

UIS earning a reputation for innovation and quality

There are moments when we know our lives have changed, that the ground has shifted under us, that the future has been forever altered. Consider landing that first job after college, or meeting a person you know is destined to be your life partner, or the birth of a first child.



HARRY
BERMAN

Organizations, too, have such moments. The week of Oct. 22 was just such a ground-shifting, future-altering moment in the history of the University of Illinois at Springfield.

At the beginning of that week, UIS was recognized for institution-wide excellence in online teaching and learning by the Sloan Consortium, an organization of about 1,200 higher education institutions committed to enhancing quality in online education. The consortium was created with funding from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, which has a longstanding interest in supporting initiatives to increase access to higher education. It's not a

stretch to say that UIS was recognized for being the best in the nation in online education.

That same week, UIS had its reaccreditation site visit from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the organization that accredits colleges and universities in the Midwest. We received a ringing endorsement for the clarity of our vision and mission and the alignment of our activities and processes with that vision and mission. In effect, they said, "You know what you want to be — one of the top small public liberal arts universities in the country — and you're taking the right steps to get there."

Two aspects of these successes are particularly satisfying. First, both are collective, not individual, successes. There's no doubt that online education at UIS would not be where it is today without the inspired leadership of professor Ray Schroeder, who, by the way, received the Sloan Consortium award for "Most Outstanding Achievement in Online Learning by an Individual" a few years ago. But

the success of UIS' online programming is a product of all the early faculty adopters, all those faculty who have continued to join the effort to use this technology to increase access to higher education, and all the creative and dedicated UIS staff who make online education work for students and faculty.

Similarly, we were unbelievably fortunate to have a person with the experience, energy, organizational skills, and determination of professor Karen Kirkendall to head up the self-study in preparation for the HLC visit. The self-study was truly a collaborative effort with many, many people involved in data gathering; report writing, critiquing, editing and designing; and site-visit planning and coordination.

But the outcome of the site visit did not rest on the self-study report alone; it rested on the improvements made at UIS over the past 10 years and on the degree to which the assertions about our goals and our processes as put forward in the self-study were validated in the many

conversations the site visit team members had during their time with us.

The second particularly sweet aspect of these successes is that both were "peer reviews." In the academic life, it's tough to equal the sense of satisfaction we get from having our intellectual products — conference presentations, papers, book proposals — evaluated favorably by our peers.

What does all of this mean to the Springfield community? It's a well known fact that every great city has a great university. It has become ever more clear that Springfield now has a great university.

When we started to talk a couple of years ago about becoming one of the leading small, public liberal arts universities, many of us felt like it was sheer rhetoric. "Honestly," we thought, "how could we ever hope to be one of the best?"

Over the past several years, though, various accomplishments (e.g., the accreditation of the College of Business and

Management by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, the explosion of the fine arts, the caliber of our new faculty, just to name a few) have raised the prospect that there's more than just talk going on here. The events of that fateful week took us well beyond the realm of sheer rhetoric. An institution that wins the Sloan Consortium award and receives such a strong endorsement from an HLC site visit is, at minimum, a contender for entry into the realm of the leading, small public liberal arts universities.

We know we're not perfect. We've still got a lot of work to do.

That said, I want you to know that the public university in your hometown of Springfield is making its mark on the national scene and gaining a national reputation for successful innovation and high-quality programs. You've got a lot to be proud of.

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