

SIUE

THE MAGAZINE FOR SOUTHERN ILLINOIS
UNIVERSITY EDWARDSVILLE ALUMNI & FRIENDS
FALL 2025

DREAM *Jobs*



SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
EDWARDSVILLE



Celebrating a Robust Fall Enrollment

New first-year students gather at the Cougar statue for a class photo every fall. This year's cohort is the second largest since 2016. Additional fall 2025 enrollment highlights include:

- First-time, first-year student enrollment reached 1,826, a 19% increase over 2024.
- New transfer student enrollment rose to a six-year high of 1,165 students, a 20% increase over 2024.
- SIUE's overall enrollment increased by 7.7% to 12,813.

On the Cover: Matt Graifer '10, Dometi Pongo '11, Gail Miller Bisher '91, and Kathie Opel '06—four SIUE alumni who have each transformed their dreams into reality.

WHAT'S *inside*



FEATURE STORY 5-11

Dream Jobs

ALUMNI PROFILE 12

Matt Graifer Hypes Up Sold-Out Crowds at Busch Stadium

STUDENT PROFILE 13

Mirella Eldridge Forges Her Own Path Toward Success

DONOR PROFILE 14

Bill Luan's Journey from SIUE to Google

FACULTY PROFILE 15

Amelia Pérez Leads the Next Generation of Nurses

ATHLETICS 16-17

AROUND CAMPUS 18-19

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT 20

COUGAR CONNECTIONS 21

HEARD ON SOCIAL 22-23

Next Up!

Changemakers - Spring 2026 Magazine



Greetings from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville!

At SIUE, we believe in the transformative power of higher education. A college degree not only opens pathways to social and economic mobility but also establishes the foundation for living lives of purpose, service, and impact.

As we present the Fall 2025 edition of SIUE Magazine, themed “Dream Jobs,” I am reminded of the incredible promise that lies at the intersection of college access and opportunity. When individuals are given the chance to pursue their interests, develop their potential, and build confidence in their abilities, the possibilities for their future are truly boundless.

This issue celebrates the alumni and students who are living out their dreams. These individuals are not only succeeding in their chosen career fields, but they are also contributing to their communities. “Dream jobs” are not simply handed out—they are discovered through hard work, guided by mentorship, and fueled by passion. SIUE provides a place where students are challenged academically, prepared professionally, and invited to consider their social responsibility. The stories featured in this issue demonstrate just how far that combination can take you.

As you read these pages, I hope you are inspired by the many ways our community continues to dream boldly and act with purpose. Thank you for being part of SIUE’s ongoing story—one that continues to evolve through every student we empower, and every life, family, and community we help transform.

Warmest Regards,

JAMES T. MINOR, PhD
Chancellor



Actor. Archaeologist. Bestselling Author. Chief Executive Officer. Educator. Inventor. Pediatric Neuropsychologist. Sculptor. Professional Athlete. U.S. Representative. Pulitzer Prize-winning Journalist. Cast Director and Chief Potassium Enthusiast.

WHAT DO ALL THESE CAREERS HAVE IN COMMON?

They represent just a few of the diverse and inspiring career paths taken by alumni of SIUE. Let's celebrate the careers of several of our alumni who have pursued their dream jobs that reflect not only their ambition and talent, but also the values and experiences that shaped them. Whether their dreams were sparked on campus or discovered after graduation, the individuals featured prove that with passion, hard work, and sometimes, a little bit of potassium, landing a dream job can be a reality.



The Best of Boeing

Shaunnika "Niki" Allen

BS Business Administration '04

Niki Allen is the chief information officer for Boeing Global Services, which ensures optimal aircraft availability and mission readiness for its customers' fleets. She previously served as Boeing's vice president of Global IT infrastructure and operations. Niki was named Top 100 Executive Women in Tech to Watch in 2025 by the WomenTech Network.



Best in Show

Gail Miller Bisher

BS Mass Communications '91

Advertising, marketing, and public relations professional Gail Miller Bisher is an award-winning advertising broadcast producer with Clio and Cannes honors. For nearly a decade, she served as the Fox Sports Dog Show on-camera analyst for the iconic Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show telecast live from Madison Square Garden in New York City and the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center in Queens. Additionally, she hosted "The Road to Westminster" video series.



Platinum Pen, Creative Soul

Christina "Tina" Doman

BS Special Education '10

Christina "Tina" Doman, also known as Christina Gandy-Rodgers, is a highly successful American songwriter, credited with achieving 12-times multi-platinum status. Doman has worked on chart-topping tracks and high-profile projects, including contributions to Doja Cat's "Demons," Kodak Black's "ZEZE" featuring Offset and Travis Scott, and Tyga's "Do My Dance" featuring 2 Chainz. She is also the owner of Icon Florals in Los Angeles.

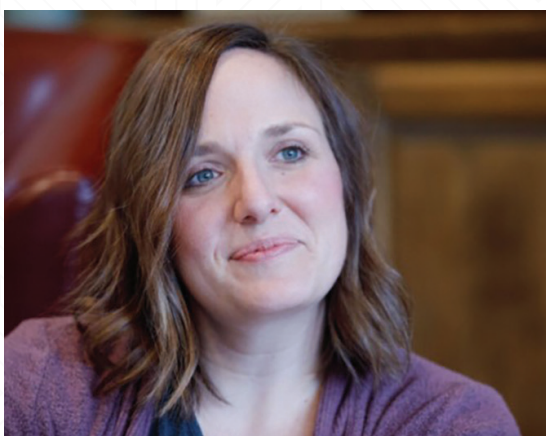


Science and Service

Jacquelyn Ferguson

BS Civil Engineering '82

Driven by a passion for clean air and water, Jacquelyn Ferguson combined her civil engineering background and love of chemistry to land her dream job at the EPA. She began in the drinking water program before joining the Army Reserves as an environmental science officer, applying her expertise to safeguard health and the environment worldwide. Ferguson later spent a year in Germany as an environmental engineer with the U.S. Army, then returned to the EPA, serving in programs including superfund, watershed management, toxics and pesticides, and emergency planning.



Healing with Heart

Breanna Hetland, PhD, RN, CCRN

BS Nursing '10

Breanna Hetland is an associate professor at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, nurse scientist at Nebraska Medicine, and CEO of the Family Room. Her expertise lies in combining technology with integrative healing methods to support critically ill patients and their families. Her research has earned national funding and recognition, including projects like familyroom.health and studies using therapeutic robots in pediatric intensive care units. She's a published expert, sought-after speaker, successful entrepreneur, and leader in critical care nursing innovation.



Always Up for a Laugh

David Hopping

BA Mass Communications '13

As co-host of the "Back to the Best" podcast, David Hopping celebrates nostalgia and revisits the things he and his co-host Grace Isaacs Russell enjoyed as kids growing up in the '90s and '00s. When he first moved to Los Angeles, David got a job as a Warner Brothers Studios tour guide. This role helped him hone his public speaking skills. He currently serves as executive assistant to comedian and media personality Conan O'Brien. David once (in a sketch) was selected as Conan's successor, which landed him on the front page of his hometown newspaper in Carlinville, Ill.



Endocrine Expert

Diana Isaacs, PharmD, BCPS, BCACP, BC-ADM, CDCES

Doctor of Pharmacy '09

Diana Isaacs is a leading clinical pharmacist specializing in diabetes and endocrine care. She co-directs a program for endocrine disorders in pregnancy and oversees training in diabetes technology at Cleveland Clinic. A national speaker and podcast host, Diana has helped shape national diabetes care guidelines and advocates for better access to the latest treatments and tech. In 2020, she was named the Association for Diabetes Care and Education Specialists' Diabetes Care Specialist of the Year.



The Mind Behind Great Campaigns

Lisa James

BS Political Science '92

Lisa James (pictured on far right) is a seasoned coalition builder and public relations expert who began her career in Illinois politics. She's advised U.S. presidents, senators, and members of Congress, serving on key campaigns and initiatives. Collaborating with husband Gordon James, they have worked on presidential inaugurations and produced White House Easter Egg Rolls, demonstrating deep experience in national, political, and public events.



Building the Future

Ralph Korte (1934-2025)

Associate in Business '65, BS Business Administration '68

The SIUE community mourns the passing of Ralph Korte, a visionary builder, philanthropist, and founder of one of the nation's leading design-build firms, The Korte Company. He transformed the construction industry and helped drive growth across the St. Louis region. Ralph took two night classes a week at SIUE for nine years and made education and lifelong learning core values of his business. His generosity and leadership helped establish the School of Engineering's construction management program and built the landmark Ralph Korte Stadium, which are lasting symbols of his innovation, integrity, and dedication to SIUE.



Ready Player One

Mary Bauer Wilhelm Macmillan

BA Art and Design '74

Mary Bauer Wilhelm Macmillan found her passion for art and design by spending hours in the Wagner Building exploring photography, jewelry, and art history. That creative foundation carried into her nearly 20-year career with Nintendo, where she worked as a merchandiser for the brand across major retailers in the Denver region. Known for her hands-on displays and joyful energy, she was a true cheerleader for the brand and even earned one Retail Representative of the Year award and three Golden Mario statues for her excellent service at Nintendo. Now retired, Mary enjoys sharing her massive collection of Nintendo consoles and games with her grandchildren.



Social AI in Motion

Ross Mead

BS Computer Science '07

A leading expert in human-robot interaction, Ross Mead is the founder and CEO of Semio, a Los Angeles-based company focused on making robots more socially intelligent and friendly with human users. His work blends robotics, AI, and natural language processing to help robotic characters communicate like humans using speech, gestures, eye contact, and other social behaviors. Ross has amassed more than 70 peer-reviewed publications and secured more than \$10 million in research funding. Ross also supports AI and STEM education through board roles and has advised major organizations like Disney, Intel, and National Geographic.



The Father of SIUE Tennis

Bob Meyers

BS Physical Education '71, MS Education '72

Bob Meyers (pictured on right) witnessed the birth of men's and women's tennis teams at SIUE. He guided the women's team to four consecutive championships from 1986-1989, an era of Cougar tennis that lives on as one of the best championship runs in NCAA history with three National Singles Championships and two National Championships Doubles teams. While at SIUE, he worked as an assistant athletic director, an assistant to the director of Campus Recreation, a health, physical education, and recreation instructor, and a tennis coach.



Compassionate Dental Educator

Patricia "Tish" Nihill, DMD, MS

Doctor of Dental Medicine '82

Tish Nihill recently retired after a career in dental education that has spanned more than 30 years. She was a member of the SIU School of Dental Medicine faculty from 1984-2000. Tish has also served as a faculty member at the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Dentistry and the University of Kentucky College of Dentistry, where she served as the division chief of Comprehensive Care until her retirement. In her retirement, she volunteers at the Chicago Dental Society Foundation clinic in her hometown of Wheaton and teaches part time as an adjunct faculty member at Midwestern University College of Dental Medicine-Illinois.



Everyone's Neighbor

Chad and Kathie Opel

BS Kinesiology '03 (Chad); BS Mass Communications '06 (Kathie)

Former Cougar baseball player Chad Opel is a wealth management advisor and owner of Front Office Wealth Strategies. Kathie is an estate planning attorney and practicing partner at Opel Bash Group. Together, they co-founded the nonprofit charity Edwardsville Neighbors, which supports Edwardsville District 7 families facing medical or emergency hardships. They have provided \$1.4 million+ in direct assistance since 2010. The charity hosts the annual "Taste of Edwardsville" event, which highlights the culinary talents of local, community-minded restaurants, and an annual Turkey Trot 5K on Thanksgiving morning on SIUE's campus.



Top of Her Class

Lori Patton Davis, PhD

BS Speech Communication '95

Lori Patton Davis, PhD, is the Heyman Endowed Chair and faculty director of the Educational Leadership Program in the School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA. With 100+ publications and 18,000+ citations, she is listed among the top 200 most influential scholars shaping educational practice and policy by Education Policy's RHSU Edu-Scholar Rankings and in the top 35 women in higher education by the publication *Diverse Issues*. A member of the National Academy of Education, her goal in higher education is to promote access and success and cultivate a campus environment where all students can thrive.



Excused Absence

Treyvoyn "Trey" Perkins

BA Theater and Dance '24

Treyvoyn Perkins landed the role of Chickie Pete in the Oscar-nominated film "Nickel Boys," which is based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of the same name by Colson Whitehead. Upon hearing his casting news, Trey was due on set the next day to film for nearly a month during the fall semester of his third year at SIUE. Due to his extraordinary discipline and the support of his faculty mentors, he was able to graduate on time with straight A's and landed a spot on the Dean's List while following his Hollywood dreams.



Storytelling with Purpose

Dometi Pongo

BS Business Administration '11

Dometi Pongo is known for his work at Paramount, including his role as MTV correspondent. Dometi has hosted, executive-produced and contributed to multiple franchises including MTV's "True Crime Life," "MTV News Need to Know," and "The Exhibit." In addition to his red-carpet interviews, he's been featured on BET's "America in Black," VH1's "Lineage to Legacy," and multiple Smithsonian Channel docuseries. He has contributed cultural commentary to "CBS Mornings Plus," CNN's "Flash Docs," and "Entertainment Tonight." Pongo's series for CBS "48 Hours," "Candyman: The True Story Behind the Bathroom Mirror Murder," is available on all podcast platforms.



Country Stardom

Brett Sheroky

BS Speech Language Pathology Audiology '06, MS Speech Language Pathology '08

Brett Sheroky is a country music artist and songwriter. For 11 years, he worked by day as a speech therapist and perfected his songwriting at night. In 2020, he signed his first publishing deal with SeaGayle Music. He's penned songs for artists like Blake Shelton, Jake Owen, and Matt Stell. His songs have been performed on The Voice and American Idol. Brett's debut album, Rock Paper Scissors, was released in 2025.



Global Nursing Leader

Bernadette Sobczak, DNP, APN, CPNP-PC, PMHS

BS Nursing '97, MS Nursing '03

Bernadette Sobczak is an associate professor of family health and community health nursing at SIUE. Bernadette has led six clinical service trips to the remote village of Escuintla, Guatemala with the nonprofit ER Abroad. In the village, she launched a pediatric telehealth services program for community children in The Land of Hope Community. The medical clinic was dedicated to the SIUE School of Nursing by Land of Hope partners BuildinGUATE and ER Abroad.



Combat Vet to CEO

Tabatha Turman

BS Accounting '98

Tabatha Turman is a retired military officer, combat veteran, and founder and CEO of Integrated Finance & Accounting Solutions, a multimillion-dollar, award-winning firm that serves federal agencies. She is a speaker and the author of "P2D: Elements of a Growth Mindset." In Tabatha's dynamic career that has spanned over 30 years, she has built a legacy of leadership, service, and entrepreneurial success.

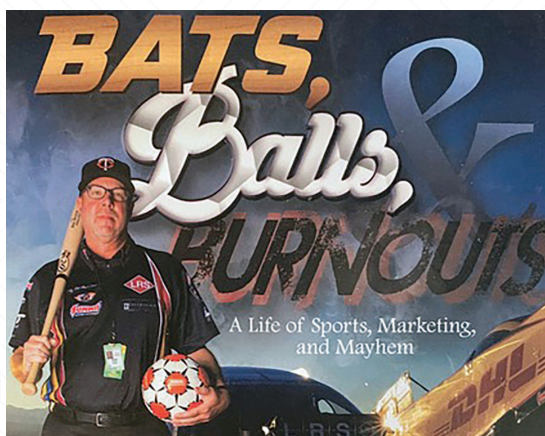


Masterpiece Master

Roger Weik

BS Art and Design '72, MFA Art and Design '73

Contemporary artist Roger Weik's work has been featured in prestigious venues worldwide, including the Elgiz Museum of Contemporary Art, Boca Raton Museum of Art, and Carnegie Art Museum. Notable exhibitions include the 1976 "Thirteen Artists from Saint Louis" at the Lyon Contemporary Art Museum in France and the 2022 "WE ARE LA" show at USCLA's Ronald Silverman Fine Art Gallery. His work is held in the permanent collections of 58 museums globally, with a 2025 solo exhibition slated at NART in Buenos Aires, Argentina.



Crafting Stories, Running Bases

Bob Wilber

BS Mass Communications '80

With his passion for professional baseball, soccer, and drag racing, Bob Wilber has built a dynamic career with his athleticism, marketing knowledge, and love for storytelling. He played professional baseball for the Detroit and Oakland organizations and served as a professional scout for the Toronto Blue Jays. He transitioned into sports marketing, leading indoor soccer teams and managing PR for NHRA drag racing. In addition to his sports careers, Bob is a published author having penned "Bats, Balls & Burnouts" as well as "How Far?" and "The Lost Manuscript." His fourth book, "Forever Hilanders," is due to be released soon.



Transforming Pharmacology

Brentsen Wolf, PharmD

Doctor of Pharmacy '21

Brentsen Wolf (pictured middle) blends deep clinical research experience with a passion for innovation and education. As a medical science liaison at AstraZeneca, he specializes in thoracic malignancies and head and neck cancers, building on previous medical roles at Merck. At SIUE, Wolf earned national recognition for breast cancer genomics research working with Ronald Worthington, PhD, professor emeritus. Today, he also serves as co-founder and president of RxTeach, a nonprofit dedicated to professional development, preventative medicine, and personal wellness.



Dentistry Reimagined

Rick Workman, DMD

Doctor of Dental Medicine '80

Rick Workman is the founder and executive chair of Heartland Dental, the largest dental support organization in the country. Heartland Dental provides non-clinical administrative support to over 3,000 dentists across 1,800+ dental offices with 25,000+ team members. By supporting activities such as hiring, marketing, payor negotiations, and doctor and team member education and training, Heartland Dental-supported doctors can focus on providing high-quality and compassionate care to their patients. His vision has helped to modernize and scale dental care, improving both patient experience and healthcare delivery.



Principal of the Year

Tron Young, EdD

MSEd Educational Administration '09, EdS Educational Administration '17, EdD Educational Leadership '19

Tron Young is an award-winning educator. In 2020, he was honored as the Illinois Principal Association's Illinois Middle School Principal of the Year for his innovation, community engagement, and positive school leadership. He is the founder and host of the "Be the Thermostat" podcast that addresses themes of perseverance, making good choices, goal setting, and youth leadership skill development. The motivational speaker and professional development coach kicked off the 2025-26 school year as a principal in the O'Fallon Illinois Community Consolidated School District.

As both the executive director of Alumni and Donor Relations and a proud SIUE alumna, I'm continually inspired by the remarkable paths our graduates take. The alumni featured in this spread are living proof that an SIUE education opens doors to dream jobs across every industry and corner of the globe. Their work is impactful, creative, and often one-of-a-kind—shaping communities, advancing innovation, and making the world a better place.

It's a joy to celebrate their achievements and to know that their journey started right here at SIUE. I'm proud to call them fellow Cougars!

Cathy Taylor

CATHY TAYLOR, MPA '15

*Associate Vice Chancellor for University Advancement
Executive Director of Alumni and Donor Relations*



GOING *Bananas*



Matt Graifer Hypes Up Sold-out Crowds at Busch Stadium

Matt Graifer, MS kinesiology '10, didn't set out to become a sports entertainer. In fact, he wasn't sure that his dream job even existed until he found himself doing it.

Today, Graifer is known to millions of fans as "The Young Professor," chief potassium enthusiast, and cast director of the Savannah Bananas, the viral baseball team that took TikTok by storm. But in 2008, long before Graifer ever picked up a microphone or put on a glittering tuxedo, he was at SIUE pursuing a graduate degree.

Graifer credits the Department of Exercise, Sports and Nutrition Sciences, including former program director Curt Lox, PhD, for helping shape his future at SIUE.

"Dr. Lox was very supportive and allowed me to tailor my curriculum in a way that made most sense for where I wanted to go professionally," said Graifer, who earned a bachelor's in psychology from Rowan University. "I was fortunate to take courses in sports marketing and business management. It's incredibly helpful to what I do now."

After SIUE, Graifer taught exercise science at Keiser University for over seven years. In 2015, he started hosting bar trivia nights,

a gig that sparked a passion for live performance. He set his sights on becoming a professional sports announcer a few years later. That goal quickly materialized when a Florida wrestling promotion posted an audition call for a Saturday-night announcer. Graifer showed up, nailed it, and never looked back.

What followed was a stretch of announcing gigs for wrestling, MMA, minor league baseball, arena football, and college basketball before Graifer joined the Savannah Bananas on their first Banana Ball World Tour in 2022.

"It's an incredibly fulfilling role," said Graifer. "I've had the chance to help build it, shape it, and now even hire other hosts as we expand into new teams and brands. I get to perform and use my skills as a writer and producer to create what we call 'the greatest show in sports.'"

In July, the Savannah Bananas lit up Busch Stadium during two sold-out nights in St. Louis. With more than 90,000 fans in attendance, including hundreds of SIUE alumni, Graifer brought his signature energy center stage, helping power the show from start to finish.

This is absolutely my dream job, it just didn't exist when I started.

MATT GRAIFER
MS Kinesiology '10
Chief Potassium Enthusiast
and Cast Director, Savannah Bananas

“/”

A Rising Star

Mirella Eldridge Forges Her Own Path Toward Success

From guiding campus tours to interning with top engineering firms across the country, senior industrial engineering major Mirella Eldridge is making the most of every moment at SIUE.

Eldridge, who grew up in Peoria, Ill., took her love for math and science and transformed it into a meaningful path where she could find purpose in the people-centered, process-driven world of industrial engineering.

"I am not surprised I fell in love with industrial engineering, given how much I enjoy planning, understanding how things work, and always working with a continuous improvement mindset," said Eldridge.

Her extroverted nature led her to thrive in several student worker roles with the Office of Admissions, where she helped coordinate new student programs, trained fellow student ambassadors, and led countless campus tours. Her passion for leadership, her positivity, and collaborative nature have earned her the School's Outstanding Senior in Industrial Engineering Award, the Kay Guse Founder's Award for her leadership in the Society of Women Engineers, and the Bill and Jean Luan STEM Scholarship.

Outside the classroom, Eldridge has built an already-impressive resume through internships and co-op positions with AECOM, ARCO National Construction, and Burns & McDonnell. She spent last summer working as a project controls intern in Rhode Island with Burns & McDonnell, supporting the state's energy utility construction program. For the young engineer, learning how to communicate technical information to non-technical audiences has been incredibly rewarding.



Mirella is one of those rare students who stands out for not just her technical skills, but for her character. Her future in industrial engineering is incredibly bright, and I'm confident she'll bring both skill and heart to whatever path she chooses.

SINAN ONAL, PHD

Professor and Chair

*Department of Industrial Engineering
School of Engineering*

“/”

"We work with project managers to update schedules, analyze costs, and forecast budgets," said Eldridge. "I love the direct, client-facing experience I've had in this role. We meet with our clients weekly to report updates, present data clearly, and discuss issues or adjustments."

With encouragement from mentors like Sinan Onal, PhD, professor and chair of the Department of Industrial Engineering; Miriam Rocca, vice chancellor for student affairs; and Alicia Taylor, associate director of admissions; Eldridge has embraced every opportunity to grow as a leader, a learner, and a future engineer. As her December graduation date approaches, she's ready to bring that same energy and openness to the next chapter of her journey.



Powered By Curiosity: Bill Luan's Journey from SIUE to Google

Bill Yue Luan's path to his dream job began in 1980 in the basement of Lovejoy Library.

An international student from Shanghai, China majoring in electrical engineering, Luan took a student worker job in the library's audio-visual lab. Frustrated with the lab's inefficient punch-card tracking system, he taught himself BASIC programming on an Apple II and created a program that automated student activity counts. His program replaced the old manual operation and also earned him the Friends of Lovejoy Library award in 1984.

"That program taught me a new perspective and changed my life," said Luan. "It showed me that taking initiative to solve real-world problems can be rewarding."

After graduating with BS and MS degrees in electrical engineering in 1984 and 1985, Luan entered the workforce amid a wave of factory automation. As an electrical systems engineer, he helped companies like Owens-Illinois, Reynolds Metals, and Siemens replace outdated manual systems with computer controls.

By the 1990s, Luan was helping shape the future of mobile technology at Motorola, contributing to the first two-way pagers. He then joined Microsoft, where he managed products such as ActiveSync and Windows Embedded and later hosted executive briefings for global leaders—including a presidential delegation from China at Microsoft headquarters and Bill Gates' home.

In 2008, a former colleague recruited him to Google's new developer relations team. Though hesitant, he took the leap. Over the next decade, he built developer communities, organized major conferences, and trained tens of thousands of developers worldwide.

"We trained developers who went on to create many of the mobile games and apps people use today," Luan said.

Now a senior program manager at Google, Luan leads projects in artificial intelligence (AI), including healthcare AI models, chip design for wearables, and open-source machine learning compiler technology.

“

Be proactive and willing to take risks and embrace something new. Sometimes that leap into something uncertain is exactly what will lead you to your dream job.

BILL LUAN

*BS Electrical Engineering '84, MS Electrical Engineering '85
Senior Program Manager, Google*

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Beyond his professional accomplishments, Luan has remained deeply connected to SIUE. A 2016 SIUE Alumni Hall of Fame inductee, he established two scholarships and an endowment to support future students.

"Supporting our alma mater to build a stronger foundation for future academic excellence is the best legacy we can build for ourselves and future generations," he said.

As he reflects on a 40-year career, Luan encourages today's students to stay curious and embrace change.

From Student to Professor



Amelia Pérez Leads the Next Generation of Nurses

"Mentoring nursing students throughout their professional growth and then seeing them in the healthcare environment as professional nurses after graduation is the most rewarding part of my job" said Amelia Pérez, PhD, RN, CNE, professor of family health and community health nursing.

Over the years, Pérez's nursing journey has evolved from her time as an SIUE nursing student to a full-time professor, mentor, and leader at the university. She earned a BSN in 1996 and MSN in 2001. After receiving her master's, Professor Emerita Cindy Schmidt, PhD, invited her to consider teaching a clinical at SIUE, and she quickly discovered a lasting passion for teaching.

"If I had closed the door on considering academic teaching, I would have closed the door on my dream job," said Pérez.

In 2011, Pérez completed a doctorate in nursing at Saint Louis University and her career as a nurse educator continued to flourish. Since returning to the SIUE School of Nursing as a faculty member in 2003, she has taught undergraduate and graduate courses, coordinated the Simulated Learning Center for Health Sciences, and led the Department of Family Health and Community Health Nursing as chair.

Pérez currently serves as coordinator of the University's Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA) program and as co-investigator on two Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) federally funded grants. One grant focuses on a mobile health program through the SIUE WE CARE Clinic providing care to underserved individuals across the expansive St. Louis metropolitan area. The brick-and-mortar clinic and mobile health unit serve about 710 patients per year.

"Bringing screenings, physicals, and education to the community can help overcome barriers of access to care, which can make a major difference in someone's health," said Pérez.

Through the second HRSA grant, Pérez and colleagues have developed and implemented a preceptor and clinical faculty training academy. Approximately 600 preceptors and clinical faculty across a six-state region have already participated in the program.

Pérez credits much of her career success to SIUE mentors who provided guidance and support throughout her educational and academic faculty journey, including Professors Emeritae Rhonda Comrie, PhD, Cynthia Schmidt, PhD, Laura Bernaix, PhD, and Mary Ann Boyd, PhD.

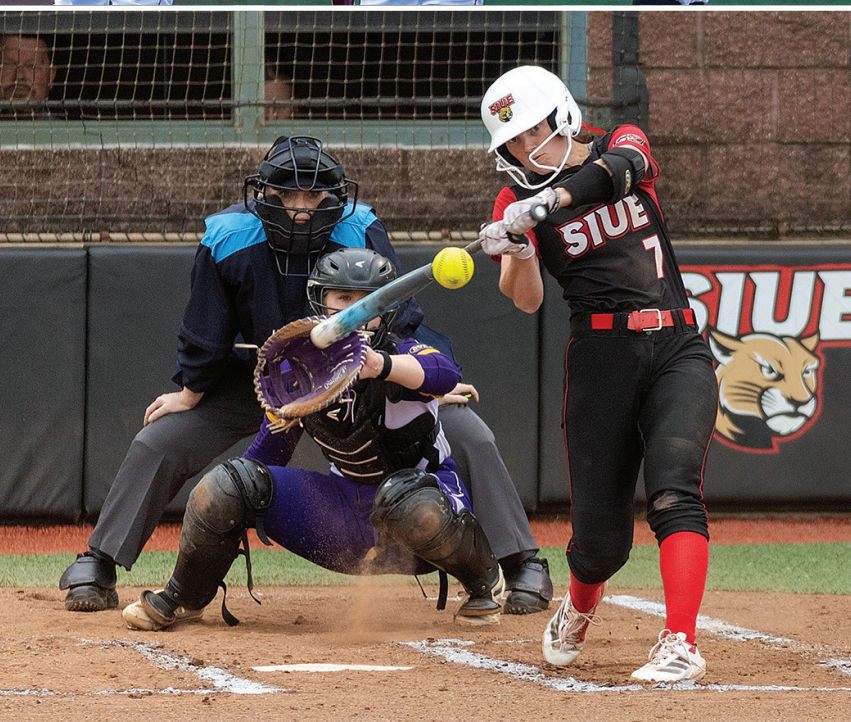


Always keep your eyes open for something you may not have thought about, because it may end up being what you love.

AMELIA PÉREZ, PHD, RN, CNE
BS Nursing '96, MS Nursing '01
Professor

Family Health and Community Health
School of Nursing

“/”



Cougar Baseball, Softball Swing Big with Record Wins, Top Honors

2025 marked strong seasons for the SIUE Cougars baseball and softball teams.

After an 8-8 nonconference start, the softball team opened Ohio Valley Conference (OVC) play with eight straight wins and three consecutive series victories. The Cougars finished 19-6 in league play, just three games out of first, for their most OVC wins since 2015. With a 32-22 overall record, SIUE reached 30 wins for the second time in three seasons under Head Coach Ben Sorden, who was named OVC Coach of the Year. The 32 wins were the program's most since 2017.

Five Cougars earned OVC postseason honors. Freshman pitcher Avery Arwood was named Freshman of the Year after going 11-8, tying for third in the league in wins. She ranked 10th in ERA (3.11) and sixth in strikeouts (89). Offensive leader Kaylynn Salyars finished fourth in batting average (.384), second in hits (66) and third in doubles (16). Piper Montgomery (First Team), Emma Henderson (Second Team) and Kaylin Fahy (All-Newcomer Team) also earned recognition.

In the OVC Championship, SIUE forced a decisive game against top-seeded Eastern Illinois with a 4-3 win but fell 1-0 in extra innings on a wild pitch.

Baseball also battled back from a 2-9 start and an eight-game losing streak to win five straight to open OVC play. The Cougars won seven of nine conference series and finished 18-8, leading the league in wins and coming within percentage points of their first-ever regular-season title. The Cougars may have secured the title had they not had their final regular season game washed away due to rain. The 18 wins were the most under Head Coach Sean Lyons and second most in program history.

In the postseason, SIUE dropped its first two OVC tournament games, falling to regular-season champion and tournament runner-up Eastern Illinois.

Seven baseball Cougars earned All-OVC honors, including a program-record four First Team selections. Mack Mitchell led the league with 19 home runs and ranked sixth with 51 RBIs. Chase Bloomer tied for fourth with 14 home runs. Daniel Gierer finished third in batting average (.355) and fourth in stolen bases (22), while Ryan Niedzwiedz hit .332 for 10th in the league. Pitchers Spencer Steans and Liam McKillop earned Second Team honors, and Tim Teixeira was named to the All-Freshman Team.



Savannah DeFini Gets Back In The Game

When women's soccer forward Savannah DeFini arrived at SIUE in fall 2022, she expected to graduate early and stick around to finish her soccer career. She didn't expect a season-ending injury would help her gain a new perspective on soccer, school, and leadership.

DeFini's college recruiting process was complicated by the COVID-19 global pandemic. While other schools slowed their recruitment efforts, SIUE continued to show up and get to know her.

"That commitment through the pandemic showed that they cared about me," said DeFini. "When I took my visit, it felt like home."

During her first season, the women's soccer team secured an Ohio Valley Conference (OVC) championship win, marking the team's third consecutive trip to the NCAA tournament and an 8-6-4 overall record.

Amidst the OVC run, DeFini tore her right ACL in a game against Eastern Illinois University, ending her season as she watched her team go to the NCAA tournament from the sidelines. Returning for the 2023 season, the Cougars fell in the opening

round of the OVC tournament on penalty kicks. In 2024, the team ended its season with a 2-7-7 record.

As she reflected on the injury that ended her 2022 season, as difficult as it was, DeFini is grateful for the growth she experienced as it helped her develop into the person she is today.

"The Lord works in mysterious ways, and he put me on the sideline so that I had to be a good teammate, a good daughter, a good friend, and a leader in different ways," she said.

Now, as a graduate student playing her final season, DeFini is ready to help lead the team to success.

"It would be full circle to be able to lead these girls through that," she said. "That's where I was four years ago, and for them to get a title and experience what I experienced four years ago would be special."

DeFini and her fellow seniors know they have the support of the entire coaching staff in their final season.

I want to end this season in a good way.
I don't want to have any regrets, and
I want to make an impact on my team.

SAVANNAH DEFINI

Graduate Student, SIUE Women's Soccer Forward

“/”





A New Era for the Health Sciences at SIUE

The new state-of-the-art 176,000-square-foot Health Sciences Complex (HSC) at SIUE marks the start of a transformative chapter, housing the SIUE Schools of Pharmacy and Nursing in the same building for the first time. The three-story facility mirrors real-world healthcare settings, offering exam rooms, skill labs, immersive virtual reality experiences, collaborative learning spaces, and opportunities for interprofessional education.

Classes for pharmacy students began in the new complex this fall. First-year enrollment in the School of Pharmacy is up more than 30%, a testament to the draw of this groundbreaking facility.

“The greatest strength of our program has always been its people. Now we have a facility that matches their talents,” said Mark Luer, PharmD, FCCP, School of Pharmacy Dean.

Illinois’ nursing shortage is estimated to be 15,000. With the additional space and capacity, the HSC will provide, School of Nursing enrollment, which currently stands at more than 1,700 students, has the potential to grow by nearly 30%. With 80% of nursing alumni working in the region, the impact on the nursing shortage could be significant.

Nursing students will start classes in the new space in spring 2026.

Mellon Foundation Grant Supports Public Knowledge Digital Project

A \$1.6 million grant from the Mellon Foundation through its Public Knowledge program will support the expansion of the Black Lit Network, a digital resource dedicated to African American literary studies. The project includes a podcast series, data visualizations, a literature search tool, and additional public-facing resources. “It’s rare for an African American literary studies initiative at a regional university like ours to receive a grant of this scale,” said SIUE Distinguished Research Professor of Literature Howard Ramsby II, PhD, a lead researcher on the project.

Blind Baseball World Series Comes to SIUE

SIUE hosted the 2025 National Beep Baseball Association World Series in July, welcoming 19 teams of blind and visually impaired athletes from across the U.S. and Taiwan. Co-hosted by MindsEye, led by CEO and Alumni Association Board Member Jason Frazier, BS mass communications ’11, the event marked the first time the tournament is held in a non-major city in decades.

SIUE earns 2025-26 Military Friendly® School Gold Status

SIUE has once again earned Gold Tier recognition as a 2025-2026 Military Friendly® School by VIQTOR, publisher of G.I. Jobs® Magazine, placing the University among the top 10% of institutions nationwide for its commitment to serving military-affiliated students, including active-duty service members, veterans, and military-connected families.

BY THE *numbers*

**\$3.25
MILLION**

AMOUNT STUDENTS EARNED
LAST YEAR AT INTERNSHIPS AND CO-OPS

127,000+
ALUMNI
And counting!

2,300+
EMPLOYERS RECRUITED
SIUE STUDENTS

11,700+
JOBS ON THE
CAREER DEVELOPMENT
CENTER WEBSITE
2024-2025



BEST COMPANIES TO WORK FOR

U.S. News & World Report's 2025-26

**ST. LOUIS-BASED COMPANIES
THAT MADE THE LIST AND SIUE
ALUMNI WHO WORK THERE**

Ameren* 700+
Barry-Wehmiller Companies 14
Drury Hotels 8
Edward Jones* 58
Enterprise Financial Services* 36
McCarthy Building Companies* 80
World Wide Technology* 450+
**Internships opportunities for SIUE students*

ALUMNI LIVE AND WORK IN

50 & **88**
STATES COUNTRIES

More Than

70,000
ALUMNI
LIVE AND WORK IN
ILLINOIS

**FY23 REGIONAL
ECONOMIC IMPACT ***
\$1.3 BILLION
12,178 JOBS
FY23

**ALUMNI REGIONAL
IMPACT ***
\$516,306,895
SIUE FY23

Estimated increased incomes linked to SIUE education
**In Southern IL and St. Louis Metropolitan area*



FROM YOUR ALUMNI
ASSOCIATION PRESIDENT

Fellow Alumni,

It's with great honor and excitement that I introduce myself as the new President of our esteemed Alumni Association. As a fellow graduate, I know firsthand the transformative power of our experiences here at SIUE. This institution didn't just equip us with degrees; it provided a foundation for pursuing our passions and living out our dream jobs.

For many of us, the path to our dream job wasn't always a straight line. There were twists, turns, and perhaps even a few detours, but it was the foundational learning and the unwavering support system we found here at SIUE that gave us the confidence to persevere. Whether your dream job is to be an entrepreneur, a scientist, an artist, or a community leader, the experiences gained within these hallowed halls provided the essential stepping stones. Continuing this legacy, our Alumni Association offers networking, mentorship, and resources to help every alumnus achieve their highest aspirations.

I look forward to connecting with many of you to celebrate the profound impact SIUE has had on our lives and ensuring that future generations of students are equally well-prepared to turn their own career dreams into reality.

GO COUGARS!

GEORGE LADD, BSA '07, MBA '09

President

SIUE Alumni Association Board of Directors

CONNECT WITH US!
@siuealumni



SIUE Powers Regional Innovation with Partnership with The Wedge

SIUE is deepening its connection in the greater Alton Metro region through a new partnership with AltonWorks, a social impact redevelopment company focused on the revitalization of historic downtown Alton. Branded as "The Wedge Powered by SIUE," the collaboration will create a dynamic ecosystem for innovation, education, and community development.

The Wedge will serve as a social impact hub, research lab, think tank, and workspace that drives innovation across Illinois and Missouri. The 55,000-square foot center located in the heart of downtown Alton opened its doors to the community in April 2025.

"This partnership allows us to provide applied research, technical support, and data analytics in partnership with municipal and county leadership while developing talent to drive today's workforce and our future needs," said Denise Cobb, PhD, Provost and Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs.

SIUE will draw on institutional strengths and expand our reach through specialized programming and technical expertise in a dedicated space within The Wedge. The following SIUE Centers will be central to this effort:

- GeoMarc Program: Providing geospatial mapping, applications, and research capabilities
- Center for Predictive Analytics: Delivering data-driven insights to business and community partners
- Center for Sustainable Communities and Entrepreneurship: Supporting SIUE's community engagement, innovation, and entrepreneurship throughout the region

The Wedge will feature professional development programming in collaboration with the School of Business and Office of Online Services and Educational Outreach. Courses range from entrepreneurship, technology skills, grant writing, and more to support the evolving needs of local businesses and professionals.

"By bringing together SIUE's research capabilities and educational programming with The Wedge's innovative workspace, we're creating unprecedented opportunities for economic growth, workforce development, and community engagement," said John Simmons, BS political science '91, CEO of AltonWorks.

WELCOME NEW ALUMNI ASSOCIATION BOARD MEMBERS!

- Lucinda Antonacci-Fulton, BS Biological Sciences '91, MS Biological Sciences '97
- Jessica Boykin, BS Special Education '14
- Olivia Emerson, BS Criminal Justice Studies '20
- Allison Gray, BS Economics and Finance '07, MS Economics and Finance '08
- Thomas Harrell, BS Sociology '05
- Jesse Phelps, BS Computer Science '08
- Steve Porter, BA Mass Communications '73
- Charlie Reifsteck, MBA '97
- Danayka Saavedra-Berrocal, BA Psychology '07, MPA '14
- Matt Warren, BS Business Administration '05, MBA '07

Alumni Affinity Groups

Our 10 Alumni Affinity Groups unite alumni and friends through common interests, backgrounds, experiences, and geographic ties. When you join an affinity group, you enter a vibrant community where belonging thrives. Join us today and be part of a community that celebrates what brings us together.

Learn more and join an Alumni Affinity Group today!



siue.edu/alumni/get-involved/chapters-networks



ONE DAY, ONE SIUE

Thursday, April 23, 2026 | 6 p.m.
SIUE Health Sciences Complex

Join us for the fifth annual One Day, One SIUE Celebration and Reception—our signature “Day of Giving” event uniting the entire SIUE community in support of students, programs, and progress.

This year, we proudly feature Lisa Spencer, '93, '01, a dedicated SIUE alumna and valued SIUE Foundation Board member, as our Distinguished Alumna and Community Leader. Lisa's leadership and commitment to SIUE embody the spirit of giving that fuels our shared success.

Last year's motorsport-themed celebration, featuring special guest Curtis Francois, owner and CEO of World Wide Technology Raceway, was one for the record books, raising more than \$2.8 million from over 2,300 donors.

With this year's event taking place in the brand-new Health Sciences Complex, we're setting our sights even higher and hope to raise \$3 million in support of SIUE!

It will be an inspiring evening filled with energy, gratitude, and Cougar pride as we celebrate the impact of One Day, One SIUE.



GRADUATES FROM 1976 and EARLIER
Golden Graduate Reunion
MAY 9, 2026

Fifty years, countless memories, and one unforgettable day back on campus. Join fellow Golden Graduates—alumni who graduated 50 or more years ago—back on campus for a day filled with celebration, reconnection, and Cougar pride.

The day will include:

- Golden Graduate Luncheon with classmates
- Wearing gold regalia and crossing the stage with the class of 2026 in the Commencement Ceremony
- Receiving your commemorative alumni medallion
- Guided bus tour of campus featuring old favorites and exciting new additions

Mark your calendars and relive the moments that made your SIUE experience golden.

Chimega

SIUE'S FIRST MASCOT



In 1986, SIUE welcomed to campus its first live mascot, a spirited cougar cub named Chimega. She lived in a geodesic dome designed by Buckminster Fuller and was well taken care of by trained handlers and student volunteers called the Cougar Guard. She was a beloved presence across campus and attended sporting events, parades, and other activities across the region. For 17 years, Chimega embodied Cougar pride, greeting students, alumni, and community members alike. Decades later, Chimega's legacy brings back vivid memories and the joy of seeing SIUE's live mascot in action.

Here's what our fellow alumni and friends recently said about Chimega on the SIUE Alumni Association's Facebook page ...

"There was nothing cooler than watching Chimega walk the sidelines during the Bronze Boot game at old Busch Stadium."

BARRY MCCLINTOCK '96

"I took piano classes on campus in the mid to late 1980s, and the location was near the cougar cage. I remember excitedly looking out my window for her as we approached."

EMILY TERRY-GATES

"Chimega was an affectionate cat and loved to attend sporting events and walk with the Cougar Guard among the student body."

RIC STEPHENSON '70 '74 '77

HEARD ON SOCIAL



“/”

"I saw her daily.
What a beautiful girl!"

DENISE DEWING SCHOPPET '76

"I remember seeing Chimega at athletic events, and I thought it was the coolest thing ever. I couldn't wait to become a student at SIUE!"

MARY GUELKER WILSON '84

"I was on the Cougar Guard for four years. My kids and grandkids now love to hear my stories about Chimega. She used to pounce on me to play and held me down because she liked to play with my long hair!"

GAIL SELF '82



"My father was a monument dealer, and after putting two of my siblings and me through SIUE, he donated Chimega's grave marker to the University."

JIM JATCKO '84

**SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
EDWARDSVILLE**

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ST LOUIS MO

next up!
**CHANGE
MAKERS**

**The SIUE Changemakers
initiative builds on the
University's strengths
to make learning
visible, practical,
and transformative
for every student.**

By reimagining general education, SIUE empowers students to turn their passions into meaningful community impact and thoughtful problem-solving. From their first semester to senior capstone, students in every major apply the real-world skills rooted in critical thinking, communication, leadership, and civic engagement to address community and corporate challenges. These experiences are expanding beyond select programs, ensuring every student gains the tools, confidence, and creativity to make a difference.

SIUE's tradition of high-impact learning through senior assignments, undergraduate research, internships, community projects, and study abroad opportunities continues to shape tomorrow's leaders.

Were you a part of an experience that connected your classwork to the world, built your confidence, or gave you a unique edge in your career after graduation?

We'd love to hear your story!

Share it with us at siuealumni@siue.edu.