SOUTHERN WELCOMES NEW CHANCELLOR
Rita Hartung Cheng to lead the Carbondale campus

Inside: Southern Exposure, Congratulations Graduates, Association News, and more...
On Dec. 10, 2009, Rita Hartung Cheng’s appointment as chancellor of Southern Illinois University Carbondale was ratified by the SIU Board of Trustees. Formerly the provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs for the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Cheng officially began her duties at Southern on June 1.

Earlier preparation, however, was fueled by several trips to Carbondale over the past six months to “listen, learn, and discover” as much as she could about the campus and the community. During one of those recent visits, Cheng sat down with Southern Alumni to discuss her new position.

Southern Alumni: You have made it a point to be on campus frequently in recent months. What did those visits do for you?
Rita Cheng: I tried to get back a bit each month since I was appointed chancellor, and have met with many people on campus. I would call them important listening sessions to assist me in being prepared to formulate a strategic vision for SIUC in my first six months on the job and beyond. It is important that I understand the culture and norms of this large and complex institution.

SA: What were your initial views of the campus and the Carbondale community?

RC: I was immediately impressed with the natural beauty of the SIUC campus. When I began to study the academic side of the institution, it became clear to me that Southern is a special place that truly lives the mission of being accessible to students. The campus should also be proud of strong academic programs enhanced by significant strength in research. The two together facilitate a real priority in student learning and success. I believe SIU is a leader among institutions who seek to find that special synergy between research and student learning.

SA: Making a college education as attainable as possible is important to you – in part perhaps – because you were a nontraditional student.

RC: That is true. Although I started out as a full-time college student when I was a freshman, I soon had to look for employment opportunities to finance my education. I would go on to attend several undergraduate institutions on a part-time basis before earning my bachelor’s degree. Some of those educational choices were connected to following my husband’s career moves, so my educational path was anything but traditional. (See sidebar for Cheng’s background).

SA: Although you have been working in Milwaukee, Wis., for several years, you grew up in a small town similar to several communities in this region.

RC: I grew up in Elmwood, Wis., a community where families support one another and the fabric of what goes on there each day is intertwined with school, church, and social functions in the village. There are only about 700 people in town, and I still love to go back there and reconnect with my late parents’ friends and their children who were my schoolmates.

The irony is that when I first thought about the chancellor’s position here at SIU, I wasn’t sure it would be a good fit. I had been in an urban setting for a long time, but when I began to look into it a bit more, everything made sense. Having grown up in such a small town, several of those old feelings came back to me again. It just seemed right.

SA: After listening, learning, and discovering as much as you could for the last six months, what do you feel will be one of the most important challenges you will face as you transition into the chancellor’s role?

RC: Obviously I need to work closely with President Glenn Poshard and the SIU Board of Trustees to insure that I understand the current state of affairs and our priorities. I also want to help everyone be proud of the wonderful work that we are doing on this campus and the mark we are making toward excellence as an institution.

SA: The Saluki Way project is starting to be quite noticeable to all, and I’m sure those are some of the improvements you hope to point to and build on.

RC: Each time I came back to campus during the last six months, I always made it a point to note the progress of
the construction projects at athletics. I also engaged in conversation related to the new transportation center, as all of the upgrades tied to Saluki Way give us great reason for optimism. Budgets are extremely tight, but it is important for the future of SIU that we move forward with these needed improvements. Saluki Way will help bring the region and the campus closer together.

SA: You mention the challenging fiscal environment, but your background in finance should assist you as you face some difficult financial decisions.

RC: I know my way around the numbers, and I understand the business side of a university as well as the academic side. That gives me a platform for some conversations we will need to have, and decisions made will have sound business knowledge behind them. I believe my background certainly allows me to effectively think through the consequences of any decision, and that my training will help me judge the impact of the path we take.

My background in business and accounting should contribute to conversation on how we might do some things differently, more effectively, and more efficiently. I am not afraid to make a tough decision to invest in a given area if we can show that Southern and its students will get quality returns on those changes.

SA: And funding at the university level brings with it a political component that you must be aware of each day. Is this something you have dealt with before?

RC: Throughout my career, I have closely followed the politics and external conversations around higher education. It is important for the chancellor to be attuned to the state and national dialogue and understand what the impact may be in the institution.

SA: Although state dollars have dwindled recently, SIU has announced that tuition rates will not rise for 2010-11 (See sidebar story). Most other universities in Illinois have placed more of the financial onus on the student, including the University of Illinois, which plans to raise tuition by 9.5 percent. What was your reaction when you heard Southern was freezing tuition?

RC: It reaffirmed why I’m excited to be here. One of the reasons I sincerely was attracted to SIU was because I saw that it was an institution of access that actually lives that mission. As state support wanes, we have to find a balance between the cost to the student and the availability of a quality education. As I’ve noted earlier, this will bring about tough choices, but always placing that cost on the student is not the answer.

Education is about preparation, access, and affordability. We do have to be diligent in not pricing ourselves out of the market for those who wish to attend—many who still arrive as first-generation students. Access is also about partnering with community colleges to try

THE CHENG FILE…

EDUCATION
Institution/Degree/Year/City
University of Rhode Island/M.B.A./1980/Kingston, R.I.
Bishop’s University/B.B.A./1977/ Lennoxville, Quebec, Canada

PROFESSIONAL
5/05 – to current
SIUC appointment: Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
1/05 – 5/05: Interim Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
6/04 – 1/05: Associate Vice Chancellor and Interim Dean of the School of Continuing Education, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
11/02 – 6/04: Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
8/02 – to current
SIUC appointment: Professor, Sheldon B. Lubar School of Business, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
7/98 – 6/03: Associate Dean, Sheldon B. Lubar School of Business, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
7/94 – 6/03: Special Assistant to the Dean for Affirmative Action, Sheldon B. Lubar School of Business, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
8/94 – 8/02: Associate Professor/A. O. Smith Professor, Sheldon B. Lubar School of Business, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
8/88 – 8/94: Assistant Professor, Sheldon B. Lubar School of Business, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
8/77 – 5/83: Business Manager, University Health Services, University of Rhode Island.

PERSONAL
Married to Tom Cheng for 36 years.
They have two children, Sam (30), a software engineer in Seattle, Wash., and Erika (27), a graduate student at UW-Madison.
The Chengs enjoy riding bikes in their spare time, and like to attend sporting and arts events. They also love to travel.
Students today have different challenges the way out as well as on the way in. We need to be welcoming on of the educational experience and then of life's circumstances, need to step out any quality of education.

Excellent programs, many with the capacity to add students without eroding research at the University. We must also find ways to increase access to our online offerings is important to serving working adults.

SIU has a world-wide reputation for quality research and boasts an exceptional faculty. I want to continue that growth to make sure that during my time as chancellor there is increased attention placed on the high quality of research and scholarly activity that is done here.

Access institutions such as SIU have more challenges with retention than selective institutions. Students face many challenges that factor in retention, and we have to do our part by making certain our programs are staying current with the needs of our students. If necessary, we must change or alter some programs if those needs change.

SIU FREEZES TUITION FOR 2010-11

The Southern Illinois University Board of Trustees recently voted to freeze tuition for the 2010-11 academic year at the 2009-10 level. In addition, fees for students at SIU Carbondale will go up 1.8 percent.

Tuition for new SIUC undergraduates registering for 15 credit hours in the fall will be $3,645, or $7,290 for the academic year. The entering tuition rate is guaranteed to remain the same for all four years. Tuition for students from Arkansas, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri and Tennessee is equivalent to Illinois residents’ tuition.

SIU President Glenn Poshard says the University “can't continue to put the burden on the backs” of low- and middle-income families, noting that tuition increases totaled 139 percent in the past nine years. We are closing the door to a lot of kids who are qualified to come. It is time to get back in alignment with what families are capable of paying. The question is whether to increase tuition and shut the door to more and more of those families, or keep the door as open as possible.”

Poshard notes that tuition increases over the past nine years were in response to declining state support. Adoption of the tuition freeze for next year “is consistent with our historical mission of access,” he said, adding that the same philosophy applies to the decisions made about student fees.

Tuition for graduate students also is frozen for the next academic year. Students enrolled for 12 credit hours will pay $3,936 per semester.

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