creating opportunities through PRODUCTIVITY

By Rita Cheng

From our local communities, to our state capitols, to our nation’s Capitol, the higher education sector remains under tremendous pressure. Our institutions serve many constituencies—including students and their families, taxpayers and elected officials—struggling with fiscal constraints and uncertainties of their own. As a result of these economic realities, calls for greater accountability and efficiency on our campuses are growing ever louder.

As responsible stewards of public funding and generous private donations, higher education leaders are heeding those calls—perhaps more than many outside higher education realize. We are asked to improve student achievement and to do so with fewer financial resources.

As chancellor of Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIU), I know first-hand and from conversations with colleagues throughout the country that the higher education community is focusing on productivity along with needed improvements to student success and degree completion rates. One size does not fit all, but at SIU, we have implemented a range of initiatives that are already showing signs of streamlining our operations.

• We improved controls on expenditures by reducing the number of fiscal officers by more than half (from 400 to 185).

• A faculty and staff health clinic that opened earlier this year in our Student Health Center generates additional revenue and reduces the time lost to off-campus physician appointments.

• Through attrition, we have nearly 500 fewer full-time employees today than we did in fiscal year 2008. Those vacancies, created by retirements and resignations, remain unfilled due to an ongoing hiring freeze necessitated by annual reductions in our state appropriation.

• We established the Center for Teaching Excellence—using existing resources—to create one central unit to provide faculty and staff with expert assistance in sound pedagogy and technology enhancement for on-campus and distance education. The center provides critical support to the University College (which serves all first-year students) and technology-enhanced instruction in math and English courses.

• Academic prioritization led to program eliminations and potential consolidations. Colleges and departments lead our efforts to achieve greater efficiencies.

• We are working to shorten the time to degree completion and improve academic success rates, which will help control costs for students and the university.

• Beginning this fall, all new freshmen will receive tablets that include digital textbooks and assignments for some courses. Students and their families will realize significant savings compared to traditional textbooks. More importantly, however, this responsive approach to how today’s students learn facilitates their success. In addition, the tablets will come pre-loaded; this eliminates the risk of students falling behind because they had to wait to purchase course materials due to financial aid delays. The tablets also will better connect students to residential life, events and activities, social media and campus safety initiatives.

These improvements, along with many others, are the result of wonderful collaboration among faculty, staff and administrators committed to enhancing our legacy of access, opportunity and transforming lives. The realities of the 21st century demand our renewed focus on productivity. While this presents a challenge, it is also an opportunity to more effectively meet the needs of our students and society.