

Senior assignment program praised

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SIUE

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville was recently recognized along with Harvard, MIT, Duke, Princeton, and the University of Chicago for its comprehensive, integrative learning experience programs for graduating seniors.

Known as senior assignment at SIUE, each department is required to develop an interactive tool to gauge what students have learned

during their studies. The senior assignment program has been recognized twice recently as a model for other institutions across the nation.

In a report from The Association of American Colleges and Universities, SIUE's senior assignment program was heralded as an indicator of the effectiveness of the

academic programs offered. The 2006 issue of U.S. News and World Report named the University among America's Best Colleges because of the program, which engages students and enriches their lives.

"It makes what the students learn visible," said SIUE Associate Provost David Sill. "It becomes visible and it becomes measurable. One of the things that make this program unique to other programs is that it relates the major and the general education objectives.

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"As a graduation requirement, all students must experience senior assignment."

SIUE was one of the first institutions of higher learning in the nation to introduce a senior assignment program. The idea for the campus-wide initiative was born in 1988. By 1993, all departments had identified objectives, and designed and incorporated the senior assignment into the curricula.

The programs require students to incorporate the knowledge they learned during their courses of study.

"It's growing and maturing and developing in terms of ethics, in terms of human interaction, in

terms of civic responsibility," Sill said. "All of these are things the senior assignment can and frequently does make visible. The direction we're going is to have every student actually do what it is that professionals in that discipline do. The senior assignment changes with time."

Sill said that patterns indicating strengths and weaknesses can be derived from the information gathered by faculty based on the programs.

Examples given of senior assignments include the department of psychology's requirement that graduating seniors conduct original research. They must then present their findings to psychology faculty and the university community, Sill said.

"They must defend their work," he said. "What's important about this is that students are not just studying about psychology. They're actually doing what researchers in psychology do, and

they're held to the highest standards."

Sill said some students also present their findings at an annual Midwest Psychological Association meeting.

In another example, Department of Art and Design students visit a remote part of Mexico for three weeks and study with regional artisans. These artisans do not speak English, and the majority of students do not speak Spanish, Sill said, but the students learned despite the language barrier. Back in Illinois, the students draw upon their experiences to create art, which is featured each fall in an exhibit on campus.

The SIUE assessment program is not to be confused with traditional capstone programs, Sill said, noting "The regular capstone is about assessing individual learning, while the senior assignment is assessing the effectiveness of the program as a whole."