

Interim dean pushes nursing school forward

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Laura Bernaix.



This week on Segue, SIUE Interim Chancellor Stephen Hansen, PhD, hosts Laura Bernaix, PhD, and interim dean of the SIUE School of Nursing (SON).

As both administrators have been employed by the University since the 1980s, the long-time colleagues discuss Bernaix's experiences in both healthcare and academia, the drastic evolution of the SON since her appointment, the School's corporate partnerships, the SIUE We Care Clinic and her dedication to research on the topic of breastfeeding.

Hansen, a former history educator, jokes by asking, "What made you decide that you wanted to be a nurse? Why didn't you want to pursue something more glamorous ... like becoming a historian?"

An alumna of the SIUE SON, Bernaix returned to her alma mater as a professor of family health and community health nursing. She later served as department chair and associate dean before her eventual appointment as interim dean. Prior to academia, Bernaix worked in the healthcare field for approximately 17 years, providing patient care as a maternal-newborn nurse at various St. Louis area facilities.

"I decided to attend the SIUE SON, because it was well-known and had a great reputation," she shares. "I was pleased with my education here, and it has served me well all of these years. I feel strongly about the quality of education provided at SIUE. I have a deep love and commitment to this school, and my dedication to it keeps me here."

A School that prides itself on providing high quality, positive student experiences, the SON now services its programs through more than 300 clinical partners. Because of these relationships, SIUE nursing students are given the opportunity to work in various healthcare facilities to engage in practicum and clinical studies.

Further, the School has formed numerous corporate partnerships with healthcare facilities in the region, which allow nurses to return to school for baccalaureate preparation via SIUE's registered nurse to Bachelor of Science (RN to BS) program. The program is administered entirely online. The curriculum is designed in an eight-week format, consisting of six nursing courses. With the billing process handled entirely between institutions, the SIUE SON provides an opportunity for further education and tuition reimbursement without the "red tape" of student admission processes.

"We have now expanded our corporate partnerships into Kentucky," Bernaix explains. "We are soon finalizing another corporate partnership with Baptist Health in Paducah. We're extremely excited about it, as it will provide additional students for our RN to BS program."

While much has changed in Bernaix's time with the SON, she places much of her emphasis on the statistical growth of the School and the profession as a whole. "We're excited to see a strong demand by students for nursing, but one of the challenges is that there's now a shortage in nursing educators," she says. "By 2024, it's predicted that nursing positions will increase by 19 percent. I think it will continue to grow over time, because

there are a lot of opportunities in nursing, and the public is starting to realize the scope of opportunities that nurses can and do have.

“Also, nursing has primarily been female for a long time, but male nurses are increasing in number and certainly should be. Approximately 13 percent of students in the SON are male, but we’re always anxious to increase those numbers.”

The SON fulfills a passion for community service by providing patient care through the SIUE We Care Clinic on SIUE’s East St. Louis campus. Bernaix explains that the clinic integrates the services of the SIUE SON, the SIU School of Dental Medicine, the SIUE School of Pharmacy and the SIUE Department of Social Work to provide a “one-stop shop” to healthcare for the region.

Bernaix harnesses a passion for providing nursing care to childbearing families, focusing much of her research on the promotion of breastfeeding. Throughout the discussion, Bernaix cites evidence that supports the value of breast milk to the nutrition of infants, while also expressing a need to change the mixed perceptions of breastfeeding among practitioners, so that all patients are receiving the full scope of information and care.

Tune in to WSIE 88.7 FM every Sunday at 9 a.m. as weekly guests discuss issues on SIUE’s campus.

By Logan Cameron, SIUE Marketing & Communications