

SIUE enters business incubator scene



Sarah VanSlette. Posted: Friday, December 2, 2016 11:37 am

This week on Segue on WSIE-FM 88.7, Greg Budzban, PhD, dean of the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville College of Arts and Sciences, hosts Sarah VanSlette, PhD, associate professor in the Department of Applied Communication Studies, to discuss the budding relationship between SIUE and the St. Louis area through the St. Louis small business incubator scene.

A St. Louis native, VanSlette completed her undergraduate studies at Saint Louis University before receiving her master's and PhD from Purdue University. After briefly joining the faculty at John Carroll University, she decided to return home and join the SIUE faculty.

"I love that SIUE sees itself as having a mission," she says. "Part of the core mission is to serve those students who look to university to better themselves. There's a wonderful calling for students who see themselves as making the world a better place. I love being here and teaching students who truly want to

grow and learn."

VanSlette has been involved with the St. Louis small business incubator community for some time, citing that she feels great passion for its success, because she is a native St. Louisan.

"I love St. Louis. I believe in St. Louis ... it has a strong, bright future, so I have a lot invested in seeing St. Louis thrive," she explains. "This particular community of startups, incubators and creators are so important to the health of this city and the region. I've been tracking them for a while – even when I wasn't living in St. Louis. I'm excited to be back where I can spend time working with the wonderful people of that community."

Budzban admires how vibrant the St. Louis metropolitan community has become in terms of business incubation, while also mentioning the growing connection between the education and business communities.

"St. Louis has a strong community of people who come together at critical times to say, 'Here is where we want to invest our money, and here is where we see potential for growth,'" VanSlette explains. "Incubator communities such as Cortex have come about because of quite influential people in St. Louis seeing potential and saying, 'Here's some space that could use some invigoration. We have the necessary talent in the area to support it, and we need to infuse this area with the money and capital necessary to build it up.'"

"We took a group of faculty down to the Cortex area, and I was quite impressed by the creative collisions that occurred in the district's 'free space,'" Budzban responds. "People there are not in cubicles – they are taking advantage of the space and the people. They are interacting in these fruitful discussions of ideas. It's an exciting part of the city."

VanSlette explains that creative incubation ventures allow people to get excited about working in such districts. As a result, restaurants, apartment complexes, and major stores and retailers are drawn to an area, creating a community that attracts transformation in urban population and landscape.

"Now, Cortex is a thriving innovation district where creative collisions are allowing people to come together and think critically to discuss things, which is so important," she said.

As incubation districts continue to develop a critical mass of innovation, SIUE has created a more active role for itself within the T-Rex incubator community.

“SIUE has developed this partnership with T-Rex, so our faculty and students can go to network and learn from innovators,” VanSlette says. “T-Rex now houses more than 180 startups who have exciting events. Now that SIUE is a T-Rex resident, our students and faculty take advantage of ‘Lunch and Learn’ events and other wonderful development opportunities to discuss topics of interest, as well as ways to build business, advertise, promote, market, write grants and improve the overall startup community. In addition, students are afforded networking opportunities which may lead to internships and potential employment from all of the startups who are there.”

Both Budzban and VanSlette see these opportunities for faculty and students as complementary extensions to the education offered at SIUE.

“It’s another way for our students to learn, which is excellent,” VanSlette shares. “The culture at T-Rex of co-working space where people from different companies come together and bounce different ideas off of one another is special. It is people from companies as diverse as financial tech companies coming together with designers or social media professionals to exchange ideas using differing skill sets.

“Once we get out of our siloes, we see there are a lot of overlapping interests and things to capitalize on to make our businesses and our lives better. That’s what is so exciting about education in the College of Arts and Sciences. There’s a broad-based knowledge of liberal arts alongside specific skill sets that major concentrations can offer. Then, the potential for a student becomes boundless. They have the foundation to do almost anything they want professionally, which is of great value to these startups.”

With an opportunity unique to students at SIUE, a group of seniors in the Department of Applied Communications Studies is currently collaborating with Venture Café in St. Louis to promote and encourage fundraising for the organization’s annual gala. Through this experience, SIUE students are afforded the opportunity to gain real world experience, while working with one of the most interconnected and powerful entities in the St. Louis small business incubator scene. Such interactions have inspired VanSlette’s upcoming research on why public relations and startups should more actively work with and value one another.

“This is not limited to public relations,” VanSlette explains. “Professionals at T-Rex have discussed how many grants they write. How great would SIUE’s English, political science, and public administration and policy analysis students be for that? There are so many opportunities for people in startup communities.”

Budzban and VanSlette further discuss the potential SIUE/T-Rex relationship has for students to build professional networks that are now so vital to career success.

“The more our students become part of the network in St. Louis, the more people recognize SIUE,” says VanSlette. “We are right next door, so we must insert ourselves in their circles. Once we get a critical mass of students and faculty who are participating downtown and joining the conversation, people will more often think of SIUE.”

The discussion concludes with Budzban and VanSlette discussing the potential for SIUE lectures and staff meetings to be held at T-Rex’s beautiful facilities, while also discussing the students’ excitement to participate in Venture Café’s Gala, which will be held in April at Third-Degree Glass Factory. The SIUE student team has targeted fundraising goals at \$30,000 for the continued success of Venture Café and its outstanding entrepreneurial resources.

Tune in to WSIE-FM 88.7 every Sunday at 9 a.m. as weekly guests discuss issues on SIUE’s campus.
By Logan Cameron, SIUE Marketing & Communications