



SIUE ACCESS Hosts Virtual Living Room' as Space for Daily Connection

by Morgan Wieser
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EDWARDSVILLE - As Stay-at-Home orders and social distancing recommendations are the new, temporary normal, connecting with friends, mentors and other acquaintances is challenging. Knowing the importance of having those exchanges, the

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Office for Accessible Campus Community and Equitable Student Support (ACCESS) is hosting daily “Virtual Living Room” sessions. Every day, and twice daily on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, students gather on Zoom to chat, hang out and check in with ACCESS staff members.

“This was a frequent activity in our on-campus office space where students would come by just to hang out or check in with staff members, who in many ways came to know them like family and could set them on the straightened path toward success whenever they veered,” said ACCESS Director Dominic Dorsey, MEd. “We started our Remote ACCESS campaign with “Virtual Living Room” hours for students to drop in and say hi. We engage in group conversation and dialogue about how they’re doing. We laugh. We joke. We share and offer individual words of encouragement.

“In many instances, the students are sharing stories, and building connections and community just by offering support, guidance and tips from what has worked for them. It’s an informal support group that’s being utilized by ACCESS students and non-ACCESS students alike.”

The “Virtual Living Room” is one of many adjustments ACCESS has made to its daily operations to ensure both students and faculty are receiving support as everyone navigates online learning and teaching.

Dorsey and his team surveyed students at the end of March to learn the types of challenges they were experiencing. Responses were “sobering,” according to Dorsey.

Results indicated a need for students’ approved accommodations to be better adjusted for the online setting, and struggles with internal and external issues such as decreased motivation, difficulty with time management and a lack of privacy at home. Dorsey notes other issues included increased anxiety, work/life imbalance and additional responsibilities with children in the home.

“To address these challenges, we created a special edition of our monthly newsletter addressing tips specific to assisting with the transition to online learning for individuals with Attention Deficient Disorder (ADD) and Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), a significant portion of our student population, and other students as well,” Dorsey explained. “We’ve also ramped up messaging to faculty about how to apply extended time in Blackboard exams, and walked individuals through our Accommodate system for reviewing approved accommodations.”

In response to reported feelings of isolation and diminished hope, ACCESS recorded a video with messages of encouragement from staff and sent it to students. The team also created a Netflix streaming guide to content that features characters with disabilities and /or promotes diversity. Watch parties are being planned.

“Adaptation is our business, so ironically, we were better prepared for this than we probably could have envisioned,” Dorsey said. “We’re connected and available, and always looking for ways to do what we do better and serve more. Our numbers have consistently grown as we’ve seen more new students registered with ACCESS since the beginning of the spring semester than we saw in all of last year.”

Dorsey’s advice for all is to remember the element of grace, and to take whatever opportunities you can to pour back into the cups you’ve emptied.

“For me, it’s been go, go, go, and I had to stop and learn that while I have a desire to help and do for everyone else in a time of crisis and uncertainty, I need to make sure I’m reserving energy to check in on myself,” he noted. “We have to trust one another is doing our very best even absent of typical oversight, and be as accommodating and collaborative as possible with others who may be dealing with a completely different and unique set of circumstances.”

“While it may be difficult at times, we need to remember to laugh, find things we enjoy and do those as well as all the tasks and duties that may feel insurmountable,” Dorsey continued. “Mental health is paramount, feeling whole is essential. We may not be able to do all things in the ways we once did for the time being, but that doesn’t mean we stop trying to find joy and contentment whenever and wherever we can. That takes support. Whatever measure of that we can assist with at ACCESS, that’s our goal.”

Students struggling with their courses, feeling anxiety or adverse challenges with academics that weren’t present in face-to-face courses are encouraged to register with ACCESS by visiting siue.edu/access/students. Faculty and staff looking for assistance in making their content universally accessible to a wider array of diverse learners, should reach out via email to myaccess@siue.edu.

Students interested in joining in on the Zoom “Virtual Living Room” sessions should visit the ACCESS COVID-19 Response Page for more information.

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville provides students with a high quality, affordable education that prepares them for successful careers and lives of purpose to shape a changing world. Built on the foundation of a broad-based liberal education, and enhanced by hands-on research and real-world experiences, the academic preparation

SIUE students receive equips them to thrive in the global marketplace and make our communities better places to live. Situated on 2,660 acres of beautiful woodland atop the bluffs overlooking the natural beauty of the Mississippi River's rich bottomland and only a short drive from downtown St. Louis, the SIUE campus is home to a diverse student body of more than 13,000.

Photo: SIUE ACCESS Director Dominic Dorsey (top middle) hosts a “Virtual Living Room” session on Zoom for interested students.