

Pembrook, Dunn discuss higher education

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Join WSIE 88.7 FM on Sunday, October 2, at 9 a.m., as SIUE Chancellor Randy Pembrook, PhD, kicks off his Segue hosting career by welcoming SIU System President Randy Dunn to the booth. A conversation yielding a wealth of information, “the Randys” discuss role differences between chancellor and system president, and budgetary expectations for the 2016-17 academic year. They also delve into differences in the SIU System’s sister institutions, future initiatives for the SIU System, and why students, parents and staff should consider SIUE as a premier option for their higher education.

Dunn started as president of the SIU System in May 2014. His prior administrative experiences include serving as Illinois state superintendent of education, president of Murray State University, president of Youngstown University and an administrator in Illinois school districts. Dunn also served as a professor at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, where he published and conducted research.

The administrators explain that while the differences between chancellor and president can be confusing, the major difference is that SIU chancellors support campus initiatives, such as academic programs and student support services, while the system president takes charge of centralized “back-office operations” and services that support all system campuses, such as legal, internal auditing and technology transfer. Dunn shares that for the future, the SIU System hopes to undertake further services, such as procurement and compliance work, in order to avoid duplication of efforts.

“In many ways, the system’s role is to support the work that each campus is doing,” Dunn says.

When asked about budgetary expectations as the SIU System enters the 2016-17 academic year, Dunn jokingly states, “I can predict everything but the future.” He explains that the system will likely take one of four paths – one path being the completion of a state budget in January during the “lame duck session,” and the others being various plans on continuing “stop gap” budgetary efforts.

“As they say, ‘That is no way to run a railroad,’” Dunn says. “In the current situation, it’s almost impossible to do any planning beyond a month at a time. It puts many state universities into this limbo where it is very much ‘staying in stasis.’”

“The good news is SIUE has a very good path. We carefully look at cash flows for all of the system campuses, and the ability of each to carry its own debt. The situation at SIUE is strong – in large part due to good stewardship by you [Chancellor Pembrook] and your predecessors, and solid enrollment growth for some number of years.

“But we can’t get complacent. We have to watch carefully, and keep revenues and expenditures in line, in the event that we don’t see more state money for a while.”

As budgetary difficulties loom, many state citizens are anxious about the current condition of Illinois higher education, with many questioning the sustainability of institutions and academic programming over time. In response, Dunn emphatically states, “Come to SIU!”

“We are not in existential crisis,” he shares. “While we are going to have careful budget navigation because the state is not fulfilling its support the way it should be, we’re not going to close our doors.

“We’re going to stay in business and keep doing what we do. Does that mean we’re going to continue making cost reductions where we can? Yes. But we’re going to maintain academic programs, if appropriate. We are always adding new programs and omitting others to respond to what students and the marketplace want from us.

“We will continue to provide student services. When you have 14,000+ students all gathered in one place, we’re going to provide counseling services and health services, and we’re going to provide career support to make sure they get jobs when they leave.

“There are state-wide concerns from families on whether a major will continue at a university. We are required – morally, ethically and by our accreditor – to teach out every program. So, if a student starts in program X, and because enrollment is challenged or it’s difficult to maintain numbers or faculty, or just market forces change and nobody studies program X anymore, we must be responsive to that and make decisions accordingly. But we guarantee, every student admitted to program X or department X will earn that degree – that will not change.

“These combined messages lead me to say, ‘Absolutely come to SIU! Whatever campus, whatever program – we’re going to be here. We have a way to navigate through this, and if you’re looking for a solid, high achieving, high performing state school, you need to be looking at SIU. We offer outstanding education at very reasonable rates, and we’re going to be here.’”

Pembroke shares a recent story on how his higher education administration background provided unique information to a faculty in need, to which Dunn responds, “Having lived through that experience ourselves gives us sensitivity to people’s challenges and needs. We have goals to accomplish – not just our professors and staff, but even campus support services, such as grounds crew and food service. All of these units are invested in the mission we have.

“When you’re in a human capital enterprise that you can relate with, you have a sensitivity for that professor trying to build a tenure record, for that first generation student who’s trying to figure out how to go to school because their parents maybe couldn’t guide them – they hadn’t had that experience. That type of “high touch” relationship – there’s value in that.”

They continue conversation by discussing similarities and differences between the SIU System campuses.

“Every institution has a different landscape,” Dunn explains. “From afar, the contours are very similar and there’s a commonality there. But when you look closely at each institution, they have a very unique and defined landscape. The challenge then becomes leadership, and having people work at institutions with the mindscape to match that landscape they’re in. That really is the art of leadership – being able to figure out that landscape and guide a university forward.

“To say we see Carbondale as the research university and Edwardsville as the public service university – we’ve kind of gone away from that now. Actually, SIUE has a high research profile and is very successful in terms of research dollars generated as a public master’s, public comprehensive, and public regional institution.

“Carbondale – which many think of as ‘the research institution,’ given the number of doctoral degrees and approximately \$75 million annually in contract work – in many ways, by virtue of its geographic location, is still a large, regional school servicing the deep southern counties of Illinois. So, I get away from those qualifiers and different ways of thinking.

“We’re SIU. We have slightly different focuses and missions, but in that, there’s more that makes us common than different.”

Discussion concludes with Dunn providing insight on future initiatives for the SIU System, including the development of a new SIU Board of Trustees strategic plan and the enhancement of shared system services.

Tune in to WSIE 88.7 FM every Sunday at 9 a.m. as weekly guests discuss issues on SIUE's campus.

By Logan Cameron / SIUE Marketing & Communications