PHENOMENAL WOM*N CELEBRATION
Rebeccah Bennett, Founder of Emerging Wisdom and Edwardsville, Illinois resident, is an impactful change agent who has, in her nearly 20-year career, helped tens of thousands of people and hundreds of organizations effect positive change in the areas of organizational and community leadership, economic development, educational equity, environmental sustainability, diversity and inclusion, health and wellness, as well as wom*n’s and girls’ empowerment.

Rebeccah has a dedication to elevating the human condition….Rebeccah is passionate about the elevation of all individuals, not just BIPOC; as a Black wom*n, she does have the ability to utilize her passion and intersectionality together which creates even powerful, impactful results.

…Rebeccah Bennett has been, is, and will forever be what I consider a Phenomenal Wom*n! I am honored to call her friend and mentor. She’s graced our campus in a powerful way; her keynote presentation for the MLK Celebration was not only timely, but necessary for the condition of our campus. The necessity of Rebeccah’s message proved itself with the events that were to take place weeks later and matters that are still being addressed. Her title and content, "Seeding the Healed Future," sticks with me and I reference it often.
Jurnee Brewer is a kindhearted person who consistently goes above and beyond in all of her endeavors. She remains a positive influence on those around her as well as a role model to incoming students. Jurnee always volunteers to help in any way that she can with no hesitation. She is currently studying Sociology to further her knowledge of human behavior and better understand people. She is empathetic and always puts others before herself.

Jurnee has a bright vision for herself and the future. She actively works and is committed to her efforts in different community programs. Her character is also recognized by the United States Army through a number of awarded coins and nominations. Currently ranking as an E-4 promotable, she continues to excel in her leadership skills and knowledge in different community initiatives she is a part of.
After a national search, Dr. Sheila Caldwell was chosen to serve as the inaugural Vice President for Antiracism, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (ADEI) and Chief Diversity Officer for the Southern Illinois University System. Dr. Caldwell is responsible for coordinating all System diversity and equity programs, non-discrimination policies and equal opportunity compliance matters. Most importantly, she supervises initiatives leading the SIU System towards becoming an antiracist organization and she has truly proven visionary in this role.

From the moment she started in her role, she has made it her mission to connect with each campus by being visible in-person when possible, but most certainly present in many activities across the campuses virtually. She has begun the difficult task of bringing the SIU system universities together in purposeful conversations about what each campus is doing for ADEI efforts, how projects can benefit from the minds of people from each campus, and she does this all with great enthusiasm and thoughtful vision. She has even taken it upon herself to plan cross campus events, such as an upcoming visit of a Holocaust Survivor, Mr. Walter Blass who will be visiting each campus of the SIU system the first week of April. And she has taken it upon herself to see the needs of the system and ensure those gaps are filled, such as creating a committee to create an inclusive language guide that can be utilized on all campuses to ensure the system itself is “speaking the same language” of ADEI work. She is truly beyond compare and while ADEI work is her chosen career path, she does this work with much purpose. She is truly inspiring to watch and work with and must be recognized as a phenomenal wom*n.
Cristina Castillo is an outstanding person and truly deserves to be recognized as a staff member within the SIU System who has always been interested in the success of students, faculty, and staff around her. When The Hub reached out to Cristina to see if she would be interested in collaborating on Hispanic/Latinx Heritage Month program, planning, she answered with an enthusiastic “yes.” She had amazing ideas and worked tirelessly to ensure each one was executed flawlessly. We had a variety of virtual events, and all had attendance from both of our universities...The above and beyond attitude she displays truly improves the experience of students within the system and on each campus.

Additionally, Cristina’s ability to connect is unparalleled. She also knows the potential roadblocks for students and, more specifically, the Hispanic/Latinx students. Within her office in Carbondale students look specifically for Cristina because she “would understand” what they needed to talk about, or they knew she would have the answer to their questions because “she always knows.” Her concern for these students and her willingness to help ensures these students not only feel connected to her and the office, but the institution. If you asked many Hispanic/Latinx student who are persisting to graduation, for the name of someone that has helped them get there, they would say Cristina. She has single-handedly changed the face of the Hispanic/Latinx experience on the Carbondale campus.

She knows it is imperative to promote inclusive excellence and demonstrates an active commitment to creating a more equitable campus environment in all that she does.
Dr. Denise Cobb, Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, has served in this capacity since 2018 and in the role in an interim capacity since 2015. In that time and in her roles as a faculty member before that she has demonstrated many characteristics of a phenomenal wom*n. It just takes one conversation with Denise to know that she always is thinking about what can make SIUE a better campus and a better home for everyone here. She consistently demonstrates her commitment to listen and learn from those around her. When there are opportunities for faculty, staff or students to connect with senior administration, she is there and available; ready to be present and connect with those around here. And when those moments of sharing become difficult to hear feedback, she is still there, in the fight for the students.

What is most reflective of her remarkable character is not just in the way she listens and accepts the heavy burden of her role, but what she does with the information she gains. She is always reflecting on her work and the circumstances that have gotten us (SIUE) to the point we are. And in the moments when she asks herself and others the difficult questions about what action do we need to take next (especially as it relates to antiracism, equity, and diversity, and inclusion efforts), she will then thoughtfully reflect on the answers shared. Whether she is trying to improve the faculty experience or listening and advocating for students, her dedication to antiracism, equity, and inclusion work is clear. She recognizes and demonstrates the understanding that this difficult work can also be something that unites us and that working collaboratively is how we can make this campus better for everyone.
Dr. Carol Colannino-Meeks...is conscientious and dedicated, leading many of our research programs and challenging other employees to excel. She is not afraid to face up to research challenges and also to call attention to important social issues within her field of Anthropology. In these times of uncertainty and disparity, Dr. Colannino-Meeks is a voice making sure no one is overlooked.

...In our Center’s discussions of race and equity, Dr. Colannino-Meeks has been a leading voice in starting conversations and calling attention to ways we can improve our outreach...In every case I’ve seen her navigate these situations with compassion, conscientiousness, and professionalism.

...She manages many of our grant programs that are designed to support those that are traditionally underrepresented in STEM fields. When we work with our program participants, she does not hesitate to share her own story of being a gender minority who once struggled in school due to several systematic barriers that did not properly support those with her specific way of learning. She has also been awarded grant funds to support research and awareness to help facilitate positive change for the unfortunate issue of sexual harassment that is often found in field work scenarios in the sciences. Carol has overcome personal experiences as well as supported others through challenging issues dealing with discriminatory acts and barriers...She deserves to be recognized for her outstanding work as an integral part of our department.

Carol Colannino-Meeks
SIUE Faculty
Carolyn Jason embodies what it means to be “phenomenal” on both a personal and professional level. She has made countless contributions to diversity and inclusion at SIUE and beyond and inspires others to do the same.

In 2021, Carolyn was appointed to serve as co-chair of an ad hoc committee tasked with improving the relationship between the SIUE East St. Louis Center and the Edwardsville campus. The committee utilized data from the Anti-Racism Task Force, institutional documents, surveys, listening sessions, and interviews to make recommendations for improving communication and services to the East St. Louis Center.

Carolyn serves as a team member of the SIUE Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation Campus Center...and Carolyn currently serves as the interim program director of the SIUE Head Start and Early Head Start Program. The program’s mission is to positively affect the lives of others by removing barriers and providing quality services to empower children and their families. Carolyn is committed to this mission and proves it daily as she builds relationships with staff and the families they serve that foster success.
Candi Johnson is phenomenal...A sisterhood of scientists exists in our community in part because we have so many strong female mentors. In her current position as Program Coordinator and Resource Center Manager, Candi is the first face a lot of undergraduates and graduates see when they enter the STEM Center. Often students come to the Center to study or ask for help in science topics, and she makes a special effort to seek out other young women interested in science.

In her position working with students in area schools, Candi’s efforts to ensure we are reaching students and engaging them in science in ways that they can relate to sets her apart from other educators. When discussing our STEM program with area schools and teachers, Candi is always careful to inquire what the needs of the students are and how we might best accommodate them in our curriculum. As a working mom of two young boys, I have seen her make tremendous efforts to balance work life and personal life and she is amazing at it...
When Dee Johnson became the Research Support Services Manager within Library and Information Services (LIS)..., she took on an entirely new role...and was responsible for developing the vision of this new department. She recognized the importance of her staff in assisting her develop that vision and sharing it with them...Empathy is one of the core tenets of Dee’s leadership style. In the time that I have worked with Dee, empathy is at the center of all her work relationships and decisions. She understands the importance of meeting people at their level. Her empathy has allowed her to go well past the role of supervisor and has taken on a role of mentor with much of the library’s staff and faculty...Dee is a safe space for many to bounce off ideas or issues and get honest answers. Dee has created a space for everyone around her to grow and take chances while also providing them room to fail...

...Dee is an active listener who knows how to make people feel heard and valued, while also not shying away from difficult conversations. Dee knows how to coach others to be the best version of themselves and handles it with grace...Dee approaches her work through the lens of diversity, equity, inclusion, and antiracism (DEIA). Dee knows how to recognize barriers and is committed to breaking them down. She has positively influenced hiring practices in the library, helping others to recognize their own biases and commit to making the process fair and equitable. Dee continues to improve our campus outreach efforts with DEIA guiding her; it is apparent that she is working to build a library that represents the community it serves and welcomes everyone...The state civil service system classifies Dee as library operations associate in the civil service system, but to quote Dr. Maya Angelou, Dee is “a woman Phenomenally. Phenomenal woman, That's [Dee].”
Dr. Min Liu, faculty member in the Applied Communication Studies Department, in addition to her fine, ongoing work as a scholar and educator at SIUE, she is also very involved with the AAPI community in the area. She serves as the community outreach director for the Chinese Education and Cultural Center in Richmond Heights, where she has helped coordinate vigils and fund-raisers, and worked with area law enforcement to raise awareness of AAPI hate crimes.

Most recently, she wrote and received a $50,000 for 2 years from the St. Louis County Children's Service Fund. This grant fund work towards addressing mental health needs among AAPI youth and families in St. Louis. She is working to make a positive difference toward anti-AAPI racism and working hard to create understanding within the community by applying her professional skills as a communication scholar to problems in our region.
Dianah McGreehan is the current Graduate Professional Student Council (GPSC) president on the Southern Illinois University Carbondale campus. And while she is actively involved in many things on the Carbondale campus, her efforts have truly had an impact beyond her home campus. As the GPSC president she serves on a variety of committees and some of those have her serving as a graduate student voice. On multiple occasions she has served on a committee that includes faculty, staff, and students from across the SIU System and she takes this role very seriously. She ensures she thinks critically and asks the difficult equity and inclusion questions that not everyone may be willing to ask, but everyone will benefit from hearing the answer to. There has even been a couple of times that a student at SIUE mentioned how much they gained from hearing Dianah speak within these committee meetings and they learned ways to advocate for the student voice in a better way. This influence moves beyond her campus.

Additionally, she doesn’t stop with just being a voice, she quite often goes above and beyond. She recently took the lead in planning the first Diversity Week held on the Carbondale campus. This week brought together presenters from across the university system for the benefit of the system. She was also able to independently fundraise $25,000 for the week. And she doesn’t stop there, she has recently planned a Saluki Pride event, a Stand with Ukraine Peace Rally, and is in the midst of planning a Women’s Wellness Walk that will celebrate the 50th anniversary of Title IX and honor past/present female athletes and coaches. Dianah truly is a phenomenal wom*n and has greatly contributed to the Carbondale campus and the SIU system as a whole.
Dr. Gertrude Pannirselvam serves as a professor in the Management & Marketing Department within the School of Business and absolutely demonstrates the characteristics of a phenomenal wom*n. When the call comes for her to commit time and efforts to antiracism, equity, diversity and inclusion work, she consistently answer with an enthusiastic “yes.” From serving as the chair of the policy committee for the University Diversity Council, to serving on the core council of the Anti-Racism Task Force, to chairing the Anti-Racism Task Force Subcommittee #4, Dr. Pannirselvam tirelessly strives for a more equitable campus. She takes on these roles and responsibilities with a humble spirit despite the fierceness with which she fights for equitable policies and accountability for campus action for change. She also serves as an Equity Advisor, which are faculty members charged with ensuring inclusive recruitment practices and hiring strategies throughout search processes.

Besides her formal commitments, she also regularly encourages her colleagues and others around her to have difficult, but necessary conversations about their own bias, privilege, and parts played in continuing systemic racism. By encouraging conversations and reflections, she challenges long held beliefs and perspectives that could inhibit supporting students in equitable and purposeful ways. By providing space for learning and growth, she improves the environment for students. Her holistic thinking truly impacts the environments she occupies. She believes in more equitable and inclusive spaces and continues to do what it takes to see those spaces come to fruition.
Mahoggani Pickett is very involved on campus and demonstrates her remarkable character throughout her everyday actions. Double majoring in Criminal Justice and Psychology and minoring in African American studies, Mahoggani is devoted to examining human behavior providing her the ability to fully understand and empathize with people.

A feminist and activist, Mahoggani is devoted to bringing about change. She is committed to her work in antiracism, equity, diversity, and inclusion which she displays often. She works vigorously to improve policies that affect the student experience during their time at SIUE. Her remarkable character and influence are recognized not only by her peers but by the multiple organizations Ms. Pickett is actively involved in. As President of Black Girls Rock, constant recognition as Federated Sister of the Month, and her constant efforts to improve the black experience at SIUE, Mahoggani’s hard work should not go unrecognized.
Izzy Pruitt has committed to anti-racism and inclusion not only through large acts of protesting injustice, but also through everyday life. As a first-generation college student and a second-generation Latina immigrant, she has had privileges beyond those before her and she believes it is her duty to work towards giving those opportunities to others to create a more equitable environment for all.

Izzy has helped to organize and plan four different protests and marches, including the Women’s March and the Black Lives Matter Protest in Springfield, Illinois.

As the current VP, Izzy helps to enact policy changes like reforming sexist dress codes to provide a more inclusive environment for all and engaging in conversations with students from marginalized groups to hear their voice and bring that to the University administration. This bravery requires confidence, conviction, and courage that the voice of the student should not only be heard, but heard clearly when offering feedback for change to the administration. She even recently made time to speak about recommendations and improvements for The Hub on behalf of her senators! She was not afraid to be direct about ways to improve equity work and make clear the voice of the students.

Izzy also serves as the Director of Health and Wellness Education in her sorority, Alpha Phi, providing resources to help the development of nearly 100 women with their leadership skills and understanding of themselves so they can be the best possible women they can be.
Telisha Reinhardt is one of the most inspiring women I know. She is passionate about what she does and when it comes to helping other be successful. Telisha goes out of her way to assist veterans and military affiliated students of all different backgrounds. Anyone that walks into the Military and Veterans Services office is met with a warm smile from Telisha. They never have to worry that they are given incorrect information due to Telisha’s extensive knowledge.

Telisha is always open to having tough conversations and giving students a platform to feel heard such as with her “From Uniform to University: African American Servicemembers and Veterans in the Community” panel and many others...She consistently reaches out across campus to create collaborative programming opportunities that not only supports her office and the students she serves, but encourages campus to see military and veteran students as part of equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts...

You don’t meet many people as genuine and passionate about their craft as Telisha, she is truly one of a kind.
...Dr. Bernadette Sobczak...has worked diligently to help overcome barriers for underserved populations by engaging in projects and continuous works that improves health equity and access to care in these populations. She has not only engaged in this work at the local, regional, and national level, but also internationally. Through the organization ER Abroad, Dr. Sobczak has led, planned, and participated in multiple medical mission trips to an underserved community in Guatemala with very limited access to healthcare resources. Dr. Sobczak conducts mission trips to this area at least twice per year to promote continuity of care to the hundreds of patients that they see on each trip. And most recently, Dr. Sobczak and her project team were awarded funding to enhance internet capabilities in the local clinic in Guatemala and implement an electronic health record system so that they can perform virtual health visits in between mission trips....As the clinical site coordinator for nurse practitioner students at SIUE School of Nursing, a large part of her work is focused on initiating and maintaining collaborative relationships with clinical partners in local and regional rural, urban, and suburban underserved communities where students can complete their clinical hours while providing care to underserved populations...

As a pediatric nurse practitioner, her commitment to the health and wellness of the children in Guatemala is evident. She not only cares for them when on the ground in Guatemala, but she leads monthly telemedicine clinics with the children that are malnourished. Her hard work is paying off as the initial results of these monthly clinics is showing that the children are growing and starting to thrive. Without her tenacity these children would most likely still be suffering from severe malnutrition...Dr. Sobczak is an excellent example of how one Wom*n can change, inspire and motivate those around her to improve others’ lives.

Bernadette Sobczak
SIUE Faculty
Ashley Wittler embodies the criteria of a Phenomenal Wom*n. Her education at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) began as an undergraduate student in the nursing program. She was guided by wonderful, supportive instructors who instilled the values of equity, diversity, and inclusion throughout her education. Her nursing career has evolved over time...and she now supports the next generation of nurses in her role as an instructor for the very same school of nursing she graduated from. As a clinical instructor she implements cultural awareness projects to help students learn and engage in culturally sensitive patient care. Students participate in experiences with ancillary services in the community to learn about holistic care options available for diverse populations...Most recently, students participated in a simulated virtual telemedicine experience which prepares them to care for patients with limited access to healthcare...

Her research is focused on women’s health promotion education via telemedicine to global patients in areas where there is little access to care...and she is working towards a grant application which would provide for contraceptive access for women who live in these same areas....in the past year, she has implemented a reproductive life planning tool which promotes safe and equitable family planning education for all patients of reproductive ability within her clinic...and she also participates in research focusing on the implementation of a patient centering program...which provides group prenatal care services offered during evening and weekend hours to promote increased access to for all pregnant women. Finally, she has participated in several fundraising events for the National Share Organization located in the St. Louis area...which is a foundation providing support for families who have experienced perinatal or neonatal loss.

Ashley Wittler
SIUE Faculty
Congratulations to the 2022 Phenomenal Wom*n Award Winners!
I’m a woman phenomenally. Phenomenal woman. That’s me.

-Maya Angelou