

Statement by FA President Dave Johnson to SIU Board of Trustees. 12/14/2017

Items in italics are my initial ad-libs, as best I remember them. Things in brackets and smaller font were cut to meet the two minute time limit.

Trustee Gilbert mentioned me in his comments, so I feel I should respond. He noted, rightly, that SIUC hadn't done enough to follow up on previous recommendations for change. But those recommendations were the result of a far more rigorous process of shared government than anything we're seeing right now, and they didn't call for anything like the elimination of academic departments. If the chancellor had called for these recommendations to be followed, this room wouldn't be full today. Instead he's calling for us to be turned upside down and inside out all at once.

Trustee Ryan called for civility in the discussion surrounding proposed changes. I agree our tone should be civil. She also noted an atmosphere of intimidation on campus.. Let me just say that I find it strange to be worrying about a faculty member¹ intimidating the chancellor. Perhaps we should also be worried about things working the other way around.

[Let me start by thanking the chancellor for meeting with the union ten days before he announced his proposal, as he mentioned yesterday. He did do that. But he wasn't interested in input. We tried. We tried, in fact, to warn him, in private, about parts of his plan that would meet with opposition. But he didn't want to hear it. It quickly became clear that a real exchange of views could only lead to a shouting match, so we just asked questions—which he did, to his credit, answer forthrightly. He's also held other meetings union leaders, and there the exchanges were more substantive. But it was still mainly our questions and his answers, because the chancellor had all the answers already: he wasn't interested in anything we had to say. He may remember the conversations differently, of course. If you want to judge how the chancellor deals with a real exchange of views, ask people who have seen him at public meetings on campus. He's berated and belittled administrators and faculty and, far worse, students. He's stormed out of meetings and stormed back in again. Don't just trust me: ask around.]

[There was some dispute yesterday about how much support there is on campus for the chancellor's plan. There's a pretty simple answer to that question. The bodies that represent faculty and students have all voted against the central element in his plan—the elimination of all academic departments. Graduate and undergraduate student government passed their motions unanimously. The vote in the Faculty Senate was 19-11-3; that in the Graduate Council was 15-5-3. If you argue that faculty votes only

¹ In the form of an email written to the chancellor by Randy Auxier, saying that he had to back down or face defeat and even being fired.

matter when they are unanimous, you have a rather limited view of democracy; if you argue that student votes don't matter because students are ignorant, you don't know our students.]

They say a picture is worth 1000 words. Chancellor Montemagno showed us pictures of two cars yesterday, illustrating what he thinks of SIUC. Today, he said, a degree from SIUC is as worthless as a beat-up old Yugo, whereas he is going to make us a brand new shiny red Chevy Camaro again. In Chancellor Montemagno's view, everything about SIUC is broken. Our academic structure is broken; our core curriculum is broken; our research is a mess; student life is a mess. We are "sub-standard across the board," as he put it. SIUC is a piece of junk that only Carlo Montemagno can fix.

[Chancellor Montemagno has lots of ideas to fix us. Some of them are promising; some of them have support on campus. But, as trustee Portwood noted yesterday, there's not much evidence or argument behind them. Asked for models, he gives you a different answer every time: now it's Georgia Tech, now Dartmouth, now Edinburgh or ASU; yesterday it was Cornell.]

Trustee Sambursky asked a good question yesterday. He didn't challenge the fact that the chancellor has provided no evidence that his plan would work. But Sambursky asked for evidence that what we're doing now is working. Well, take a look around this room. It's filled with faculty and students who made time during exam week to show up for a board meeting—usually not the hottest ticket in town. Ask SIUC students if their education here is Yugo level. Ask faculty if their research is sub-standard. Ask department chairs if their work is standing in the way of progress. And ask them for evidence for what they say.

I don't know about chancellor Montemagno, but I'm proud of SIUC. I'm proud of our students, proud of my faculty colleagues, proud of our staff. Hell, I'm even proud of some administrators. And while the problems we face are very real, I'm confident that we can solve them if we work together, make hard decisions based on evidence, build on what works, and change what needs changing. What I fear is a reckless, hasty, top-down slew of changes backed by nothing more than a leap of faith in an untested leader. What I fear is a proposal that is quite clear about what it will destroy—our current academic departments—but all too vague about what it will put in their place. What I fear is us wasting a year fighting about a grandiose, unprecedented, evidence-free restructuring plan that the chancellor himself has admitted won't fix our enrollment problem, instead of coming up with shared solutions that will fix it. Let us act not out of desperation and blind faith, but on the basis of pride in what we've accomplished, evidence for what works, and confidence in changes we design with one another. Let us act promptly, but let us take the time to do this right and do it together.