

# Despite Earthquakes, SIUE Faculty, Students Present Research in Puerto Rico

by Doug McIlhagga  
January 20 2020 1:21 PM



**EDWARDSVILLE** – When Southern Illinois University Edwardsville faculty and students from the Departments of Political Science and Environmental Sciences were selected to present at the 2020 Southern Political Science Association (SPSA) Conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, from Jan. 9-11, none of them anticipated the earthquakes that would rock the small island during their visit.

Political Science Professor Laurie Rice, PhD, arrived in San Juan a few days before the conference began, so she experienced both the magnitude 5.8 and 6.4 earthquakes that

occurred on Jan. 6 and 7, respectively. The southern California native is used to experiencing earthquakes, but she was not expecting them while in Puerto Rico.

“When the magnitude 5.8 earthquake woke me up in my 10th floor hotel room, it took me a while to figure out the shaking was an earthquake,” said Rice. “Based on previous experience with earthquakes, I figured either I was somewhat far from the epicenter or that it wasn't very strong and I promptly went back to sleep. The 6.4 was different - it started strong and got stronger and the shaking lasted longer. There was a moment as the shaking was intensifying where I thought if it got much worse there might be impacts in San Juan. Thankfully that didn't happen.”

In San Juan, the only major consequence of the earthquakes was a power outage. The southern part of the island was not as fortunate. Many Puerto Ricans lost their homes, which was especially tough for an island still recovering from the devastation left by Hurricane Maria in 2017.

“I had the chance to talk to locals in San Juan and I was glad to be able to use my own experience with earthquakes to bring some calm and reassurance,” added Rice. “The earthquakes had them really rattled. You can't anticipate them and plan for them in the same way as you can a hurricane.”

Despite the earthquakes, the SPSA Conference continued as planned. In a hotel powered by generators, Rice and colleague Ken Moffett, PhD, presented their research on how involvement in the MeToo movement and other issues such as immigration policy and gun control is connected with increased civic engagement among young adults. This paper is part of a larger project the pair intends to publish as a book.

SIUE Political Science and Environmental Sciences Professor Nicholas Guehlstorf, PhD, also attended the conference with his students, SIUE Environmental Sciences graduate student Krista Russell and SIU Carbondale Environmental Resource and Policy doctoral student Courtney Breckenridge. The group presented the research paper they co-authored, “Renewable Fuels and Agriculture Land Use: Questioning the Corn-ethanol Causation.”

“Presenting our work on the Renewable Fuel Standard to political and environmental science faculty and students would have been an exciting way to start 2020 regardless of the destination, but the conference's location in Puerto Rico made it quite the dramatic experience,” said Breckenridge. “While the devastating earthquakes that hit the southern part of the island remain a humanitarian crisis, we were fortunate to be able to experience the beauty and culture of San Juan without noticeable impacts.”

Despite the lower-than-normal conference attendance, the SIUE students and faculty still enjoyed opportunities to connect with their colleagues from across the county. They also gained valuable feedback on their respective research.

“Attending the SPSA conference was a once in a lifetime experience for a graduate student,” said Russell. “I am thankful for the collaborations at SIUE that have helped support my master’s research and provided me with the opportunity to present at my first academic conference. After significant preparation, I was thankful that considering the recent earthquakes we were still able to attend. I look forward to utilizing the feedback from the conference to further improve this research on the Renewable Fuel Standard.”

Central to SIUE’s exceptional and comprehensive education, the College of Arts and Sciences offers degree programs in the natural sciences, humanities, arts, social sciences, and communications. The College touches the lives of all SIUE students helping them 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.