

SIUE celebrates diversity amidst adversity

Segue • SIUE

Published 10:56 am, Friday, March 31, 2017



Recent political events in the United States have created a climate of uncertainty on the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville campus, specifically within international students, faculty and staff.

In the midst of this adversity and uncertainty, University leaders and administrators have been working diligently to support and celebrate the diverse population of students, faculty and staff from 74 countries around the world.

On this week's episode of Segue, SIUE's premier radio show discussing the ideas and issues within the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), Greg Budzban, PhD, CAS dean, interviews Mary Weishaar, PhD, executive director, the Office of International Affairs; Wendy Shaw, PhD, associate dean of CAS; as well as Gary Hicks, PhD, professor in the Department of Mass Communications.

Through their various University positions, these faculty members are driven to advocate for the international population on campus by building an environment of support, inclusive education and various efforts.

On January 27, 2017, newly inaugurated President Donald Trump issued the first executive order that restricted admission of citizens from seven different countries, including Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen, to the U.S. The order also indefinitely suspended the admission of Syrian refugees coming into the country.

The executive order's travel ban component created a climate of anxiety both around the country and within SIUE's large international community. Shortly after the order was signed, Chancellor Randy Pembroke sent out a statement to the SIUE community, showcasing the University's commitment to maintaining a "safe, secure and inclusive campus environment for all students, faculty and staff," noting that it "does not discriminate against individuals based on their religion, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation or place of origin."

In the days that followed, the Office of International Affairs took the lead in building a network of support for this important segment on campus.

"The entire community came together in light of these events," Weishaar says. "We wanted to provide an accurate and consistent flow of information and support for everyone at SIUE. We did not want anyone to feel alone in this time."

The Office held several meetings with constituent groups directly affected by the executive order and provided support and resources to those in need. Deans from around the University also stepped up and reached out to the international faculty, staff and students within their respective units with messages of support.

“It takes a lot of courage for an international student to stand out in a group and share a story,” Weishaar says. “One student spoke that their parents will no longer be able to attend their graduation in May because of the ban. Another shared that they are afraid something may happen to them in the community. It is moving and heartbreaking. You simply have to do your best to provide support and guidance to these students, faculty and staff as best you can.”

With students, faculty and staff members hailing from around the world, the international community makes up a large segment of the SIUE population. In the past, CAS has celebrated the work and achievements of its international faculty with a well-attended reception. Though the event had lapsed, CAS is excited to bring the event back to life from 3-4:30 p.m. on April 6, on the first floor of Rendleman Hall. This time, the entire SIUE population is welcome to attend and support the international campus community.

“It amazes me that the University has this level of diversity and internationalization,” Shaw says. “First and foremost, we are a community, and we support one another.”

From 9:30 a.m.-10 p.m. on April 6, the international studies program hosts a full day of events dedicated to celebrating international diversity, including an information fair, career panel, film presentations and performances. The evening closes with a trivia night.

Throughout the various departments and programs on campus, administrators have worked diligently to emphasize cultural issues and diversity within their curricula.

Last fall, the Department of Mass Communications chose “diversity” as the theme of their annual Mass Communications Week celebration, set for April 3-6. As the faculty and staff worked to organize programming for the event, the proposed conversations about internationalization grew more relevant.

In its aptly titled “Diversity Amidst Adversity” series, the department will welcome several presentations featuring scholars and media professionals from around the country, recent alumni, as well as current professors and instructors.

On Monday, April 3, French-Senegalese journalist, filmmaker and human rights activist Rokhaya Diallo will speak to the audience in the Maple-Dogwood Room at the Morris University Center. After her presentation, she will screen her documentary, “Networks of Hate,” an introspective piece about hate speech and freedom of speech online. Afterwards, she will hold a question-and-answers session.

“Diallo showcases that France has the same type of problems we are seeing in our country in terms of the backlash against immigration, populist agendas, isolationism and turning inward,” Hicks says. “Even though she has been a victim of death threats, she has faced adversity and is still one of the most prominent figures in the idea of cultural assimilation, while also respecting the diversity that makes up these cultures.”

SIUE Professor Emeritus and internationally acclaimed media critic Jack Shaheen, PhD, will close out the week’s activities by discussing his latest research about Muslim and Arab stereotyping in the media.

“Dr. Shaheen began his academic career at SIUE and has become world famous for his work on stereotypes of Arabs in film, news and entertainment,” Hicks says. “He has probably become the number one expert on media representation of Arabs.”

Along with his presentation, Shaheen's critically acclaimed exhibit, "A is for Arab," a display that deconstructs the stereotypes of Muslims and Arabs in the Western world, will be presented on the Dunham Hall rotunda.

"During my nearly 20 years here at SIUE, this is the most exciting week of programming during Mass Communications Week we have ever put on," Hicks says.

"The role media plays in ensuring that these voices are heard is critical. How does the media actually ensure that this dialogue occurs?" Budzban inquires.

"That begins with educating future media professionals," Hicks replies. "We have people who are training to go into journalism, documentary filmmaking, advertising, public relations and corporate communications. All these areas need employees who can critically analyze and approach these topics with an intellectual curiosity, questioning the decisions they are making.

"The more people you can train to think about these things critically, the world will begin to change."

Catch the entire conversation by listening in at 9 a.m. Sunday to WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

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