

Thinking globally with SIUE's Mary Weishaar



Segue • SIUE

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Within its mission to develop scholars and leaders who shape a changing world, SouthTern Illinois University Edwardsville is focused on fostering an inclusive and diverse community for students and faculty members from the region and beyond.

On this week's episode of Segue, SIUE's premier radio show on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound that discusses the ideas and issues on campus and beyond, Chancellor Randy Pembroke, PhD, speaks with Mary Weishaar, PhD, executive director of International Affairs, to discuss the University's ongoing commitment to global education opportunities.

Weishaar arrived at SIUE in 1994 after serving as a special education teacher and administrator in public schools. In her 23 years at the University, she served as a professor and associate dean of the School of Education, Health and Human Behavior, and researched international education experiences for students with disabilities. During her career, Weishaar was awarded two Fulbright Scholar Awards, studied in Kyiv, Ukraine, and has authored or co-authored six textbooks on special education administration, law and assessment. She also published several journal articles on international issues in higher education. In 2015, Weishaar was named to her current position in the Office of International Affairs, and has provided leadership for all activities and initiatives that support the advancement of SIUE's global mission.

Weishaar's passion for international education began during her childhood, as her father was a child of Hungarian and Ukrainian immigrants.

"My grandparents eventually settled in southern Illinois and my grandfather worked in a coal mine," she says. "They faced a hard life and a lot of discrimination, but always strived to educate their children."

In 2012, Weishaar was instrumental in developing the International Training Program in Pedagogy at SIUE. The program hosts visiting faculty members from China every fall semester and introduces them to U.S. higher education pedagogy.

"These groups of Chinese scholars we have had at SIUE are extremely bright and highly educated, but many of them have never been outside their own country," she says. "With this program, the scholars have this wonderful opportunity to visit our country and gain new experiences. They love living in Cougar Village, observing in our classes, visiting our neighboring landmarks like the St. Louis Arch and visiting classrooms in the Edwardsville School District."

"I was incredibly impressed to see some of the scholars' backgrounds and their areas of interest," Pembroke says. "My wife Mary Jo and I are excited to have these scholars over for a traditional American Thanksgiving dinner this November."

"To be recognized by a university chancellor and invited into their personal home is a huge honor for these Chinese scholars," Weishaar replies. "A Thanksgiving dinner is one of the most enjoyable cultural experiences. The philosophy of giving thanks and the food, the mashed potatoes and turkey, is unique."

"The Office of International Affairs is the starting point for many students who want to study around the world. How does the Study Abroad program at SIUE work?" Pembroke inquires.

“We have two different types of Study Abroad programs. We have short-term programs led by faculty members and semester-long or year-long programs where students travel and study at a university and take courses in English,” Weishaar replies. “We had 177 students who studied abroad last year, and we’re set to go far beyond 200 students this year.”

SIUE is home to nearly 400 students from 51 nations around the globe. In the Office of International Affairs, Weishaar and her colleagues manage the formalities of an international education, including student visas, paperwork and financing. In January, when news of President Donald Trump’s executive order suspending travel from seven countries reached campus, international students and faculty arrived at the Office looking for answers.

“It was one of the most challenging experiences of my career in international education,” Weishaar recalls. “It was important that our students and faculty members felt safe and supported, had clear information and resources. We clearly and quickly organized meetings for faculty and students affected, and had attorneys available.”

The Office of International Affairs is also responsible for more casual tasks, like making students feel comfortable on campus and helping them get settled in with the International Hospitality Program.

“The International Hospitality Program is a wonderful and supportive group of community volunteers that have been organized for over 30 years,” Weishaar says. “These families want to enrich the lives of international students and also recognize the impact the students have on their own family.”

The program provides support to international students through many activities and initiatives, including gifting household items to students and inviting them to family meals, events and program gatherings.

Current students who are interested in having a Study Abroad experience or families wishing to join the International Hospitality are invited to contact Weishaar by phone at 618-650-3491 or by email at mweisha@siue.edu.

Catch the entire conversation between Chancellor Pembroke and Weishaar at 9 a.m. this Sunday, Oct. 15, by tuning in to WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

By Madelaine Gerard, SIUE Marketing & Communications