RAPID CHANGE NECESSARY AT SIU CARBONDALE

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I have received a lot of feedback since my State of the University address and the following open forum on revitalizing academic programs. It has included very thoughtful counterproposals to the draft academic reorganization, constructive suggestions, excitement, praise and criticism. All of it has been welcome, especially feedback that offers additional ideas and alternatives. The draft proposal will look very different in its next iteration, and a final version is likely to be different still.

That is exactly the point.

When people start with something to react to, they can provide meaningful and immediate input that will create something better. While we can’t meet every single suggestion, especially since many ideas contradict each other, we can and will take every comment seriously.

Change is hard. Rapid change is even harder. At SIU, change is necessary, and it must happen quickly if we are to address our downward spiral in enrollment and reclaim our status as the second jewel in the crown of Illinois higher education.

A lot of people ask: How do you know this will work?

I know that robust, current academic programs attract students. I know that investment in new programs attracts new students who pay tuition. I know that strong programs attract strong faculty and students under multiple organizational structures. I know that interdisciplinary collaboration yields stronger research and creative thinking. I know that more students and more external support create more revenue to invest and grow. I know that by centralizing aspects of academic administration, we will save money that we can reinvest in faculty, staff and programs. I know that faculty members want to teach and conduct research, and relieving them of some administrative responsibilities while ensuring that they retain ownership of their academic programs makes that possible.

I know that if we always do what we’re doing, we’ll always get the same results. In SIU’s case, the results will get worse.

Because I am an engineer, some people assume that I want SIU to be all about science and engineering. But as I have stated repeatedly, we cannot fulfill our mission as a comprehensive university without strong offerings in the social sciences, humanities, arts and business, among others. We wouldn’t be SIU without them.

As a doctoral research institution, we must also pay attention to graduate education, providing our graduate students opportunities to engage with our academic mission through assistantships, including teaching assistantships. We serve undergraduate as well as graduate students better when we ensure that graduate students in front of our classrooms have appropriate training and mentoring from experienced faculty members.
We can grow our graduate enrollment overall with increased grant funding that provides opportunities for graduate students, but we must rely on multiple sources of funding to ensure that these opportunities are in all of our graduate-level programs. That has always been, and always will be, the case.

It is also important that we focus our attention on the cultural competencies of all of our students. We must ensure not only that SIU is a welcoming campus, but also that all of our graduates are prepared for the diverse world in which they will live and work. I strongly believe that the many people currently dedicated to multiculturalism across campus – whether their focus is on Africana Studies; Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies; Latino and Latin American Studies; Native American studies; East Asian Language and Culture; American Studies; or International Studies – share this commitment.

But I believe we are touching too few students, that we are not as effective as we could be, and that our current model is not sustainable. I look forward to working with those who care about multicultural education to create an effective and sustainable model that reaches every single SIU student.

To keep our focus on this goal, and after hearing from our students, faculty and friends, I have deferred any decision about the Africana Studies major for a year to see if we can find a way forward to serve all students, as well as those who are specifically interested in the degree. Regardless, there is no question that our multicultural initiatives, most of which are already cross-disciplinary, add value and can add even greater value through a more concentrated effort.

All of this is to say that change is necessary, speed is essential and input is valued. Our academic programs are the heart of our institution, and constructive debate over any change is expected and welcome. We must all be willing to be open to change, to give and to take, as we move forward toward a stronger, more vibrant Southern Illinois University.