

# **SIUE Names Finalists for Vice Chancellor for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion**

by Doug McIllaga  
January 16 2021 7:05 AM



EDWARDSVILLE – Southern Illinois University Edwardsville has selected two internal candidates among its three finalists in the search for its first Vice Chancellor for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (VCEDI). SIU School of Dental Medicine (SDM) Chief Diversity Officer, Director of the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, and Assistant Dean for Admissions and Student Services Dr. Cornell Thomas is chairing the search committee. The candidates will participate in virtual interviews in late January and early February.

“The new VCEDI will provide leadership and guide SIUE forward in an ever-changing dynamic of our pursuits for inclusive excellence in all that we do,” said Thomas. “The person selected will lead SIUE in creating a space that promotes anti-racism, diversity,

equity and inclusion as the norm in the core aspects of our hiring, teaching and retention.”

The national search, which began in mid-October, 2020, produced 46 applicants. The search committee narrowed the field to the following candidates:

- Lakesha Butler, PharmD, BCPS, has served as the director of diversity, equity and inclusion for the SIUE School of Pharmacy (SOP) since 2017, and as a clinical professor of pharmacy practice in the SOP since 2006. She is serving as the only pharmacist on the National Medical Association (NMA) COVID-19 Commission on Vaccines and Therapeutics among a panel of Black doctors to vet COVID-19 vaccines to overcome mistrust in the healthcare system, especially in the Black community.
- Jessica Harris, PhD, was named assistant provost for academic equity and inclusive excellence in the SIUE Office of the Provost in 2020 after serving as the interim assistant provost for the previous two years. An SIUE faculty member since 2011, Harris served as an associate professor of historical studies in the SIUE College of Arts and Sciences and director of the interdisciplinary Black Studies program before being promoted into administrative roles.
- Debbie Thomas, PhD, served as vice chancellor for learning and instruction at Arkansas State University Mid-South in West Memphis, Arkansas from 2019-20. Prior to that appointment, she was provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs at Kentucky State University from 2017-18.

The VCEDI will serve an integral role in two important current initiatives – the [Anti-Racism Task Force](#) (ARTF) and the [Higher Learning Commission](#) (HLC) Quality Initiative focusing on anti-racism. The VCEDI also will work closely with the [SIU System](#) and its new vice president for diversity, as well as the [Diversity Advisory Council](#) (DAC).

The VCEDI’s direct responsibilities will include, but are not limited to:

- Lead the Office of Diversity and Inclusion
- Supervise and administer the offices of EOA/Title IX, Military and Veterans Services, and the Center for Student Diversity and Inclusion
- Work with equity advisors for staff searches and the Impact Academy for staff positions
- Through the Diversity Council, continue to advance the recently developed Diversity Strategic Plan and be responsible for SIUE’s diversity goals

- Lead ongoing Anti-Racism Task Force efforts, including developing training and professional development opportunities, and implementing the recommendations from that group in coordination with the ongoing Higher Learning Commission Quality Initiative (QI)
- Coordinate the Institutional Diversity Leadership Team
- Chair the Bias Incident Response Team (BIRT)
- Participate in certain functions of the EOA/Title IX appeals processes in consultation with the EOA Director
- Provide guidance in the Strategic Hiring Initiative as it pertains to SIUE Staff
- Assume responsibilities for anti-racism, equity, diversity, and inclusion programming, including growth of campus constituency groups

[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 nearly 13,000.

**Photo (L-R):** SIUE finalists for vice chancellor for equity, diversity and inclusion (VCEDI): Lakesha Butler, PharmD, BCPS, director of diversity, equity and inclusion for the SIUE School of Pharmacy (SOP) and clinical professor of pharmacy practice; Jessica Harris, PhD, assistant provost for academic equity and inclusive excellence in the SIUE Office of the Provost; and Debbie Thomas, PhD, former vice chancellor for learning and instruction at Arkansas State University Mid-South.