

SIUE Difference Maker: Renteria-Poepsel Supports International Students

by Megan Wieser

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EDWARDSVILLE – Difference makers can be described in many ways: proactive, improves the lives of others, service driven and more. Amid the ongoing pandemic, difference makers are all around, helping individuals overcome challenges, coordinating support mechanisms, creatively adapting activities and offering light through darkness.

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville is celebrating such difference makers throughout February. These individuals are just a few of the countless University

faculty, staff and students that have made hard times a little less difficult for others. They were nominated by colleagues and students.

The Coronavirus pandemic has presented major challenges for international students who have dealt with the inability to travel home, financial constraints, changing course requirements due to federal policy and more. Gaby Renteria-Poepsel, international student programming advisor in the Office of International Affairs, is a difference maker who has helped international graduate student Anuj Kharel, of Nepal, persevere.

“She is the one who helped me through these tough times,” said Kharel, who is pursuing a master’s in computer science. “Gabriela helped with my academic advising when I was having financial hardship. It was through her effort I was able to make it through. I felt like home whenever I spoke with her, and that gave me hope that all these hardships will go away. I can’t express with words how thankful I am.”

Deeply honored by Kharel’s acknowledgement, Renteria-Poepsel noted her strong dedication to serving the international student population at SIUE. She praised students for demonstrating incredible resilience throughout the pandemic.

“Being a new student at any institution is a stressful experience, and more so when you are embarking on your academic journey overseas,” she explained. “They are expected to navigate a different language, culture, teaching styles, transportation systems and even weather. With the pandemic, providing students with hope is extremely important, because I want them to believe that they will get through this tough time, even if it doesn’t always feel like it at first.”

As international programming advisor, Renteria-Poepsel manages pre-arrival communication, as well as communication with current students, international orientation and other programming, and retention efforts. She and her colleagues in the Office of International Affairs have devoted countless hours to the students they serve as they all navigated through changing circumstances.

“Quickly after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, constant communication with current students became key to not only provide peace of mind, but also to make sure they knew about resources available to them,” Renteria-Poepsel said. “I distributed gift cards from local businesses to 37 students. The gift cards were donated to Student Affairs and were meant to support international students in Edwardsville, who were in most need, to cover at least one or two meals.”

“Many international students also faced the loss of job opportunities,” she added. “Our office recognized the need to help students who needed emergency funding to continue to make academic progress. Four of our students received a \$2,500 emergency fund

from the Institute of International Education based on our nominations. Additionally, we offered biweekly virtual meetups in partnership with SIUE Counseling Services to share strategies for managing stress and anxiety during the pandemic. We also held a series with the Career Development Center to provide additional tools for students who were slated to graduate last May or summer.”

According to Renteria-Poepsel, as the pandemic forges on in combination with a rise in white nationalism, violence and racial incidents, it is critical to enhance students’ sense of belonging.

“Our international students hear about these incidents through social media, and it can have a negative impact on their sense of belonging not only at SIUE, but also in the U. S.,” she concluded. “I want to make sure they know we are here to support them and that there are resources available to them to deal with any concerns. I look forward to continuing to serve our international student population.”

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.