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'It's On Now': As Southern Illinois Campuses Battled, the System President Played Puppeteer

By *Fernanda Zamudio-Suaréz* | JUNE 29, 2018

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Steve Buhman, Southern Illinois U.

Randy Dunn, president of Southern Illinois U., worked behind the scenes to divide the two campuses in his system, newly obtained emails suggest.

Long before that meeting, in which the trustees eventually voted down the proposal, Randy J. Dunn, the system's president, was doing exactly what Britton cautioned against: aiding an effort to divide the campuses from behind his computer screen, according to

When presented with a proposal to take \$5.1 million in state appropriations from Southern Illinois University's flagship Carbondale campus and give it to the Edwardsville campus, several of the system's trustees shared a common question: Where was all this coming from?

"I don't like being blindsided 10 days ago with absolutely no warning," one trustee said, referencing when the proposal appeared on the board's agenda. Another called it "premature," while yet another, Tom Britton, said he wanted "to make sure that we're not dividing and not pitting campuses against each other."

emails obtained by *The Chronicle*.

In public, Dunn billed the proposal as a way for the Edwardsville campus — growing in enrollment and located near the St. Louis metro area — to get a fairer share from the state. He told *The Southern Illinoisan* that the university's operation policy stated that 60 percent of state allocations should go to the Carbondale campus and 40 percent to Edwardsville. The new proposed transfer was the first step to hitting those target percentages, he told the newspaper.

The Carbondale campus saw the proposed changes as a threat, and a war of words between advocates for the two campuses ensued. That eventually developed into a surprise attempt to put Dunn on administrative leave, and a deadlocked board meeting that kept him in the job.

At the center of that attempted ouster was a cache of emails, obtained by *The Chronicle* through a public-records request, that gave a handful of trustees pause about Dunn's ability to lead. Among other things, the emails suggest that Dunn himself dreamed up the \$5.1-million figure, that he helped push legislation that would separate the two campuses, and that he had contempt for Carbondale critics, calling them "bitchers."

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Dunn declined a request for comment. In an email, he wrote that he was asked by the board to decline interview requests.

'Get in the Fray'

Dunn began to advocate for the transfer of state funds months ago. An email he sent on February 13 to Randall G. Pembroke, chancellor of the Edwardsville campus, confirmed that a reallocation discussion would be on the board's retreat agenda in March.

Later, in an email about plans for the retreat, Dunn wrote to Amy Sholar, the board chair, that he wanted to start a discussion about the allocation of funds between campuses.

"This one is being pushed loudly on the Edwardsville campus and they will want to see it get on the docket to start a process," Dunn wrote to Sholar.

After trustees discussed the reallocation at the March retreat, Dunn quickly worked on the details of how much money would be moved from the Carbondale campus (SIUC) to Edwardsville (SIUE).

Dunn suggested the \$5-million transfer to Pembroke on March 19, according to notes of that day's meeting provided to *The Chronicle*.

"Dunn indicated to all that a board matter was to be prepared by SIUE to shift State funds from SIUC to SIUE," read the meeting notes. "Dunn opined that the amount of transfer shouldn't be so large as to be easily rejected yet so little as to have no meaning. Ultimately, he suggested a number around \$5 million."

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Later, the president wanted Duane Stucky, the system's senior vice president for financial and administrative affairs and board treasurer, to attend an upcoming board meeting because Dunn heard "chatter that people didn't believe the 60-40 target for the split of appropriations was true," according to Stucky's meeting notes from his meeting with Dunn.

"He wanted me to assemble the data to show where it came from and present it to the Board," Stucky wrote, and he later added: "I explained that I had never heard of it in fifteen years in my work on the university budget, and I didn't know of any data that would support such a concept."

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A month earlier, Dunn had pointed to the purported 60-40 policy in an interview with *The Southern Illinoisian* to defend the transfer. He later acknowledged that the policy was not "written," but rather, "aspirational."

Before the board's reallocation vote, Dunn, suspecting it wouldn't pass, played puppeteer. Two days before the vote he plotted with Pembroke about when to loop in state legislators from the Edwardsville area on a bill to completely sever the link between the two campuses, giving them separate boards.

He instructed Pembroke not to say who supported an upcoming bill to completely separate the two campuses.

Dunn also encouraged Pembroke to be vocal during the meeting. "Don't forget in the discussion today, get in the fray when you need to b/c you know Carlo is going to," Dunn wrote in an email sent on April 11, referring to Carlo Montemagno, chancellor of the Carbondale campus.

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The board shelved the reallocation proposal on April 12. Dunn said an independent consultant would review the system's funding distribution to better reflect the campuses' enrollment.

That day State Rep. Jay Hoffman, Democrat of Swansea, introduced House Bill 5861 to split the university into two campuses with separate governing bodies.

Dunn gave Pembroke the green light to support Hoffman's bill because Montemagno was so vocal about his opposition to the reallocation proposal.

"You have freedom to come out in support since Carlo went well off the reservation by going on public record repeatedly to decry the reallocation," Dunn wrote to Pembroke. "Full-on for you too, now."

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And when, shortly after the funding proposal was rejected, Pembroke announced the pending legislation in a mass message, Dunn gleefully forwarded it along to his wife, Ronda Dunn, with the note: "It's on now. Xoxo"

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While Dunn declined to comment to *The Chronicle*, he did submit a public response to claims made by Kathleen Chwalisz, a faculty member at the Carbondale campus who first obtained the "bitchers" email, and publicized it in a column in *The Southern Illinoisan*.

In a response, Dunn apologized for calling Carbondale critics "bitchers," but defended himself against other allegations. He said he had no contempt for the Carbondale campus, and denied that the \$5-million figure was arbitrary. "Clearly, if one took the time to listen to the presentation at the April Board of Trustees meeting ... or to read it, they would understand where the \$5 million amount was determined."

And he added that the \$5-million proposal was not part of a plan to split the system. "Why would I advocate to eliminate the SIU System which would eliminate the capstone job that the Board of Trustees asked me to come home for?" he wrote. "If I want to leave

SIU, I'll resign or retire; it would be ridiculous to make up some elaborate plan to blow up the system as I leave. I love SIU too much to do that."

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