

SIUE's Construction Leadership Institute celebrates eight years and 200 graduates

By **KERRY L. BEISER**

Now in its eighth year, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's Construction Leadership Institute, which began in 2004 as a "real world" curriculum for those immersed in management positions within the industry, has sent 200 working construction professionals back to their companies armed with executive skills they didn't have before.

The nine-week, Friday curriculum is an executive education program jointly developed by the SIUE School of Business and the Dept. of Construction in the School of Engineering. Program co-director Mary Sumner says the courses are led by industry execs; the content, she adds, reflects the best practices of the construction industry. Chris Gordon is also co-director of the program.

"Our mission is to ensure that what we're teaching aligns with the needs of the construction industry in a rapidly changing environment," Sumner said. "The Construction Leadership Institute provides participants with the opportunity to broaden their perspective and to quickly learn leadership, business management and communication skills that would otherwise take many years of experience to gain. We place special emphasis on developing communication and presentation skills that are critical to attaining executive-level positions," she added.

Jeff Boyer, an operations director at McCarthy Building Companies Inc. and a Glen Carbon resident, graduated from SIUE's CLI program in 2007. Boyer was a project manager with McCarthy at the time he enrolled in the CLI, but he was preparing to assume his current role of director approximately one year later.

"Three of us at McCarthy were selected

to attend the course that year," said Boyer. "In all, 10 McCarthy people have gone through the program now. It was extremely valuable. I had already done other internal leadership training at my company, and the Construction Leadership Institute fit really well into that."

One of the best parts of SIUE's curriculum, several CLI graduates agree, is the mock Request for Proposal and project interview team exercises. "The board of executives we presented our proposal to was comprised of executives from several well-known St. Louis companies and was pretty high-level," said Boyer. "Now that I'm a director, a lot of my time is spent conducting (project) interviews, so this was an essential part of the course for me."

Being taught the legal aspects of the construction business - including contracts and legal reviews - by a prominent area attorney was another valuable part of the CLI, according to Boyer, as was the program's executive-level finance class, taught by a chief financial officer from a major construction company. "When you get involved in financial information at a job site as a project manager, it's relatively simple," said Boyer. "But when you get to a level where you're reading income statements from contractors and high-level balance sheets, it's another thing."

Gregg Korte, general manager of Korte & Luitjohan Contractors Inc., has been on the CLI board of directors since 2006 and has sent five employees through SIUE's construction leadership program. To Korte, the merits of CLI are clear.

"It gives our seasoned project managers a continuing education refresher, adding

to their knowledge base with perhaps newer or more proven practices," said Korte. "For our construction management degree project managers, it gives them another look - a more global look - at practices and procedures after working for awhile as a PM, a perspective they may not have the advantage of getting in their undergraduate study."

For project managers who come up through the system through the trades, the SIUE course offers them more of a formal education in management practices and procedures, Korte says. CLI also offers practical training for construction owners with managers who deal with the construction industry, he adds, such as current industry practices info that they may not have been exposed to in their previous education.

The skill - or talent - of networking is not left out of SIUE's CLI curriculum. Liz Lahm, director of enterprise risk and project management at Ameren Services, is a member of the CLI advisory board and a 2009 graduate.

An extrovert by nature, Lahm describes the "authentic" networking exercise included in the CLI program.

"As a class, business cards in hand, we attended an official, large-scale networking event hosted by the Southern Illinois Builders Association," Lahm said. "Each of us were required to meet 15 people we didn't know when we walked in the door. For me, that comes easy. But

for some people, that's a really hard skill to master when you're preparing to move into an executive leadership role. That's exactly why this program is so valuable. It provides 'real-world' experiences to prepare you for what you'll be doing on the job."

Lahm, who currently chairs the alumni subcommittee for the CLI advisory board, also stresses the value of networking among students and alumni through opportunities such as the "mega trends" CLI session; during this class, CLI grads return to lead a panel on a specific industry theme such as LEED or green construction.

Grads like Boyer agree that you never know where the connections made through SIUE's CLI experience will take you. "We are on a project right now at McCarthy with a joint venture partner that involves an executive I first came to know because we were fellow students in SIUE's Construction Leadership Institute four years ago," said Boyer. "You forge professional relationships over that two-month period of time that last, and it can translate into partnerships between companies who gain trust and knowledge of each other that much more quickly."

Sumner says the profile of those enrolling in CLI varies from those who have been in the construction profession for only five years to those who have been working in the industry as long as 30 years.

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