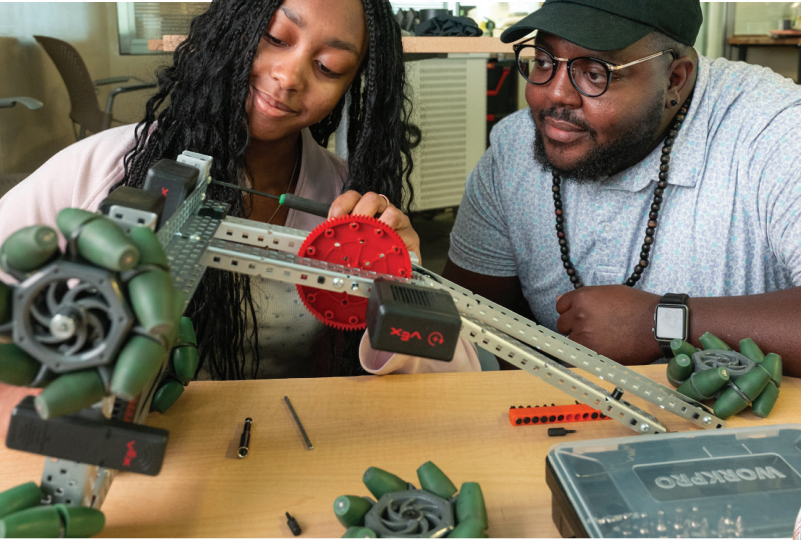
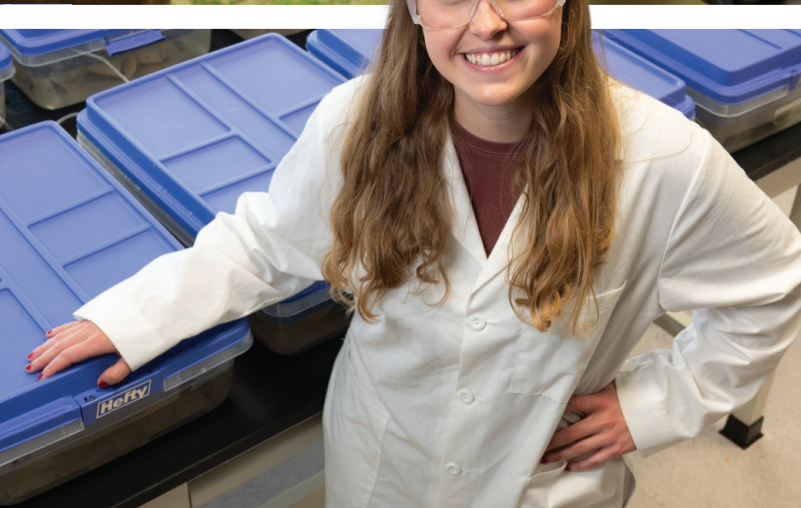


SIUE

THE MAGAZINE FOR SOUTHERN ILLINOIS
UNIVERSITY EDWARDSVILLE ALUMNI & FRIENDS
SPRING 2026



CHANGE
makers



**SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
EDWARDSVILLE**



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Change Maker Energy Across Campus

..... In February 2026, SIUE students and faculty gathered at the Illinois State Capitol in Springfield for Cougars at the Capitol. This annual advocacy day connects students with legislators and higher education leaders across the state. Partnering with students from SIU Carbondale, participants discussed the impact of higher education and gained insight into the policymaking process shaping public universities.

On the Cover: Through the Change Makers initiative, SIUE helps students graduate with the tools, experiences, and wisdom to make meaningful differences in their careers and communities.

Next Up! Shaping the Future of Care



GREETINGS FROM SIUE!

At SIUE, we remain committed to ensuring students engage in hands-on learning experiences that foster critical thinking, personal growth, and the development of a strong professional identity. Our mission to “develop professionals, scholars, and leaders who shape a changing world” informs our approach to creating powerful academic and co-curricular experiences so that our graduates, like you, are fully prepared to make a difference in their workplaces, professions, and communities. To support this mission, we are taking another bold step to differentiate the best of an SIUE education through change-making.

The Spring 2026 edition of SIUE Magazine, themed “Change Makers,” explores the high-impact practices at SIUE and highlights the University’s efforts to elevate the most transformative aspects of an SIUE education. Through meaningful experiential learning, SIUE empowers students to apply knowledge in real-world settings as a part of their degree program. This includes community-based problem solving, service learning, living learning communities, research with faculty, internships or field experiences, study abroad, and culminating senior experiences or capstone projects.

These efforts are prominently featured in academic and co-curricular programs and measurable in student outcomes. From students in our award-winning Community-Oriented Digital Engagement Scholars Program (CODES) to those in the John Martinson Honors Program, students have access to a wide range of opportunities. In CODES, students collaborate with community partners to study issues in local communities and share their outcomes through digital storytelling. Our goal is that all students have the benefit of these types of experiences as early as their first year of college.

From convocation to commencement, SIUE students explore big ideas and tackle real-world challenges that align with their goals. Creating such powerful experiences for students is who we are as an institution. With our new Change Makers curriculum for all undergraduates, we are connecting academic study with experiential learning with relevant pathways that will bring students with a range of majors together to make a difference. These efforts create a powerful framework for developing skilled, thoughtful, and engaged graduates.

The stories in this issue reflect what it truly means to be a Change Maker, turning knowledge into action and ideas into impact. We are proud to support our students as they grow into leaders who will define the future. We are grateful for your continued support in making this work possible.

Warmest Regards,

JAMES T. MINOR, PhD
Chancellor

CHANGE MAKERS *High-Impact Practices* EXPERIENCES THAT SHAPE US

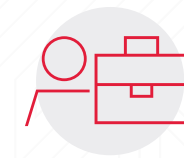
Many SIUE alumni can point to a defining moment that helped shape how they saw themselves: A professor introducing them to applied research, a late-night team project that demanded creative problem-solving, an internship that brought classroom concepts to life, or a community experience that revealed a larger purpose.

SIUE builds these moments into the student journey through high-impact practices, experiences defined not by a label, but by their depth and intentionality. They require critical thinking, collaboration, and real-world application, helping students become confident, capable problem-solvers ready to make meaningful changes in their lives and communities.



CAPSTONE COURSES AND PROJECTS

Completing a senior project, thesis, or capstone experience that requires integration of everything a student has learned.



INTERNSHIPS

Gaining hands-on, professional experience through internships, co-ops, student-teaching, or clinical placements, applying classroom knowledge in real-world settings.



COLLABORATIVE ASSIGNMENTS AND PROJECTS

Collaborating with classmates on coursework to help solve problems, develop ideas, and understand diverse perspectives as a team.



LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Giving students in cohorts or within residence halls the opportunity to connect and explore related topics together outside of class.



SHARED INTELLECTUAL EXPERIENCES

Sharing core learning experiences (e.g., common reading) or general education classes with students from many majors, discussing big ideas, and building a shared academic foundation.



SERVICE AND COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING

Connecting coursework with community service or collaborative problem-solving, working alongside community and external partners to apply classroom knowledge to real needs beyond campus.



DIVERSITY AND GLOBAL LEARNING

Studying different cultures, perspectives, and global issues, broadening understanding of the world, the people in it, and one’s role and relationship within it.



UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

Working alongside faculty on research and creative activities that build analytical skills, curiosity, and the confidence to contribute new knowledge and ideas.



ePORTFOLIOS

Collecting and reflecting on work from multiple classes, tracking progress, and showcasing learning in a portfolio.



WRITING INTENSIVE COURSES

Strengthening the way students communicate complex ideas clearly and persuasively by the creation of regular drafts, providing and receiving feedback, and crafting revisions.



FIRST-YEAR SEMINARS AND EXPERIENCES

Getting rich learning and support during the first semester or year in courses or programs designed to help new students adjust to campus life and academic expectations.

As you explore this issue, these icons point to the high-impact practices reflected in each story, highlighting the experiences that shape SIUE journeys and define the Change Makers initiative.



CHANGE MAKERS

Creating Moments that Matter

PROVOST
DENISE COBB, PHD,
INTRODUCES
CHANGE MAKERS

At SIUE, the Change Makers initiative builds on what the University has long done well: connecting learning to real-world impact. Before applied, experience-driven education became a national priority, SIUE students were already benefiting from mentorship, collaboration, and opportunities to put their knowledge into practice.

For many alumni, the most meaningful experiences emerged when ideas learned in the classroom were brought to life through internships, collaborative projects, service projects, study abroad trips, research or creative activities, and everyday moments of discovery.

Today, those experiences are being expanded and made intentional through a focused “Change Makers” curriculum, which ensures every student has access to transformative, hands-on learning. By integrating these opportunities across disciplines, SIUE prepares graduates with immensely important and durable skills such as critical thinking, effective collaboration, and leading with purpose.

Denise Cobb, PhD, Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, shares how Change Makers is shaping the student experience and advancing SIUE’s mission.

Q WHAT MAKES A STUDENT, FACULTY MEMBER, ALUM, OR DONOR A “CHANGE MAKER?”

One part of SIUE’s mission that resonates most deeply is “shaping a changing world.” Built upon SIUE’s strengths, the Change Makers program extends the University’s curriculum into co-curricular experiences and living learning communities. Cultivating change makers is about preparing students to make a difference and live lives of purpose — whether that means leading change in their profession, contributing to their community, or supporting causes that inspire them. Programs such as Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities, the John Martinson Honors Program, Community-Oriented Digital Engagement Scholars, Boundless Scholar Experience, and our nationally recognized senior assignment continue building on these strengths. We want to expand and enrich these opportunities for all students.

It begins with recognizing that students arrive with talent and potential. The University helps them build confidence and apply what they have learned in meaningful ways. Change-making is not tied to a single outcome; it is an orientation — a willingness to embrace change and a belief in one’s own agency and capacity to act.

Our faculty and staff are central to that process. Through teaching, mentorship, and collaboration, our faculty create environments where students are challenged and supported, connecting classroom learning to research, creative activities, and real-world application. When we’ve successfully crafted this dynamic landscape, our students can imagine even greater possibilities.

Alumni and donors also play a vital role. Their investment of time, mentorship, and philanthropy expands opportunities for students and strengthens their experiences. Supporting students in this way is an act of change-making.

Q WHY DOES SIUE EMPHASIZE HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES?

High-impact practices are powerful drivers of student learning, persistence, and success. SIUE’s strategic plan reflects a commitment to ensuring that every student has access to at least two intentionally designed high-impact experiences grounded in the belief that excellence must be accessible to all students. We are ensuring they occur early and often and highlighting their impact for students who seek the opportunity to make a difference.

Research shows that early exposure to these practices increases retention and graduation rates while deepening learning. At SIUE, they are not simply features to highlight; they are foundational to the University’s approach to education. Embedding high-impact practices throughout the curriculum helps students connect coursework to lived experience and understand how their education translates into meaningful impact.

Q WHY DO HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES MATTER TO STUDENTS, FACULTY, ALUMNI, AND DONORS?

For students, high-impact practices transform their learning experience. Rather than simply taking a quiz, students engage in experiences requiring them to integrate knowledge and apply it collaboratively. Through research, internships, study abroad, capstones, and community-based projects, they build confidence and readiness for what comes next. They begin to see themselves as capable of contributing meaningfully to their workplaces and communities.

For faculty, these experiences create opportunities to work closely with students and connect them to research and creative activity. Faculty move beyond delivering course material to designing experiences that engage students in discovery, collaboration, and application.

There is something powerful about an SIUE education that creates a real state of readiness for students upon graduation. These experiences build the confidence alumni carry into their careers and communities.

For our alumni, these high-impact practices were memorable and transformative. They helped set the foundation for their success. Our friends, donors, and community partners make a significant difference in what is possible for students. Their financial, professional, and personal support expands opportunities and deepens experiences. That partnership enriches the educational environment and ensures students are prepared to make a difference wherever they go.

Q WHAT MORE CAN BE DONE TO CONTINUE TO PROPEL SIUE FORWARD?

SIUE has momentum. In a world defined by change, there are opportunities to highlight who we are and continue building on that momentum. We have been too humble about the incredible work happening here. The accomplishments of our students, faculty, staff, and alumni are worth celebrating, and we have a powerful story to tell. By continuing to share that story, we have an opportunity not only to grow, but to truly set ourselves apart.

If you ask why a student should choose SIUE, I am confident the answer is rooted in the essence of change-making and the powerful experiences we have intentionally crafted for all students. Our alumni stories and impact reaffirm that commitment.

There is so much ahead of us. As we continue preparing students for the future, I believe we are positioned to thrive for years to come. It begins with honoring what we’ve achieved, and I am excited for what we will accomplish together.

Change Makers in Action

ALUMNI SHAPING A CHANGING WORLD



Juan Pizano Jr.

BA Mass Communications '25
Page, NBCUniversal

Juan Pizano Jr. arrived at SIUE from Kansas City, Mo. determined to step beyond his comfort zone and make the most of every opportunity. The Provost Scholarship recipient wanted to graduate from college knowing he had challenged himself, embraced new experiences, and grown in every way possible. He did exactly that, earning his degree in 3.5 years while building an extraordinary record of involvement across campus, receiving multiple honors, and serving in leadership roles with the University Center Board and Hispanic Student Union.

“As a first-generation student, I felt like I’d be doing a disservice to myself and my family by not using my freedom to the fullest,” Pizano said.

A member of the first cohort of students to graduate from SIUE’s Community Oriented Digital Engagement Scholars (CODES) program, Pizano worked alongside the Boys and Girls Club of Alton to mentor students and research disparities in graduation rates among Black and white high school students. The experience showed him how education and service can work together to create meaningful change.

“I appreciated how CODES gave us the chance to explore real problems happening within communities and conceptualize ways in which they can be addressed,” he said.

During an internship with the City of Kansas City, Pizano supported civic communications, built partnerships with businesses, and saw how strategic outreach can strengthen an entire community. Today, Pizano is part of the highly competitive NBCUniversal Page Program, a 16-month, full-time rotational experience for recent college graduates interested in media careers, a significant launching point toward what is sure to be an exceptionally bright future.

Mikal Bell

Doctor of Dental Medicine '17
Owner, Bell Dental LLC

For Mikal Bell, DMD, serving others has been a calling that has guided him from the U.S. Army Reserves to the SIU School of Dental Medicine to his own dental practice.

After enlisting during his junior year of high school, Bell trained as a dental assistant. He balanced military duties, college coursework, and civilian responsibilities before being called to active service. For over six years, he worked in high-volume dental clinics, taking thousands of X-rays to help prepare troops for deployment.

Bell enrolled at the School of Dental Medicine following active duty and immersed himself in community outreach opportunities available to students. He helped provide care to hundreds of children during Give Kids A Smile Day, an annual community outreach event in the Metro East that provides free dental care to children in need, and treated patients during mission trips abroad. As president of the Tau Sigma (Tri-Service) Military Dental Club, he and his classmates raised donations to support dental care for homeless veterans in the St. Louis region, contributing to the development of the Veterans Dental Care Program, also supported by alumnus John Simmons '91.

These service-learning experiences provided Bell with opportunities to build relationships with patients and understand the real-world impact of dental care. He continues to serve patients through his practice and as a community provider for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

“I believe I have been blessed with the opportunity to serve and to help heal others through oral health,” Bell said.

Meredith Burkart

BA Philosophy and Political Science '08
Senior Director, Government Affairs and Public Policy, Halcyon

Meredith Burkart’s career in governmental affairs and cyber policy traces back to the intellectual foundation she built at SIUE. As a Meridian Scholar double-majoring in philosophy and political science, she didn’t just learn what to think – she learned how to think. That training in critical analysis and plain language communication has been one of the quiet secrets to her success.

A study abroad experience in Istanbul deepened that foundation, impressing on her the value of appreciating the perspectives very different from her own. Immersed in the philosophy of Islamic aesthetics and the culture around her, Burkart came home with an appreciation that has shaped her approach to diversity ever since.

“The experience reshaped how I think about other countries and cultures – not as ‘the other’ but as people we can understand, connect, and work with,” Burkart said. “That perspective has influenced how I approach diplomacy and foreign policy.”

After SIUE, she earned a master’s degree in international relations and national security studies from Georgetown University before beginning her 15-year career with the FBI, rising from an intelligence analyst to the agency’s Chief of Cyber Policy. Today, she is the senior director of cybersecurity policy and governmental affairs at Halcyon and one of the founding leaders of its Ransomware Research Center. She also volunteers as the deputy chief product officer at Cybersecurity Canon and teaches a self-developed graduate-level course at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service Security Studies Program.



Becoming a Change Maker

STUDENTS DESIGNING SOLUTIONS FOR THE FUTURE



Ciara Folkerts

Senior, Mass Communications, Spanish, and Applied Communications Studies triple major

From exploring global cultures to having her stories appear live on TV, Ciara Folkerts has developed the curiosity, global perspective, and technical skills that will define her career as a multimedia journalist.

Through study abroad experiences in England, Italy, and Spain, Folkerts explored cultures and communities different from her own. She expanded her awareness and understanding of how communities around the globe experience and share stories by researching historic sites, studying architecture and cultural traditions, and observing life in unfamiliar places.

"Studying abroad enhanced my worldview and changed the way I approach communities," Folkerts said.

Folkerts landed internships with three major stations in the St. Louis market, where she applied her classroom knowledge while building connections with reporters and producers. She has her sights set on a career in broadcast journalism rooted in curiosity and public service.



Yusra Amena

Senior, Biological Sciences major

Yusra Amena came to SIUE from India to pursue her goal of bridging the gap between biology and technology through a career in bioinformatics. She will graduate with a resume defined by real-world learning, multidisciplinary skill development, and a commitment to advancing solutions in her field.

In two different projects presented at Illinois State Academy of Science conferences, Amena, a STEM Student Ambassador, co-authored a study of student perspectives of math enrichment sessions provided in introductory STEM courses.

In the lab, she tracked bacterial cell growth and reactions to bacteria-destroying viruses as an Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA) assistant. As an URCA associate, she investigated a dual approach to weaken and destroy harmful, antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

"It feels meaningful to do the research that matters," Amena said. "It's interesting to think my project might help in the fight to eliminate drug-resistant bacteria."



Kaelyn Cupil

Senior, Nursing major

Kaelyn Cupil's education has been defined by what she learned and the bonds she's made with her classmates during her college journey. She found her place in University Housing's Nursing Living Learning Community in Woodland Hall, which offered a built-in network of peers navigating the same demanding coursework and the transition to college life.

From lectures to late-night study sessions, she and her cohort moved through their coursework together. Before ever setting foot in a hospital, they practiced skills in the School of Nursing's state-of-the-art simulation labs, building confidence and competence side-by-side.

"If we were stressed, we'd check in with each other and ask, 'What can we do?'" Cupil said. "It made me feel supported and like I wasn't alone."

After graduation, she plans to begin her career as a medical-surgical nurse before returning to SIUE to pursue her dream of being a nurse educator.



Frank Wember

Senior, Computer Science major

Frank Wember, an Honors student from Cameroon, exemplifies how dynamic learning opportunities offered at SIUE prepare students for careers and lives of purpose.

After winning two eHacks competitions, an annual hackathon organized by SIUE computer science students with classmates, Wember caught the attention of Meta Platforms. As a sophomore, he interned in California, working on Facebook's backend. The following year, he joined Meta in New York, contributing to its artificial intelligence initiatives. These experiences inspired his senior capstone project, Eddie Bot, an AI-powered assistant for the School of Engineering website that connects students to deadlines, policies, and resources.

After graduation, Wember will return to Meta as a full-time software engineer. "I want to create something bigger than myself," he said. "Something that can help create value for the most people."



Ella Young

Senior, English Language and Literature and Anthropology double major

Honors student Ella Young has explored her passions for Shakespearean literature, anthropology, and history through applied research and a study-abroad experience.

As an URCA assistant, she contributed to an archive for the Rose Playhouse site in London, an Elizabethan theater from 1587. She mastered archival skills by processing and uploading documents, photographs, videos, and social media posts to preserve the Rose's legacy and ensure access. These experiences opened her eyes to the significance of the playhouse, its importance, and Shakespeare's influence on the arts community.

"It helped me understand the importance of archival work, which preserves history that would be lost," she said.

Young plans to earn an advanced degree in museum studies and hopes to bring her research experience and perspective to a career as a museum curator.



Aman Pai

Junior, Civil Engineering major

Aman Pai is driven to use math and science to help communities thrive. Through the John Martinson Honors Program and the School of Engineering curricula, which connect ideas to real-world applications, he learned that solutions emerge from interdisciplinary thinking and a shared sense of purpose. Pai attended the National College Honors Council's (NCHC) conference, which served nearly 900 member institutions and 300,000+ honors students, and connected with peers to research civic engagement. He is the first SIUE student appointed to the NCHC's Board of Directors.

"Having perspective and understanding on how to work with people is the important thing I've learned," Pai said. "Despite having goals, we are all learning to collaborate and work together to make a difference."

This mindset shaped his leadership beyond the classroom. Pai revived the SIUE Engineers Without Borders chapter, and will travel to Bolivia this summer to support clean-water and greenhouse projects.



BY THE *numbers* 2025-2026

- 75+ clinical nursing partners in urban, rural, acute care, and community agency settings
- 8 Living Learning Communities (LLCs) with 519 student residents
- 132 students studied abroad last year
- 377 students participated in internships and co-ops last year

Inspiring The Change

FACULTY INNOVATORS BUILDING THE PATHWAYS



Eric W. Ruckh, PhD

Director, John Martinson Honors Program, Associate Professor of History

As director of the John Martinson Honors Program, Eric W. Ruckh, PhD, has helped SIUE reimagine how honors students learn by crafting shared intellectual experiences beyond a single discipline.

Since assuming leadership in 2013, and in consultation with the University Honors Advisory Council, Ruckh has redesigned the honors experience, transforming it from a traditional academic track into a dynamic interdisciplinary program grounded in experiential learning. Students from all majors enroll in seminar-style courses emphasizing critical thinking, dialogue, and real-world application, replacing general education requirements.

Ruckh and Denise Cobb, PhD, Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, worked closely with alumnus John Martinson, MBA '75, to expand access for historically underrepresented students. The program has grown into a campus-wide model for innovative, student-centered learning. Martinson invested a \$4 million gift in 2023 to double enrollment. A recognized change maker, he has supported 10 collegiate honors programs nationwide.

“Our goal is to enhance honors education through high-impact practices, immersive experiential learning, thought-provoking dialogue, and the co-construction of knowledge,” Ruckh said.

Ruckh and Jyotsna Kapur, PhD, received the 2025 SIU System Collaboration Award for connecting SIUE and SIUC honors students through interdisciplinary courses and joint service projects.



Jessica DeSpain, PhD

Director of Community-Oriented Digital Engagement Scholars (CODES)
Professor of English Language and Literature

Some of the most powerful learning experiences happen when students engage directly with the communities around them. As director of the Community-Oriented Digital Engagement Scholars (CODES) program, DeSpain creates opportunities for students to team up with a community partner on a research project that addresses a complex social change and directly and positively impacts that community.

Emphasizing collaborative, community-engaged research, CODES is an award-winning alternative general education program that offers Pell-eligible students or those who are first-generation or historically underrepresented in their major a unique undergraduate experience. The program, which graduated its first cohort of scholars in May 2026, offers a full tuition award. CODES attracts students interested in research and active learning who are committed to taking action in the community.

“When students work with community partners and study the real drivers of a system in action, they can see how abstract concepts they learn in the classroom have a direct application to the world around them,” DeSpain said.

Students in the 2026 cohort worked with the YWCA of Southwest Illinois to explore racial equity and violence prevention, the National Great Rivers Research and Education Center to study science communication and misinformation, and the Alton School District to examine educational equity.



Chaya Gopalan, PhD

Professor of Exercise, Sport, and Nutrition Sciences, and Nurse Anesthesiology

Chaya Gopalan, PhD, is preparing the next generation of STEM leaders by transforming the way students learn, turning classrooms into collaborative environments where critical thinking and shared discovery drive progress. She is recognized for pioneering the flipped teaching model where students prepare for class with pre-readings or videos and actively engage in discussion and collaborative exercises with their instructor and peers during class time. This approach pushes students beyond memorization toward analysis, synthesis, and real-time applications.

“The flipped model transforms the classroom from a site of passive listening to a collaborative laboratory for problem-solving,” said Gopalan, who holds joint appointments in the Schools of Nursing and Education, Health and Human Behavior.

As principal investigator of a \$2 million National Science Foundation-funded initiative, she co-leads a cross-institutional partnership that helps faculty at two- and four-year colleges apply flipped teaching models. The project develops faculty as change agents while expanding collaborative, high-impact learning across STEM education.

In her own nurse anesthesiology and exercise science courses, Gopalan witnesses her students deepening their understanding, challenging assumptions, and building the confidence to navigate complex, real-world challenges.



Tandra Taylor, PhD

Assistant Vice Chancellor for Educational Pathways and Community Engagement
Executive Director, SIUE's Children Defense Fund Freedom School®
Assistant Professor of History

The SIUE Children's Defense Fund Freedom School®, led by Tandra Taylor, PhD, is a six-week, no-cost program that advances educational equity through literacy, leadership, and community engagement. Rooted in African American history, it brings together SIUE students and community members to help youth scholars ages 7 to 13 build confidence, critical thinking skills, and a strong sense of identity. Over 150 students completed Freedom School last summer. At the end of the program, 84% of scholars maintained or improved their reading skills, and 96% of parents and guardians reported that their children showed increased confidence.

“It is incredibly important for young people to grow up with a strong sense of self and identity that is connected to both place and the past,” said Taylor, an assistant professor of history and Assistant Vice Chancellor for Educational Pathways and Community Engagement.

SIUE students acting as Servant Leaders experience meaningful personal and professional growth. This intergenerational learning community strengthens communication, empathy, and collaboration while gaining hands-on leadership experience. As they guide younger scholars, SIUE students develop adaptability and a deeper commitment to service.

“SIUE students build their capacity to seek opportunities to serve not only to advance themselves, but others as well,” Taylor said.



BY THE *numbers* 2025-2026

- 20 Meridian Scholars receiving a full scholarship for four years
- 608 Honors Students in the John Martinson Honors Program
- 170 Community-Oriented Digital Engagement Scholars (CODES)
- 168 Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA) Students
- 21 Freedom School Servant Leaders

Fueling The Change

PARTNERS INVESTING IN TOMORROW

John Simmons

BS Political Science '91
Chair, Simmons Hanly Conroy; Member, SIU System Board of Trustees

Long before John Simmons, BS political science '91, became a nationally recognized attorney and community leader, he arrived at SIUE determined to take full advantage of his second chance at receiving an education.

After earning credits at trade school and community college, Simmons used his GI benefits to enroll at SIUE after serving in the U.S. Army. He brought with him the discipline and determination he developed in the military, as well as ambition and commitment, excelling academically as a member of the Dean's College (predecessor to the Honors Program), becoming student body president, and serving as an active member of the Pre-Law Club.

"If class started at 9 a.m., I was sitting front and center behind the podium by 8:50, writing down every single word our instructors said," Simmons said.

As a political science major, he had the opportunity to serve as a bailiff at the Madison County Courthouse, where observing major trials confirmed his desire to become a lawyer.

"I got to witness probably some of the best trial lawyers ever in action," Simmons said. "They carried themselves with confidence and class. I realized that was the kind of lawyer I wanted to be."

“/” **SIUE is all of us. Our impact is remarkable, and we all have the opportunity to make a difference.**

—JOHN SIMMONS, '91
Chair, Simmons Hanly Conroy LLC

After graduating with honors from SIUE, he earned his Juris Doctor from Southern Methodist University School of Law in Texas. In 1999, he founded The Simmons Firm, which later became Simmons Hanly Conroy in 2014, building a nationally respected practice grounded in advocacy and service.

As his success grew, so did his commitment to creating opportunities for others. His \$10.2 million gift to the SIU School of Medicine helped establish the Simmons Cancer Institute. His investment in SIUE Athletics is reflected in the Simmons Baseball Complex, which elevates the experience for student-athletes and fans alike. Through AltonWorks, a social impact development initiative to revitalize downtown Alton, and The Wedge, a 55,000-square-foot innovation hub and coworking space, Simmons shows his commitment to revitalizing the riverfront city. By preserving historic buildings, creating jobs, expanding residential and commercial spaces, and establishing new community partnerships, he believes Alton can become the "Happiest and Healthiest City on the Mississippi River" and a hub for transformation, entrepreneurship, and growth.

From second-chance student to a leader whose impact reaches far beyond campus, Simmons has never forgotten where his journey began.



Bob & Donna Plummer

BA History '72 and BS Education '72, respectively
President and CEO, R.P. Lumber, and Vice President, R.P. Lumber, respectively

Long before he turned a single lumber yard into a growing business with more than 100 locations and 1,000 employees, Litchfield High School graduate Bob Plummer spent his days at SIUE balancing his classes, serving on student government, competing in wrestling and track as a student-athlete, and working multiple jobs to put himself through school.

He recalls the dedication it took to balance being a student with the responsibility of working while pursuing his degree. His professors encouraged him to recognize challenges and put in the effort to work his way through them. He learned the value of teamwork and the importance of being liked and trusted by others, all lessons he still relies on today.

Bob and his wife, Donna, taught high school history and physical education, respectively, in Hazelwood, Mo., before taking a leap of faith in 1977 to purchase a shuttered lumber yard in Staunton, Ill. Bob credits Donna's unwavering support as essential to the company's success. Together, they transformed a long-vacant property into the foundation of a thriving business.

The Plummers expanded their business through long hours, persistence, and a willingness to take risks. Nearly 50 years later, R.P. Lumber has helped fuel regional economic growth and serve communities while remaining rooted in the values that guided its growth.

"People will do business with people they know, like, and trust," Bob Plummer said. "We're surrounded by great people, from employees and customers to suppliers and vendors. By the good grace of God, we have been very blessed."

As Bob and Donna's business grew, so did their commitment to SIUE and the communities it serves. For more than three decades, the Plummers have supported numerous SIUE initiatives across the Schools of Engineering and Nursing, Athletics, The Gardens, and through Bob's service on the SIUE Foundation Board of Directors.

Bob and Donna Plummer are widely recognized for their entrepreneurial vision, combining business leadership with long-term civic involvement, charitable support, and community development. In Edwardsville, the 83-acre Plummer Family Sports Park is host to thousands of athletes and families each year, and the R.P. Lumber Center provides a year-round ice rink, a state-of-the-art running track, and a fitness facility. As community change makers, the Plummers have helped shape the character and momentum of an entire community.

DONOR PROFILES



Kelly Malson

BS Accountancy '93
Retired, Chief Financial Office,
World Acceptance

Kelly Malson built her career in the financial services industry on principles of thoughtful leadership, adaptability, and a commitment to helping others, qualities that took root during her time at SIUE.

"Once I started the accounting program, I realized it was an amazing degree to pursue since it can lead you to a variety of different opportunities," Malson said.

Through collaborative study sessions and involvement in student organizations, including the Accounting Club (now Beta Alpha Psi), Malson built lasting connections with peers and industry professionals while strengthening her communication and leadership skills.

"My mentors took time to work with students, making sure we understood what was going on in the classroom and were accessible to us after hours," she said.

Malson built a career marked by steady advancement, rising from accounting roles at KPMG and Andersen LLP to chief financial officer at World Acceptance Corp. and Nicholas Financial Inc. Her collaborative leadership style focused on developing others and building strong teams.

By establishing the Kelly M. Malson Scholarship, she has ensured current and future students with the same passion for accounting have the opportunity to earn an SIUE degree.

SIUE COUGARS *as Change Makers*

LEADERSHIP BEYOND
THE GAME



SIUE Athletics Unveils 66ers Alternate Identity

Throughout the 2026 calendar year, SIUE is occasionally competing as the SIUE 66ers. The 66ers, with an alternate logo and color scheme, were created to celebrate the centennial celebration of Route 66.

Route 66 has historic roots in Illinois, with its start in Chicago and a nearly 300-mile route throughout the state. The roadway's path in Illinois culminates in the Metro East before crossing the Mississippi River into Missouri and continuing west. 2026 marks the centennial of the creation of Route 66, with preservation, commemoration, and celebration planned throughout Illinois.

"SIUE Athletics is proud to represent the state of Illinois as the lone Division I institution in the Metro East," said Andrew Gavin, Vice Chancellor/Director of Athletics. "The SIUE 66ers present a fun opportunity to generate excitement about the present and future of SIUE Athletics while connecting with the storied history of our region and our state."

"Route 66 is more than just a road — it's a symbol of exploration, connection, and the spirit of Illinois," said Cory Jobe, president and CEO of Great Rivers and Routes Tourism Bureau. "We're thrilled to partner with SIUE Athletics as they honor this legacy through the SIUE 66ers identity."

Career Networking Night Brings Opportunity to SIUE Student-Athletes

SIUE Athletics hosted its third annual Cougars Career Networking Night, presented by Northwestern Mutual Fairview Heights-Clayton, on March 23 at First Community Arena. The event brought together more than 100 student-athletes and 40 business professionals who are creating change on campus and in the community.

"We are incredibly thankful for the buy-in from our student-athletes, business professionals, and Chris Lowery and Steve Gross with Northwestern Mutual Fairview Heights-Clayton," said Jake Sutter, Associate Director of Athletics. "This event is an important opportunity for our student-athletes as they navigate their time at SIUE and begin preparing for what comes next."

The event featured three roundtable sessions, an alumni panel, and a business leadership panel.



Syanne Mohamed: From the Court to the Community

Graduate student Syanne Mohamed came to SIUE for her final year of eligibility, but spent her time off the court pouring her heart into the local community. She was recruited by Women's Basketball Head Coach Samantha Quigley Smith in part because of the leadership she could provide.

"When she recruited me, she said they had lost a lot of players and the team was young," Mohamed said. "She told me she was looking for someone with experience who could bring energy and leadership."

That is exactly how Mohamed views her role.

"I am proud of helping my teammates as much as possible," she said. "My focus is to make an impact on my team and the players. And just give them the best support I can give them."

That attitude and purpose extend beyond the basketball court — it's who Mohamed is.

The native of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, grew up in Poland, and came to the U.S. to attend Goshen College in Goshen, Ind. in 2021. She was a four-year starter and scored more than 1,000 points in her career.

She earned a bachelor's degree in nursing while working as a teaching assistant and an oncology unit preceptor. Mohamed also worked as a member of the Athletics event staff, assisting with operations in various sports at Goshen. Away from school

Mohamed personifies the service-learning experience so common among SIUE students. She gave her time to the Boys and Girls Club, Parkview Children's Hospital, and the YMCA.

Since coming to SIUE, she has volunteered at the Goshen Elementary School Fall Festival, the Hawthorne Community Service youth event, and has assisted with event coordination and guest support at 1818 Chophouse.

Mohamed described why service is important to her.

"Everybody goes through difficult times, and some people show it, and some people don't," Mohamed said. "They might seem happy, but deep down they are broken, and they need help or a push, but they're too scared to ask. But if you're willing to show up and always be happy and helpful no matter what, you can change someone's life, and they'll remember that."

On the court, Mohamed provided much more than just support. She finished fourth on the team in scoring at 7.0 points per game, while leading the team, and ranking second in the Ohio Valley Conference, at 9.9 rebounds per game.

Mohamed appreciates the recognition for the things she has done, but it isn't what motivates her.

"As long as I know I am doing my part, I don't need applause. If I am consistent with what I am doing, I am happy with that."



My focus is to make an impact on my team and the players, and give them the best support I can.

SYANNE MOHAMED
Master of Business Administration,
Healthcare Administration Specialization
SIUE Women's Basketball Forward

“/”



Partnering for Change

AT SIUE AND ACROSS THE REGION



Learning Through Impact

Preparing future pharmacists requires more than ensuring students master the coursework; it entails offering experiences that connect classroom learning with current community needs.

The School of Pharmacy helps students develop those connections through the Professional Development program, a six-course sequence that incorporates experiential education, co-curricular activities, professionalization, and an innovative curriculum across all four years. The program concludes with Improving Patient Care for Tomorrow (ImPaCT), a senior research experience that challenges students to address real-world healthcare challenges with community partners.

Recent projects reflect the range of issues tackled by students.

- Advancing mental health awareness through community education initiatives (pictured above)
- Exploring ways to improve medication adherence through expanded medication therapy management services
- Examining barriers to obtaining diabetes medications
- Evaluating pharmacist-led insulin pump services in primary care settings
- Studying antibiotic prescribing practices
- Developing strategies to reduce fall risks linked to high-risk medications in assisted living communities



My goal is to build connections between students, mentors, and preceptors (clinical professionals who bridge the gap between theory and practice) who support wellbeing, improve learning, and prepare students for meaningful pharmacy practice.

KATE NEWMAN, PHARMD, '10
*Director of Experiential Education
 School of Pharmacy*



By connecting coursework with real healthcare challenges, the program prepares graduates to think creatively, collaborate with healthcare teams, and improve the health of the communities they serve.



Caring for the Community

For nursing students at SIUE, caring for patients starts with understanding the communities they serve. The WE CARE Clinic, located on the SIUE Wyvetter H. Younge Higher Education Campus, gives students the opportunity to connect what they learn in the classroom with impactful service.

Led by Myjal Garner '11, DNP, APRN, FNP-C, WE CARE Clinic director and assistant professor of family health and community health nursing, the clinic provides primary care to residents of East St. Louis and the surrounding Metro East communities. Patients receive care from a healthcare team that includes a nurse practitioner, a physician, a licensed clinical social worker, certified health coaches, and a pharmacist.

Nursing students work with this team to support patient care while gaining hands-on experience with the many factors that affect health and wellness. They also see how professionals from different disciplines work together to meet a patient's needs and improve outcomes.

"Students play an essential role in advancing the clinic's mission," said Garner. "Their work makes a lasting difference in the lives of patients and throughout the broader community."

The WE CARE Clinic supports both students and the community it serves. Residents have access to compassionate, comprehensive care, while future nurses graduate with the confidence and perspective needed to care for patients in a wide range of settings.



Creating Healthier Smiles

For the past 20 years, the SIU School of Dental Medicine has hosted "Give Kids a Smile Day," to provide free dental care to children in the community.

"Our clinic is a safety net clinic for central and southern Illinois, for families who can't afford to go to private dentists," said Saulius Drukteinis, DMD, MS, PhD, dean of the School. "Sixty-five percent of our care is through Medicaid, and our fees are much lower than going to a private dentist. We rely on that support to provide care to our patients."

Dental Medicine faculty, students, staff, and volunteer dental professionals perform exams, x-rays, and treatment including stainless steel crowns, fillings, and extractions. Children and their families can participate in fun and educational activities designed to promote healthy dental habits. The goal is not only to provide immediate care but also to help families understand the importance of long-term oral health.

For SIUE students, "Give Kids a Smile Day" reinforces the connection between professional training and community service. They gain confidence in their clinical abilities while seeing how access to dental care can improve quality of life.

Change Maker Energy Across Campus

UNDERGRADUATE SCHOLAR SHOWCASE



A campuswide celebration of research, creative projects, and scholarly work, the April SIUE Undergraduate Scholars Showcase, highlighted students' academic achievements and demonstrated classroom learning applied to real-world challenges.

The event, originally imagined to showcase outstanding senior assignments from every academic department, continues to highlight one of SIUE's signature academic traditions. Required of all seniors, it represents the culmination of the undergraduate experience by integrating broad learning outcomes with expertise in the major. The nationally recognized model encourages creativity, independence, and ownership of each student's education. Today, the showcase features a variety of research, creative activities, and capstone work completed by over 150 students across the University.

A cohort of business administration students presented their project, which involved identifying, evaluating, and recommending the ideal artificial intelligence (AI)-supported notetaking software for their client, Electromek.

"AI notetaking software is incredibly useful for businesses," said Cole Sitton, a senior business administration major. "The ability to go back and look through the key points of a meeting, and having the software take notes for you, allows you to focus on the tasks and projects at hand."

Approaching the project like consultants, the students tested multiple platforms in real-time settings, assessing cost, usability, integration, and performance of each software, including Otter.ai, Notion AI, Fellow, Taqtiq, and other popular AI notetaking competitors. After completing a rigorous testing process, the team plans to deliver a final recommendation to their client, demonstrating not only technical and analytical skills but also the ability to solve real business challenges.

During the Community-Oriented Digital Engagement Scholars (CODES) presentations, Keith Hawkins, Nadia Harris, Sa'Dae Cooper, Jada Parker, Lindell Blount, and Julez Hill shone a spotlight on environmental justice issues facing citizens of Cahokia, Ill. Their project explored how decades of flooding and water contamination have created a cycle of housing instability, food insecurity, and public health concerns. They developed a resident-facing website explaining renters' rights and connecting community members to legal, governmental, and social service resources, work designed to both amplify community voices and offer practical tools for navigating life in Cahokia Heights.



"The effort our group has put into this is not solely for research purposes. It's for the people whose voices are not being heard," said Parker, a sophomore criminal justice studies major. "With this website, we hope we can play a small part in helping this community grow stronger than ever."

Together, these senior assignments — and many others presented throughout the showcase — reflect the power of hands-on learning at SIUE, where students are not only gaining knowledge, but using it to create meaningful impact in their communities and future careers.



FROM YOUR ALUMNI ASSOCIATION PRESIDENT

I'm honored to serve as President of the SIUE Alumni Association and to reflect on how my time at SIUE continues to shape my path today. Like many Cougars, some of my most impactful experiences happened outside the classroom. Opportunities to engage in hands-on learning, including internships, collaboration with faculty, and involvement on campus, helped me build confidence, develop critical thinking skills, and better understand how to lead and adapt in a changing world.

These experiences did more than prepare me for a career. They helped define my purpose. They taught me the value of staying curious, embracing challenges, and giving back to the communities that support us.

As we celebrate the "Change Makers" in this issue, I'm reminded that the SIUE experience continues well beyond graduation. I encourage you to stay connected, share your story, and come back to campus, especially for Homecoming and Family Weekend. It is a great opportunity to reconnect, celebrate what it means to be a Cougar, and see how SIUE continues to inspire the next generation of leaders.

GEORGE LADD, BSA '07, MBA '09
President
SIUE Alumni Association
Board of Directors

CONNECT WITH US!
@siuealumni



Homecoming & Family Weekend

September 23-27

Inspired by the Route 66 Centennial, we honor the many paths that bring us back to SIUE and unite generations of Cougars. No matter where your journey began, all roads lead back to SIUE.



COUGARFEST: ROCK THE QUAD + NEW DRONE SHOW SPECTACULAR!

Friday, September 25 | 7-10 p.m. | Stratton Quad

SIUE's annual outdoor music and food truck festival featuring live music by Jackson and Mars, food trucks, lawn games, and family fun. New this year, enjoy an incredible drone light show above Stratton Quad.

** Drone Show provided by Route 66 Centennial Commission Grant*

COUGARS UNLEASHED HOMECOMING RUN & PANCAKE BREAKFAST

Saturday, September 26 | 9 a.m. | Stratton Quad

Lace up for the Annual Homecoming Run featuring a 5K, 10K, and Fun Run for all ages and abilities! Enjoy Cougar spirit, a pancake breakfast, family-friendly fun, and special pricing for students and alumni.

COUGAR FAN ZONE

Saturday, September 26 | 4-7 p.m. | Korte Stadium Parking Lot

Enjoy music, food trucks, giveaways, inflatables, and activities for all ages as part of the ultimate pre-game celebration.

MEN'S SOCCER GAME VS. UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN INDIANA

Saturday, September 26 | 7 p.m. | Korte Stadium

Fans can enjoy free admission and cheer on the Cougars during an exciting night of soccer.



Get more details and a full listing of events:
siue.edu/homecoming-family-weekend

Mark Your Calendar! SIUE ALUMNI HALL OF FAME

Friday, November 13

Nominations are ongoing
siue.edu/alumni/get-involved/hall-of-fame

50 Years OF PHILANTHROPY ADVANCING SIUE

Since 1976, the SIUE Foundation has connected alumni and friends with opportunities to support students, strengthen programs, and shape the future of SIUE.



1976
SIUE Foundation established as an independent 501(c)(3) to coordinate philanthropic support for SIUE's mission and vision.

1977
The first endowments are contributed for the Presidential Scholars Program (now the Meridian Scholars) to recruit high achieving students.

1985
SIUE President Earl Lazerson establishes the Arts & Issues series, attracting both a community of donors and 40 years of performers and speakers.

1990
Annual giving surpasses \$1 million for the first time.

2000
B. Barnard Birger Hall unites alumni engagement and fundraising through the generosity of B. Barnard Birger, more than 200 alumni and friends, and partners, including Korte Construction and other firms that provided gifts-in-kind.



2006
\$2.4M gift from Professor Homer Cox establishes SIUE's largest scholarship fund to date.

2017
The Grady Family Foundation (Ed '72 and Karen) creates the Entrepreneurship Scholarship Endowment Fund for students in engineering and business.

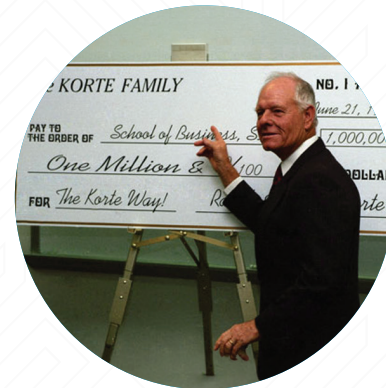
2022
"One Day, One SIUE" launches as SIUE's first Day of Giving, raising \$668,000.

2023
\$4M gift from John Martinson '75 establishes the Martinson Honors Program, SIUE's first named academic unit.

2023
Annual fundraising surpasses \$10 million for the first time.



1980
First student-led telephone campaign launches to encourage alumni giving.



1999
Ralph '68 and Donna Korte make the first \$1M gift to SIUE, fueling leadership and innovation programs.

2005
Foundation endowment surpasses \$10M, annual giving reaches \$4.6M.

2004
\$1M gift from Jayne and John '91 Simmons expands Roy E. Lee Baseball Field into the Simmons Baseball Complex.

2018
\$1.25M gift from the James C. Fowler family completes the Fowler Student Design Center, an innovation hub where students develop competition-ready engineering projects.

2011
\$3M gift from William Graebe '64 funds East St. Louis STEM Laboratory, technology expenses, and a scholarship for ESL Charter High School graduates.

2025
Professor Emerita Therese Poirier, PharmD, establishes SIUE's first endowed professorship dedicated to recruiting and retaining outstanding pharmacy faculty.

AROUND CAMPUS

\$45.5M
ENDOWMENT AT 6/30/25

UP **13.2%** FROM FY24
UP **121%** IN 10 YEARS

ENDOWMENT PERFORMANCE
as of June 30, 2025

12.6%
1-YEAR RETURN

11.6%
3-YEAR RETURN

THE SIUE FOUNDATION PROVIDED

\$1.8M IN SCHOLARSHIPS AWARDED IN FY25
51% INCREASE SINCE LAST YEAR

14%

OF SIUE STUDENTS RECEIVING DONOR-PROVIDED SCHOLARSHIPS

543 ENDOWMENTS IN PERPETUITY

5,500 ANNUAL DONORS

UP **14%** FROM FY24

20 INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS HAVE CONTRIBUTED \$1 MILLION+ TO SIUE

And the story continues.

Each gift expands opportunity and shapes the future of SIUE.

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next up! SHAPING THE FUTURE OF CARE

Where science meets compassion and students become healthcare leaders. At SIUE, the future of healthcare is taking shape in the new Health Sciences Complex, a 176,000-square-foot state-of-the-art facility designed to mirror real-world care. Here, nursing and pharmacy students, as well as dental, public health, kinesiology and exercise science, clinical nutrition, and audiology/speech-language pathology students, learn side by side.

From immersive simulation suites and virtual reality training to collaborative spaces, this is where hands-on learning becomes life-saving expertise.

HOW DID SIUE PREPARE YOU FOR
YOUR CAREER IN HEALTHCARE?

Share your story for our next issue: siuealumni@siue.edu



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