

John Charles: The voice of the SIU system

Segue • SIUE

Published 10:45 am, Friday, March 10, 2017



As the budget impasse continues to weigh on the shoulders of University administrators, faculty, staff and students, the first step to expressing the worries of the Southern Illinois University System to local and state legislators includes choosing the right person to serve as the System's voice.

On this week's episode of Segue, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's premier radio show discussing the lives and work of the SIUE community, Chancellor Randy Pembroke sits down with John Charles, executive director of government and public affairs. They will discuss Charles' career in politics, what his role in the System entails, along with how he brings the University's concerns to local and state legislators.

Since his appointment by the SIU Board of Trustees in 2013, Charles has managed both state and federal government affairs for the University. He coordinates governmental activities and outreach among administration, faculty, staff and students and all elected officials in government agencies, and serves as the spokesperson for SIU President Randy Dunn and the board. Among his other responsibilities, he also coordinates public and media outreach through traditional and social media.

"I find it quite interesting that your career in politics prior to joining SIU has given you the insights into what is going on with these legislators," Pembroke says. "You're the person that can help provide clarity as they think through whether or not they agree with a particular bill."

"One of the things that I have learned from the beginning of my career is that there are so many things that go on at a state level that SIUE is involved in or impacted by," Charles says. "The ability to have such a broad array of topics to work on with legislators is very interesting, and I enjoy being able to inform them about the great things SIU accomplishes."

As many know, the legislative process begins with over 3,500 bills being introduced by representatives from across the state. Along with his team at the SIU System, it is Charles' job to review each and every proposed bill, monitor its changes along the process, and explore exactly how it will affect their institutions if and when it becomes law.

From here, the team works closely with Dunn to communicate not only these activities with legislators, but with each of the system's 10 universities, schools and centers.

"We have a great working relationship and have many calls throughout the day, in the evenings and even on weekends," Charles says of his relationship with Dunn. "I have enjoyed working with him and the collaborative environment that he has created for us to work in."

The state's financial crisis has caused quite a bit of tension in not only those working for the SIU System, but also in the students who attend the universities. Charles has made it one of his key goals to bridge the gap between state legislators and the system's students to create a flow of communication where their voices can be heard. With SIU Lobby Day, an event coordinated with Charles and Dunn, students from around the system head to the state capitol in Springfield to speak with local and other state legislators about their worries regarding the budget impasse and other important issues.

“The SIU Lobby Day has been successful, but one of the challenges you may experience, like any other experience at the capitol, is that a legislator’s time is quite limited,” Charles says. “Fortunately for me, I have been able to get our students to meet with key legislators. Our local delegation is always great to make time for our students and staff when we visit.

“We appreciate the working relationship we have with them.”

Communicating the SIU System’s needs to legislators from outside districts can pose a difficult challenge. By showing these lawmakers the number of students that have attended its universities and the alumni who live in their communities, it is apparent that SIU has an impact in every district in the state.

“I think of higher education as an investment,” Pembroke says. “As a system, you are not asking the legislators for money, you are trying to create a situation where the population can be educated. It is incredibly important to remind people of the role that the SIU System plays in a society.”

As society shifts and evolves, the need for well-educated, driven young people wishing to make a difference in their communities is at an all-time high. Charles urges young people looking to begin careers in government to look into the Illinois Legislative Staff Internship Program, the same program where he got his start.

“Service in government is an honorable profession,” he says. “You can do a lot of good, not just for the people from where you live or where you are working, but for the whole state of Illinois. It is fun, exciting and will challenge you each and every day.”

With the decline in state support to SIU System in recent years, it seems that this dire financial situation has become the “new normal,” per Charles.

“It is the first thing I think about in the morning and the last thing I think about before I go to sleep,” Charles admits. “There are so many legislators in Springfield who are deeply concerned and want to see this budget impasse go away. We are working every day to give these legislators the information and tools to make that happen.”

Tune in to Segue at 9 a.m. this Sunday to WSIU 88.7 FM The Sound to hear the entire conversation between Chancellor Pembroke and John Charles.

SIUE Marketing & Communications