



## THE SYSTEM CONNECTION

Greetings:

This past weekend I had the opportunity to participate in my first meeting of the professional group -- numbering about 55 men and women -- who have the same job I do ... serving as president or chancellor of a public university system. To give truth to the adage that there is indeed a professional organization for every vocation, no matter how narrowly defined, I was in Washington to attend the annual meeting of the National Association of System Heads, or NASH. The organization is only 35 years old and was formed to provide a kind of forum for the exchange of views and information among its members, with special attention to the perspectives and problems of those in system leadership roles.

So as you would imagine at such a meeting, there was plenty of discussion about various D.C. happenings and the merits -- or lack thereof -- of the numerous higher education initiatives being pushed by President Obama's administration at this time. (Oddly enough ... when flying into Chicago on Sunday night, my United flight had to sit on the tarmac for quite a long while ... waiting for Air Force One to get through O'Hare. President Obama had been in Chicago that evening to attend a Get Out The Vote effort for Gov. Quinn at Chicago State University.)

The president has been promising for some time now that he is going to "shake up" higher education, and given the number of initiatives, proposals and plans that are out there right now -- which people in my business are struggling to stay abreast of -- Mr. Obama is at least keeping us on our toes to be ready for whatever is coming next.

One of the biggest areas of concern that I have in terms of federal policy proposals -- and have since it was announced more than a year ago -- is the Department of Education's plan to come up with a means to "rate" all higher education institutions on the basis of their performance ... ultimately seeking legislative authority to tie our success *to the ability to access federal student aid* for our SIU enrollees. Ostensibly, students who attend the best or most effective schools under this scheme could receive larger Pell Grants and cheaper student loans. This proposed "Postsecondary Institutions Ratings System" -- or PIRS -- is essentially a performance funding plan and the president has said he wants it in effect by 2015, with the strings attached to the federal loan money no later than 2018.

I applaud the lofty goals behind such a pay-for-performance plan -- and we can't be in a position to shy away from good approaches that aim to increase accountability and

transparency -- but the devil is always in the details on big federal initiatives such as these. And during the months and years those details get worked out and de-bugged once a law like this takes effect, I worry about the impact it could have on both the SIUC and SIUE campuses.

Coming up with a ratings system that meaningfully captures the varied missions and goals of the entire range of higher education institutions (from the smallest community college to the largest national university) would seem to me to be an almost-impossible task. For a ratings system to tell you anything, it has to quantify complex elements and attributes of performance. But for a one-size-fits-all rating, there will need to be a simplifying -- and maybe even a distorting -- of these inherently difficult metrics in such a way that the rating actually interferes with an important part of an institution's focus. Let me try to explain how that can happen.

While we could debate the merits of how metrics such as the federal graduation rate or average student debt are calculated (one huge problem in the graduation rate calculation is that it entirely ignores transfer students), these are not the types of concerns I'm talking about. These measures are already reported in the "College Scorecard" published for each of us by the U.S. Department of Education (by the way, which may *also* undergo a vast expansion of data under the federal Higher Education Act reauthorization). No ... just as Peter McPherson, president of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, told the *Wall Street Journal*, my worry is over the fact that a university's rating could hinge on "incomplete and potentially misleading metrics."

One new measure touted for this PIRS model would include earnings data on graduates. Think of an institution with a disproportionate percentage of lower-paid -- yet vitally important -- graduates in the fields of social work, education, humanities, and other public service professions. Should that institution now change its proportion of students in those areas to boost ratings and ensure access to the same level of federal aid ... even at the expense of violating its traditional or historic mission? Worse yet ... maybe we should dumb down standards to push more students into higher-paying fields, figuring that they'll get jobs somewhere and help our score. Or do some schools even just start turning away at-risk students? You get my point.

(As an aside: Assuming the feds will move full-speed-ahead on a ratings model, I would exclude the community colleges completely, I think. I believe the data would suggest that many students in that sector are both place-bound and with lower incomes. Community colleges often are chosen on the basis of geography and ease-of-access -- even if there is a more highly rated college only two or three counties away. The community college decision so often comes down to things such as transportation costs, child care, and other factors that don't fit so well into a rating. Cutting a community college student's Pell money simply because he or she attends a school with a lower PIRS number will do nothing to advance the completion agenda ... but will instead increase those students' chances of dropping out. Any system that has the effect of penalizing the neediest students -- and the colleges that accept them -- is not one that can be defended.)

Just getting good data is going to be a problem too. A well-known HIED lobbyist got called out by the Secretary of Education when PIRS was announced, because the lobbyist suggested the feds had an obligation to have "perfect data" if student aid was going to be cut because of this rating. I'm not sure why the lobbyist's statement was viewed as controversial; when there is a high-stakes assessment (and cutting funding is about as high stakes as it gets), the data need to be accurate. Beyond the earnings data I mentioned above, think about the variability in such things as the net pricing across institutions or counting part-time student enrollment. I understand that the data will never be perfect, but it would seem to me that just maybe the data collection systems need to be first developed, tested and validated before then building a ratings system anchored to those data. (Let alone the fact we already submit a large amount of data to the state and federal governments...)

Well, for some of you I've probably gone on too long about this stuff, so I apologize! But sometimes the big, so-called "game-changer" ideas that sound great in theory can have unintended but explicit consequences for students. I've been through this before on the K-12 side as we invested a tremendous amount of time and money in a system for a decade -- No Child Left Behind -- that has now been largely abandoned as even the best schools eventually couldn't "win" under a rigged standard. I understand the desire of lawmakers, policy types, foundation funders and others to have a hard number to show the value of what we do as a public university system. And as a public university, I believe we must be accountable for our performance. However, I don't want any student at an SIU campus penalized in the name of creating yet one more uniform -- but unrealistic -- standard. There are myriad factors that drive college-going, consumer behavior, and whether a student succeeds in college. Our ability to respond to all of those factors is what is going to make us successful in what we do.

Randy Dunn