

# CAS presents distinguished Going Award to Jessica DeSpain

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EDWARDSVILLE - While her scholarly interests have evolved through her academic career, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville’s Jessica DeSpain’s commitment to work rooted in service and storytelling has not. DeSpain, PhD, is a respected teacher,

colleague and community member who learns by doing and ignites in others a desire to get involved and make a difference.

In recognition of her excellence in teaching and scholarship, the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) has presented its 2018 William and Margaret Going Endowed Professorship Award to [DeSpain](#), an associate professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, and co-director of SIUE's Interdisciplinary Research and Informatics Scholarship ([IRIS](#)) Center.

The Going Award is the College's most distinguished award and is bestowed upon faculty who have produced outstanding scholarship and have connected that scholarship in fundamental ways to their teaching and transformed students' lives.

"Dr. DeSpain's excellent scholarship in the digital humanities, woven seamlessly into her teaching and student mentoring, provides an outstanding example of a true teacher-scholar," said CAS Dean Greg Budzban, PhD. "As co-founder and director of the IRIS Center, her work in sustaining the digital humanities through external grant activity provides funding support that extends beyond her own department and creative activity."

From transatlantic book history to digital storytelling, DeSpain leads and contributes to multiple digital humanities projects with funding from such external agencies as the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

One of her latest endeavors in partnership with the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities Foundation involves the children, parents, and grandparents of Madison County in the creation of digital stories to help them reflect on the value and meaning of relationships that span generations.

Many of her courses also consider issues related to food access and sustainability, and she integrates her commitment to local organizations like the [Goshen Market Foundation](#) into her teaching. "I am a strong proponent for service learning," DeSpain said. "I want to disrupt the stereotype that academics, especially humanities academics, just sit in a room, read books and think. I am always considering how we can interact in the world publically, to demonstrate that we have important things to contribute to society beyond our campus. Academics like myself want to participate in worldly conversations in ways that make us a collaborative force, as opposed to the top-down, ivory tower model."

"Digital storytelling has become my central focus, because people don't feel empowered to tell their stories," she added. "They don't realize that through their own narrative they can learn about themselves, and what informs how they think about the world and the people around them. We're also not always good about listening to people's stories and are quick to make judgments."

“Digital storytelling puts the person telling the story in front, in order to let them think about what their own narratives mean and to try to understand emotions in new ways. Technology is a facilitator of that.”

Students play a vital role in DeSpain’s work as they inform and contribute to her innovative ideas. Since her SIUE arrival in 2008, she has continuously mentored and collaborated with undergraduate and graduate students. Participants in the Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA) program have gained experience in their work with DeSpain on [The Wide, Wide World](#) digital edition.

“Working in close-knit, mentor-based, team environments with my students influences how I think about my work,” she explained. “Students should not only be in the center of it, but also have a voice as producers of it.”

“Many of the students I work with are English majors, who may not feel as comfortable with technology,” DeSpain continued. “The IRIS Center and my digital storytelling focus reframe the situation. Instead of teaching students how to use the computer, we begin with content that interests them and presents a problem that needs solving. This has made them more willing to reach out and interact with technology in ways that they wouldn’t otherwise, because they’re passionate about the content.”

With support from DeSpain, co-founder Kristine Hildebrant, PhD, associate professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, and project manager Katie Knowles, the IRIS Center has expanded its multi-modal approach and grown its community engagement not only locally, but also on an international scale.

“The IRIS Center has a complementary goal of increasing access to technology and engaging in the humanities,” DeSpain said. “When we began the Center in 2009, we wanted to create a space for faculty and students to share ideas, and we knew we needed a vision that matched SIUE as an institution. Recently, we have come to realize how central the community is to that vision, and we are excited to begin new projects that engage people of all ages in using technology to share their stories with one another.”

As part of her receipt of the Going Award, DeSpain will present a public lecture entitled “Life Courses” in fall 2018. She plans to present in a gallery space where she will share stories that students and community members have been working on through her digital storytelling projects.

Central to SIUE’s exceptional and comprehensive education, the [College of Arts and Sciences](#) has 19 departments and 85 areas of study. More than 300 full-time faculty /instructors deliver classes to more than 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Faculty help students explore diverse ideas and experiences, while learning to think and

live as fulfilled, productive members of the global community. Study abroad, service-learning, internships, and other experiential learning opportunities better prepare SIUE students not only to succeed in our region's workplaces, but also to become valuable leaders who make important contributions to our communities.