



SIUE gives honors program a makeover

Eric Ruckh.

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Segue/Logan Cameron

This week on Segue, SIUE's College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) Dean Greg Budzban, PhD, hosts Eric Ruckh, PhD, SIUE professor in the Department of History and director of the newly transformed SIUE Honors Program.

Ruckh joined the SIUE faculty in 1999 as a professor of modern European intellectual history. Soon after, he began teaching courses through the SIUE Honors Program and fell in love with the students' intellectual curiosity. Ruckh became heavily active in the program, gaining previous experience as interim director of the Honors Program before being named the program's director in 2014.

They begin by discussing the evolving face of education, noting the importance of liberal education to inform students concerning achievements of the past, while also putting emphasis on innovation for the future.

As Budzban mentions the challenges of creating an educational space that allows for such multidimensional forms of knowledge, Ruckh explains, "Part of the problem is that parents, educators and students are anxious about the profound, deep structural change in our economy and society at this moment. Students and parents believe that education should be geared toward educating for the workplace. This is a mistake, as the market today is only a short-term predictor. Its capacity to predict long-term trends is marginal, at best."

Budzban and Ruckh concur that such workforce-driven education is ineffective since the job market can rapidly change in a matter of just five short years. "It's crucial that we think about education as a way for young men and women to not only create a living, but also create a way to live life well," says Ruckh. "To think and prepare for the horizon of their life, our responsibility is to train students to be adaptable through that horizon."

Ruckh passionately explains the necessity to quickly catalyze the transformation of students as they move into higher education, training them away from their more prescribed academic history to become active creators of knowledge. "When students first come to campus, they are so filled with curiosity and joy for education," he says. "If you give them information in solving the 'big questions,' their wonder will take them far."

Ruckh hopes to further this academic necessity through a newly approved revision of the Honors Program, providing students with interactive seminars on "answering the big questions" and "making connections."

"Starting in fall, we will have a fused learning community to take the wonder and curiosities of young men and women and use them as an engine to take their writing, speaking and reasoning skills to a whole new level," Ruckh explains. "We will integrate content to develop the skills that will allow them to be educational creators at the same time."

One of the defining features of SIUE's Honors Program is the students' ability to apply their new creative skills and knowledge through practicum experiences in an effort to greater develop the deep questions of the world around them.

“They will be looking at real-world problems in the sciences, mathematics, technology, the arts, humanities or social sciences, and attempt to approach those problems from several perspectives,” Ruckh explains. “Initially, students are hesitant in these situations. But as they are training their wonder and realize there are connections between different problem domains, so they are drawn to hypothesize and generate answers.”

While student success in education is the ultimate goal, Ruckh also realizes an importance in allowing for student failure in their practicum endeavors. “There hasn’t been a definitive answer to several big questions, and there likely never will be,” he says. “But it doesn’t mean we shouldn’t continue to realize what it is. Because the more we think about them, the more refined our ability is to understand each other.

“And we learn through failure. When our ideas don’t work, that is an opportunity to reflect. It’s not an obstacle, it’s a doorway. It’s a window that we can go through. So, we have to train young men and women to accept failure. Don’t just ‘forget it’ – turn into it. Make the blocked space a passage and learn something about yourselves and the topic.”

Budzban reinforces Ruckh’s comments by adding, “If you’re at the boundary of research, and interacting with that boundary, failure is almost inevitable.”

They discuss that failure does not come without fruits, as the process itself is productive in learning. “Even when failing, we find some nugget of information that hadn’t been seen before and is worth tending to,” says Ruckh.

The conversation concludes with the scholars stressing a need for student empathy and flexibility for the perspectives of others, allowing for a more well-versed understanding of one another through education.

“Students need to be able to shift perspective and see from the eyes of another and see into the soul of another,” Ruckh says. “If they do that, they cultivate the capacity to understand one another. That is the gift and healing power that education can offer and bring to the future.”

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