



THE SYSTEM CONNECTION

Greetings:

For the column this time, I've decided to share below the almost-final draft of an op/ed piece that I'm thinking of shopping to the statewide newspapers; it addresses the push by some Illinois community colleges to gain authority for offering baccalaureate degrees.

As you'll note in my comments, I'm not a strong proponent of this statewide policy initiative for the reasons I outline, though I can see the argument some community colleges could legitimately make to offer the bachelor's in select, high-demand fields. Read on and don't hesitate to let me know what you think. As mentioned above, I haven't yet decided with certainty whether to distribute this for wider publication, but I do believe there is some responsibility to use whatever bully pulpit I have to promote a larger conversation about this important decision for our state...as opposed to potentially just having legislation pushed through in the upcoming lame-duck session of the General Assembly without some more careful vetting and consideration.

As a participant in "Complete College America" and other important student success initiatives, the Southern Illinois University System accepts President Obama's recent challenge to produce eight million post-secondary graduates by 2020. Our longstanding commitments to access and affordability led to a tuition freeze this year, and we continue to implement programs and practices that contribute to degree completion, including nearly 100 transfer partnerships with community colleges. Dozens more are in development at both SIU Edwardsville and SIU Carbondale.

In response to the president's challenge, several states have authorized community colleges to grant bachelor's degrees. Illinois should be cautious about this approach, because there will be important consequences for taxpayers and students.

Proponents' additional rationales include the need to serve working and place-bound students and an attempt to reduce the cost of education. Those are not unwarranted arguments. Also, they contend that this approach will generate tuition savings, increase access for under-served populations, improve retention and college completion, and eliminate the cost of relocating to a new institution.

In fact, this approach might instead carry significant costs for the state and our universities...and to the mission of the community colleges. In addition to program duplication, there will likely be significant start-up costs, including for expanded library holdings, upgraded facilities and additional faculty with terminal degrees – resources that already exist at our universities. Community colleges would have to meet new, more stringent accreditation standards. And there is a very real risk that the community

colleges' main focus, on associate and certificate degree and adult education programs, will be undermined, as will articulation and associate degree transfer agreements.

To serve the place-bound community college student, we agree with the need to provide select degree completion and stand-alone degree programs on site at community colleges. Bachelor's degrees have already been available at community colleges for many years now, with partner universities providing the final two years of a student's education. These "2+2" partnerships exist across a broad range of public and private institutions and even with a few for-profit institutions.

Our concern is students' career readiness. If community colleges become hybrids – featuring the attributes of both community colleges and four-year universities – there is always the risk of students graduating with watered-down bachelor's degrees consisting largely of lower-division coursework. Opportunities to experience more complex issues and higher levels of critical thinking, essential in today's global society, would be limited by such a strategy.

Today, approximately 35 Illinois community colleges, including some in the backyard of SIU campuses, offer bachelor's, master's and even a few doctoral programs on their campuses through partnerships with 48 institutions. Of that number, 13 have agreements with out-of-state institutions and seven with online institutions such as the University of Phoenix. These arrangements raise serious public policy questions. Should out-of-state institutions offer free-standing or degree completion programs at community colleges when similar programs exist at our own institutions? What happens to students who enroll through a community college in programs offered by an out-of-state university that closes its doors, as occurred earlier this year with Mid-Continent University out of Kentucky? Should community colleges offer graduate programs? And what degree completion and/or stand-alone degrees should be available on site at community colleges?

With the state divided into nine "districts" for higher education purposes, why not designate our public universities as the preferred providers for the community colleges? By re-directing public funds that annually support private institutions – including more than half of the state's student financial aid and millions in construction funding -- and giving public universities the right of first refusal, the real needs of place-bound students likely can be met. University faculty could be assigned a portion of their time at community college sites as appropriate to fulfill those special programmatic needs.

There are other options as well, such as solidifying 2+2 agreements by providing a wide range of bachelor degrees using online and interactive television classes for place-bound students. As a public university system, we are cognizant of our responsibility to produce more degree-holders.

If it turns out that our community colleges in Illinois are ultimately authorized to offer four-year degrees, they should then be generally limited to a very narrow set of Bachelor of Applied Science programs in high-demand program areas that do not duplicate existing university programs except in the rarest of instances where labor force needs dictate (e.g., nursing).

The mission of community colleges includes providing remedial education for those planning to pursue a degree. Today, 20 percent of Illinois' community college students require remediation; nearly 19 percent of university students require some level of remediation as well. Moreover, a 2012 report from Lt. Gov. Sheila Simon concluded that four out of five recent high school graduates who enroll in Illinois community colleges do not complete a certificate or degree within three years.

Our community colleges still have much to accomplish within their given mission and scope before setting their sights on possibly redundant, and certainly costly, programs that would demand more of the state's scarce resources, increase local property tax bills, and offer few value-added benefits to students.

So that's it. I'll be interested to hear your feedback if you want to take a moment and send an email or give me a call. I also want to thank Dr. John Haller — who graciously stepped in to help cover duties as System Vice President for Academic Affairs when Paul Sarvela became the SIU Carbondale Interim Chancellor — for his research and background work on this editorial piece.

Randy Dunn