.edu. Just be aware that I'm generally pretty well booked about three to four weeks out at any given point.

- In that first column I had talked about how, some years ago, we used to share Illinois Board of Higher Education news via a print publication from the SIU System office. If you are interested in getting updates on IBHE and related stuff, you can go directly to their website and subscribe to their electronic newsletter, the *Friday Memo*. Sign up at www.ibhe.org/MailingList.

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