

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

DEAN'S REPORT

2026

FEATURE STORY

On the Case

SIUE students support Illinois State Police on cold cases while preparing for careers in criminal justice.



SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
EDWARDSVILLE



Q&A

WITH DEAN KEVIN LEONARD, PHD

Q What were the highlights of the 2025-26 academic year?

A This academic year was an exciting one for SIUE and the College of Arts and Sciences. SIUE's enrollment grew by nearly 8% in fall 2025. The growing number of first-year and transfer students required the College to add sections of general education and foundational courses that prepare students for success across the University.

Most SIUE students, including students pursuing degrees in the College of Arts and Sciences, take introductory courses in CAS that help them to develop the analytical and communication skills that prepare them for success in their majors and careers. CAS faculty also teach courses that allow all SIUE students to gain an appreciation for the visual and performing arts.

I am thrilled to report that undergraduate enrollment increased in many CAS degree programs. The majors that saw the most significant growth in fall 2025 included biological sciences, Criminal Justice Studies, Philosophy, and Theater and Dance. The number of students in our master's degree program in Forensic Sciences also doubled between fall 2024 and fall 2025. New students bring fresh perspectives and energy to classrooms, studios, and labs.

Q Looking ahead to the next academic year, what opportunities and initiatives are you most excited about?

A We hope to build on our past success as we plan for continued growth and student achievement. We anticipate a record number of nursing students in introductory biological sciences and chemistry courses in fall 2026.

As new students enroll in general education courses, they will be able to take advantage of the hard work of many CAS faculty who have redesigned courses as part of Changemakers, a new initiative that offers thematic pathways through SIUE's general education program. Through pathways such as Creativity and Design for Change, Healthy Communities, and Sustainability, students will explore pressing issues, connect learning across disciplines, and apply their knowledge to address problems and change the world. Many of us in the College of Arts and Sciences are excited to see the impact Changemakers will have on SIUE students.

ABOUT THE

College of Arts and Sciences

WHO WE ARE

The College of Arts and Sciences is committed to a mission of intellectual transformation for our students in which they explore a rich tapestry of ideas, experiences, and people.

WHAT WE PROVIDE

High-Impact Educational Opportunities



Community-based learning and engagement opportunities



Dedicated learning communities



Internships and co-ops



Senior assignments, capstones, showcases, and more



Service learning



Student-faculty research



Study abroad

OUTSTANDING DEGREE PROGRAMS ACROSS 20 DEPARTMENTS

- Fine and Performing Arts
- Languages and Communication
- Mathematics and Sciences
- Social Sciences

EXPANSIVE ALUMNI NETWORK

CAS graduates join over 36,700 alumni who have gone on to achieve greatness in their careers, including Grammy-winning musicians, social workers, investigative journalists, chemists, lawyers, comedians, urban and regional planners, public officials, bestselling authors, researchers, and everything in-between.

100 CANDLES

Celebrating The Life and Legacy of Ruth Slenczynska

In 2025, SIUE honored the 100th birthday of renowned pianist and Professor Emerita Ruth Slenczynska with a special Centennial Celebration recognizing her extraordinary life, career, and lasting influence on the classical music world.

“It was incredibly special to celebrate someone who made such an impact on generations of musicians and whose deep connection to SIUE meant so much to everyone involved.”

— MARC SCHAPMAN, DMA

Professor of Voice, Chair, Department of Music

A pupil of Russian virtuoso pianist Sergei Rachmaninoff, Slenczynska performed more than 3,000 concerts worldwide and inspired countless students who studied in SIUE's Department of Music. She joined SIUE in 1964 as a full-time artist-in-residence and remained on the faculty until 1987.

The Centennial Celebration included a scholarly symposium, a piano master class, a special exhibit documenting her remarkable career, and a concert in Dunham Hall Theater featuring former students Randy and Mary Jo Pembroke and Stan Ford, along with SIUE faculty member Angela Kim, DMA.

Slenczynska passed away in April 2026 at the age of 101, leaving behind an extraordinary legacy as well as an enduring connection to SIUE and the international classical music community.



Helping Opera Singers Find Their Voice

Marc Schapman, DMA, professor of voice, not only helps SIUE students cultivate their passion for the discipline, but he also mentors high school singers.

For nearly two decades, Schapman has provided promising high school singers coaching and experiences that introduce them to the world of classical vocal performance through the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis' Bayer Fund Artists-in-Training Program.

While some singers enter the program with years of formal training or experience performing in community settings, others are encountering classical voice instruction for the first time. Regardless of their background or exposure to the discipline, he assists students in recognizing the possibilities within their voices and developing the confidence to pursue the discipline.

“I love watching students evolve,” said Schapman. “Some have come to us with little experience and gone on to study at top vocal programs across the country, and some have even performed at the Met.”



Mass Communications Studio Gets Modern Makeover

Mass communications students taking classes in the full-scale production studio in Dunham Hall are stepping into a dramatically modernized learning environment following major facility and technology enhancements.

"We have been working with one foot in the analog world and one foot in the digital world for some time," said Suman Mishra, PhD, professor and department chair. "This project required an extraordinary level of effort and coordination to transform the physical spaces to accommodate advanced, industry-standard systems."

Key improvements, made possible through support from the Chancellor's Office and collaboration with campus partners, include:

- Audio equipment, cables, server racks, and production consoles
- Blackmagic studio cameras, updated pedestals, and teleprompters
- Large Samsung production monitors and fire-retardant studio curtains
- Ross Carbonite video switchers, Xpression graphics software, and Media IO system
- New podcast and small group recording studio

Hands-on production remains central to the curriculum. In the Introduction to Audio and Video Production class, instructor Tom Atwood introduces students to the equipment, software, and workflows used to produce video content, broadcast news, radio shows, and podcasts.

"The studio newscast project shows students what it takes to produce a broadcast," said Atwood. "In addition to getting their hands on equipment like the audio board, switcher, and teleprompter, they also have a chance to work together in a live, 'on-the-air' environment as a team."

Mishra, Atwood, and their colleagues believe that providing their students with the same tools, software, and workflows used by today's media professionals will help them graduate prepared to take on industry tasks with familiarity and confidence.



KAYLEE BAUCHENS REACHES NPR COLLEGE PODCAST CHALLENGE FINALS

Kaylee Bauchens, BS mass communications '25, earned national recognition as a top 10 finalist in NPR's College Podcast Challenge for her podcast "Relief of Getting a Goodbye." The annual competition highlights outstanding student storytelling and gives college student creators a platform to share their work with NPR's national audience.

Originally submitted as an assignment for her Advanced Audio Production class, the podcast explores family hardship, financial instability, adolescent struggle, and the importance of expressing love when it matters most.

The recognition places Bauchens among the nation's top collegiate podcast producers and highlights the talent emerging from the Department of Mass Communications.

A Golden Night To Remember

The SIUE Meridian Society's Golden Age Celebration marked a milestone evening at SIUE, honoring the Department of Theater and Dance's 50th anniversary and the sold-out opening of "The Great Gatsby." The Roaring Twenties-themed event, held at Dunham Hall in October 2025, brought together alumni, philanthropy, and the performing arts.

The Meridian Society has supported 165 initiatives with more than \$453,000 in awarded funds since its inception in 2003. Ethel Shanklin, EdD, BS special education '76, EdS educational administration '07, Meridian Society president, said the celebration reflected the connections built through service and shared passions.

"Joining the Meridian Society introduced me to people I may never have met otherwise," said Shanklin. "That's what life is about — making connections, building relationships, and sharing the things we love."

The event, which honored five decades of artistic excellence in the department, was infused with positive energy and artistry. Jazz-age flair, including pop-up Charleston performances by students, carried into the "Gatsby" production, which earned standing ovations.

"The amount of support from the Meridian Society, our alumni, and guests at Dunham Hall was remarkable," said Chuck Harper, MFA, professor and director of the performance. "The Meridian Society sure knows how to throw a party!"



Theater and Dance Alum Lands Film Debut in Critically Acclaimed NICKEL BOYS

Trey Perkins, BS theater and dance '24, landed his big break during his junior year at SIUE.

After securing agent representation, Perkins submitted a tape for Nickel Boys, an adaptation of Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel produced by Brad Pitt's Plan B Entertainment. He soon received the call every actor hopes for.

"They said, 'How do you feel about working for Brad Pitt? You're in the movie!'" Perkins said.

Nickel Boys follows a Black teen wrongfully sentenced to a brutal reform school inspired by real-life abuses at Florida's Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys. Perkins portrayed Chickie Pete, a friend of the protagonist, Elwood Curtis, and a fellow inmate at the Nickel Academy.

Accepting the role required him to pause his studies, but his faculty mentors helped him stay on track academically. After filming wrapped, Perkins returned to campus and graduated on time with straight A's and Dean's List honors.

"It was clear to our department that Trey's education and degree mattered to him and his family," said Chuck Harper, MFA, professor of performance. "Everyone came together to help him find a way to make this happen."



CRIMINAL JUSTICE STUDENTS REVIEW COLD CASES WITH THE ILLINOIS STATE POLICE

At SIUE, students in the criminal justice studies program aren't just learning about justice; they are helping deliver it.

Through a unique partnership with the Illinois State Police (ISP), students are assisting investigators by organizing and preparing real cold case materials at the ISP Zone 6 headquarters in Collinsville.

The collaboration traces back to 2019, when former student Matt Bradford, BS criminal justice studies '13, who had joined the Illinois State Police (ISP), asked Trish Oberweis, PhD, professor of criminal justice studies, to help organize a fundraiser for the family of Trooper Nicholas Hopkins, who was killed in the line of duty.

Oberweis called upon several SIUE student organizations — the Criminal Justice Club, the SIUE chapter of Student Veterans of America, and the College Republicans — to help organize the event. The fundraiser, hosted in November 2019, raised more than \$8,000 for the Hopkins family. During the fundraiser, Oberweis met ISP Major Mike Lewis.

A few years later, Lewis and Major Abigail Keller had an idea: Can SIUE students help ISP investigators organize and prepare case materials to support and solve cold cases? They formally invited Oberweis and her students to assist in this mission, and by early 2021, the first cohort of SIUE students began working directly with investigators at ISP headquarters.

Every file we encounter represents a person and a family who have been waiting for answers. Knowing we might help bring someone closure keeps us motivated.

— KEITH HAWKINS
Junior, Criminal Justice Studies



Students must first undergo a rigorous background check and training process. Once approved, they organize case documents and materials to help investigators ensure files are complete and accessible. In some instances, they analyze data and build solvability matrices to help investigators prioritize cases based on the likelihood of developing new leads. Students also create searchable “murder books,” which compile key information on cold homicide cases in the Metro East region.

“Our students play a vital role in the investigative process by providing organizational support and streamlining information,” Oberweis said. “With the students’ assistance, investigators can more efficiently dedicate time to the cases closest to resolution and quickly come up to speed on the case’s facts.”

For Keith Hawkins, a junior criminal justice studies major, seeing the realities of investigative work firsthand has been transformative.

“I learned not every case is perfect, and not every case gets solved,” Hawkins said. “Having the opportunity to work with investigators and see the way they think has changed the way I look at this field.”

Hawkins was impressed with the investigators’ ability to recall cases from decades past with remarkable ease. Since the cases students handle are real, he and his peers gain a true sense of responsibility that comes with handling highly sensitive information.

Since the partnership began, SIUE students have reviewed more than 150 cold cases, helping identify victims of decades-old murder cases and advance investigations for many others.



In 2002, the bodies of three women believed to be victims of a serial killer were found along Illinois roadways. SIUE students reviewed two cases and followed the investigative work of ISP and other agencies. With direct student involvement and continued efforts by investigators, all three victims have now been identified, bringing long-awaited answers to their families.

“Every person deserves to be identified and remembered,” said Ryleigh Franklin, BS anthropology and criminal justice studies ’24. “I’m proud to have played a part in giving these women their names back.”

As the partnership continues, Oberweis hopes it will serve as a model for other law enforcement agencies while giving students meaningful, hands-on experiences that prepare them for careers in criminal justice.

PROTECTING COMMUNITIES THROUGH SAFER DRINKING WATER

What's in our drinking water and how does it affect our health over time?

Those questions, first proposed by biochemistry student Milena Di Blasi during her time as an Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA) assistant, sparked a multidisciplinary initiative analyzing drinking water across Illinois for endocrine-disrupting compounds. With long-term exposure, these compounds can interfere with hormone signaling and brain function, even in otherwise healthy individuals.

"When endocrine-disrupting compounds accumulate in water, it's often because existing treatment processes aren't designed to remove them," said Di Blasi's mentor, Carrie Butts-Wilmsmeyer, PhD, associate professor of biological sciences and director of SIUE's Center for Predictive Analytics (C-PAN). "From what we know about these compounds, they can change how signals are processed in the brain and can literally change who you are."

Recognizing the project's scope, Di Blasi and Butts-Wilmsmeyer assembled a research team that included Kevin Tucker, PhD, associate professor of chemistry and leader of Shimadzu SPARK Laboratory; Randy Pearson, PhD, professor of geography and director of SIUE's GeoMARC; and Nicholas Heller, PhD, of Illinois State University.

The initiative, Sustaining Illinois through Safe Drinking Water for All, was supported by a \$40,000 Illinois Innovation Network seed grant and \$13,000 from C-PAN.

Researchers collected 250 water samples statewide, analyzing them for estrogens and pesticides using liquid chromatography and gas chromatography-mass spectrometry. Geospatial analysis mapped contaminant concentrations and predicted contamination risk in communities not directly sampled.

**"Every water sample we analyzed
represents a real home,
a real family, a real community."**

— MILENA DI BLASI
BS Biochemistry '24

"To the credit of farmers and chemical companies, we found very few pesticides in our drinking water sources," said Butts-Wilmsmeyer. "In areas with growing populations, however, we found higher hormone levels because treatment facilities often lack the equipment needed to remove them, and the problem compounds over time."

Groundwater near St. Louis generally is less contaminated with hormones than is surface water, but expanded sampling showed groundwater filtration varies depending on aquifer type, soil composition, and regional geology.

"This research helps us develop better treatment systems, guide local decision makers, and build rapid testing tools," said Di Blasi, who is now pursuing her doctorate in biomedical chemistry at Saint Louis University. "Protecting water means protecting life."





A CHILDHOOD *dream* TAKES FLIGHT

Biological sciences alum and donor Stacia Novy '20, spent much of her life learning how to adapt. During her 23-year career in the U.S. Air Force, Novy navigated deployments, relocations, and a demanding schedule while pursuing her lifelong dream of becoming a wildlife biologist. Much like the birds she has studied, her resilience and ability to thrive in changing environments helped her turn challenges into opportunities for growth.

Her journey to commencement was marked by long nights of studying and completing online coursework between duty stations. Progress came in small increments, and unexpected setbacks — including losing portions of her thesis during a cross-country move — threatened to slow her momentum.

Support from SIUE helped her move forward. Her advisor, Rick Essner, PhD, professor of biological sciences, alerted her to online courses so she could stay enrolled while out of state. The Graduate School customized her curriculum, granted extensions, and arranged an internship that allowed her to complete her degree. Subject matter librarians at Lovejoy Library also located and emailed journal articles so she could conduct research from anywhere she was stationed.

After seven years, Novy completed her degree and received the "Wisdom Award for Longest Lifespan as a Graduate Student," a lighthearted tribute to her perseverance, named for the 73-year-old Laysan albatross that continues to nest at Midway Atoll.

After graduation, Novy launched a second career in wildlife biology and has worked as a field biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

Earning a graduate degree in biology was a childhood dream of mine. As a field biologist, I tell people that I get paid to climb trees and steal eggs from birds' nests. It makes me feel like a kid again.

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— STACIA NOVY
MS Biological Sciences '20

Grateful for the support that helped her achieve her dream, Novy now gives back through annual and planned gifts.

"I haven't forgotten anyone who lent a hand in my life's journey, especially when things were difficult," she said. "Giving back to SIUE, and especially the Department of Biological Sciences, is my way of saying 'thank you.'"

Strengthening Digital Exploration of AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY HISTORY



8 A \$1.6 million grant from the Mellon Foundation is helping SIUE expand a digital humanities initiative that reshapes how students, scholars, and the public explore African American literary history.

Howard Ramsby II, PhD, Distinguished Research Professor of Literature, leads the institution's participation in the Black Lit Network, a digital platform combining searchable literary databases, podcasts, data visualizations, and public programming to broaden engagement with Black literary studies.

"This funding is rare for an African American literary studies initiative at a regional university like ours," Ramsby said. "We are excited to expand the reach of this work."

Ramsby, co-investigators from Indiana University and Howard University, and partners from the SIUE IRIS Center have recently refined the project's Literary Navigator Device. This portal allows users to search novels, poems, short stories, autobiographies, and comic books by Black writers. The project also includes a podcast examining

responses to African American literary works and a digital gallery offering interactive visualizations that help readers explore large literary collections.

SIUE students contribute through research, podcast development, and exhibits in the Eugene B. Redmond Learning Center at Lovejoy Library. Redmond, a poet and literary historian, helped document the Black Arts Movement and assembled one of the nation's most significant archives of African American literature. SIUE students also bring these stories into community literacy programs, including SIUE's Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools® program.

Ramsby's contributions to African American literary scholarship and equity across the humanities earned him the SIU System's Wesley G. Robinson-McNeese ADEI Lifetime Achievement Award.

"Receiving this award comes at the right time," Ramsby said. "It feels especially significant to be recognized for work that affirms the importance of inclusion, equity, and ongoing institutional commitment."



FORGING AN IDENTITY THROUGH AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERACY

African American literature graduate student Makayla "Mak" Mallon, BS history '24, spent last summer leading literature-centered discussions with young scholars as a Servant Leader Intern with SIUE's Freedom School.

"Freedom School is built on literacy and advocacy, so it felt like a great way to blend all the things I love," Mallon said. "Leading discussions about stories that reflected the scholars' histories and identities made the experience meaningful. Freedom School clarified my mission to bring African American literature and history to our youth and make it exciting."

SIU System Collaboration Award



..... ERIC RUCKH, PHD

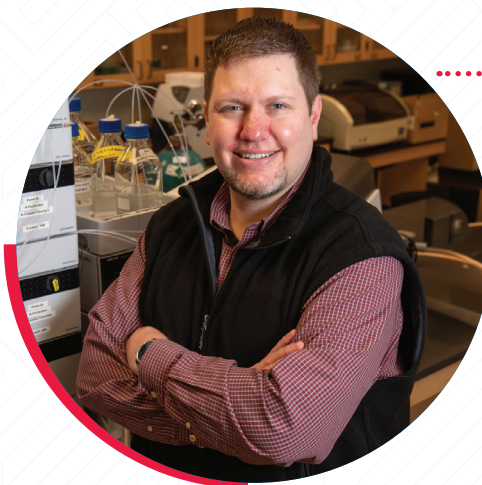
*Director, John Martinson Honors Program
Associate Professor, Department of History*

Bestowed by the SIU System, this award recognizes faculty whose cross-campus collaboration in teaching, scholarship, and service advances the System's goals. Ruckh partnered with Jyotsna Kapur, PhD, professor of cinema and media studies and former director of the Honors Program at SIUC, to expand opportunities for honors students across both campuses.

Since 2020, their collaboration has connected roughly 200 students through interdisciplinary honors courses taught by faculty at both universities. The partnership led to shared service projects organized by honors students, plus a joint student presentation at the 2023 National Collegiate Honors Council Conference in Chicago.

"By sharing resources across the two campuses, we can strengthen both institutions and improve students' experiences," Ruckh said.

Hoppe Research Professor Award



..... KEVIN TUCKER, PHD

Associate Professor, Department of Chemistry

This award recognizes SIUE faculty whose research or creative activities show promise for significant contributions to their field. Tucker's work examines how pollutants affect ecosystems by analyzing environmental samples and studying their impact on organisms, particularly invertebrates.

The award expands opportunities for student-driven research in Tucker's lab, funding projects outside traditional grants, and supporting students who might otherwise miss out. One project investigates environmental contaminants in feminine hygiene products, exploring how everyday consumer items may introduce chemicals into ecosystems.

His work advances environmental toxicology while giving students hands-on experience with analytical chemistry techniques used in environmental, pharmaceutical, and forensic sciences.

"Awards like this let faculty make a real difference for students," Tucker said. "It all goes directly to support my students doing research."

Ohio Valley Conference Outstanding Faculty Member for Student Success



..... LYNNE MILLER, PHD

Instructor, Department of Chemistry

Established by its member institutions' provosts, the Ohio Valley Conference (OVC) Outstanding Faculty Member for Student Success Award honors faculty demonstrating exceptional dedication to student success.

Nominated by SIUE student-athletes in her classes, Miller was recognized for bringing enthusiasm to the challenging chemistry coursework while providing mentorship and study strategies that help her students improve academically. For many student-athletes balancing rigorous science coursework with travel, training, and competition schedules, that support can make a meaningful difference.

"There is nothing more gratifying than watching my students succeed," Miller said. "If I can play even a small part in helping them tackle their coursework, ace the organic section of the MCAT, or land a full ride to dental school, there's nothing better."

FACULTY *Awards*

CAS BY THE *numbers*



340

Student Honorees
at Spring Celebration of
Excellence Ceremonies



648

Bachelor's Degrees
Awarded 2025



272

Scholarships
& Awards



2,978

Undergraduate
Students



340

Students in
Internships or Practica

165

Master's Degrees
Awarded 2025

392

Graduate
Students