

Harry Berman: Seeing UIS through eyes of others

By **HARRY BERMAN**

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Oh wad some power the giftie gie us To see oursel's as others see us!

— Robert Burns

Nothing compares to taking a look at yourself through the eyes of others. On May 1, the University of Illinois at Springfield was visited by representatives of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC), an organization of leading small, public liberal arts colleges and universities throughout the country. UIS is seeking membership in this organization. During the site visit, we had a chance to look at ourselves through the eyes of others. The site visitors were surprised by what we take for granted.

UIS began life in 1970 as a "senior" university, offering the third and fourth years of baccalaureate education and master's degrees. In the late 1960s and early 1970s across the country universities were being set up on that unusual model. Why?

Those were the years when the post World War II baby boomers were entering college. Students flocked to existing public four-year colleges and universities, places like Eastern Illinois University, Western Illinois University, Southern Illinois University, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. To meet the surge of demand for post-secondary education in those years, Illinois established an extensive public community college system where students could complete up to two years of baccalaureate education.

But what about the community college students who wanted to complete their baccalaureate degrees? The public universities were full to the brim with students who had entered as freshman and could not accept many transfer students. The idea of a senior university was to create an institution that specialized in educating students transferring from community colleges, students who often were adult returning students already in the work force, as well as providing master's level education for those who wanted a graduate professional credential.

From the time of UIS' founding as Sangamon State University, we experimented with ways to meet the needs of nontraditional learners. UIS never had a "night school." We offered the same curricula, taught by the same faculty, in evening and day classes. Also, we accommodated the realities of the lives of adult returning students by extending the length of class meetings to reduce the number of weekly commutes to campus and by offering weekend intensive courses. We fulfilled the mission of a senior institution in an exemplary fashion for three decades.

But the times change. The baby boom came and the baby boom went. By the late 1990s, community college transfer students became more attractive to the four-year institutions. At the same time, the limitations of the senior institution model became more and more apparent. These limitations included the inability of the faculty to put their own stamp on general education and a shortened time for students to develop a real attachment to the institution. Because of these concerns, UIS sought authorization to admit freshmen and we admitted our first small class of Capital Scholars in fall 2001.

Meanwhile, the world was changing in other ways. The Internet revolution created an opportunity to provide to community college graduates and working adults access to an educational experience unlike that provided by any preceding technology. At UIS, we had experimented with all those technologies: sideband radio, broadcast TV, cassette tapes and compressed video. But the Internet, with its capability of communication-rich, "any time, any place" learning was something else. UIS faculty jumped on board because providing access for adult learners through this new medium is an extension of what we have been doing for 30 years.

So here we are, approaching our 2009 commencement ceremony, awarding degrees to baccalaureate students who have been with us for four years, to our historical group of community college transfer students, to master's (and even three doctoral) students, and to those (both baccalaureate and master's) who have completed their degrees through online courses. In fact, we now have 1,200 online majors from all over the country in 16 online degree programs.

Which brings us back to the COPLAC site visit. Our visitors, longtime administrators at distinguished COPLAC institutions, reviewed our materials prior to their visit and thought, surely, there must be three institutions here in Springfield operating under one name: an institution to serve residential baccalaureate students; an institution with a separate graduate faculty offering master's degrees; and an institution doing online instruction with a heavy reliance on adjunct faculty. Coming from the outside, the team thought that model made sense. After all, such umbrella operations exist in other places. It had never occurred to us at UIS that others might perceive us in that way. For us, it's a given that our talented faculty can fulfill all these multiple roles. That's our identity.

The happy ending to the story is that by the time the site visitors left, they had "got it" about UIS: We are one institution serving multiple types of students and serving them well.

Dr. Harry Berman is provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs at the University of Illinois at Springfield.