

UIS ready to open doors for first freshman class

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New Capital Scholars program attracts more than 100 students

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Thursday will be a historic day on the campus of the University of Illinois at Springfield, when, after more than a decade of effort, the university will welcome its first ever class of freshmen.

"We're excited," said James Stuart, director of the UIS Capital Scholars program. "This is going to be fun."

The university had hoped to recruit a first year class of 100 students for the program, and Stuart said a total of 119 students have paid their registration fees and are scheduled to show up Thursday.

"(The total) is quite remarkable for the first year," Stuart said.

The Capital Scholars program is targeted for a select group of students. Stuart said the initial class has an average ACT college entrance exam score of 25-26, and the students rank in the top 15-20 percent of their high school classes.

The students come from all over Illinois, including about 20 from Springfield and quite a few from other local communities, including Jacksonville, Beard-

stown, Petersburg and Lincoln.

Capital Scholars will all live on the UIS campus for their first two years of school. Construction of Lincoln Residence Hall, a new building built just for Capital Scholars, is nearing completion.

UIS was founded in 1970 as Sangamon State University and as an "upper division" university, with juniors, seniors and graduates but no freshmen and sophomores. The idea was that students would complete their first two years of college at community colleges before moving on to an upper division school to finish up.

The upper division concept never worked as well as it was hoped and has been abandoned by most of the schools that originally adopted it. Administrators at SSU/UIS began publicly discussing adding freshmen and sophomores there in the early 1990s, although there had been discussions of the idea on campus for some time before that.

It was assumed that the university would move to a full four-year undergraduate program when it became a part of the U of I system in 1995, but opposition from other colleges fearful of competition for freshmen delayed approval of the change until 1999.

As a result, the first UIS freshmen will be limited to

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the honors-type Capital Scholars program, but no one doubts that the day is not far off when the university begins admitting a more diverse population of freshmen.

Meanwhile, the first freshman class will all take a series of specially designed courses that will each be team-taught by five faculty members from different disciplines and that will look at topics and issues from multiple perspectives.

University officials hope the multidisciplinary, real world-oriented classes will become a model for lower division instruction nationally.

Stuart said UIS faculty and staff members have planned other activities

designed to foster a sense of community among the Capital Scholars themselves.

For example, after the first week of classes, a large group of Capital Scholars will go to St. Louis to visit the Missouri Botanical Garden, which will be celebrating its annual Japanese Festival. Although the outing is meant to be fun, Stuart said, two UIS botany professors will accompany the group to provide the possibility of an academic side to the trip.

Later that same weekend, most of the Capital Scholars will take a canoe trip on the Current River, in Missouri's Ozarks. Again, Stuart said, members of the UIS biology faculty will tag along to lend an academic note to the trip that is primarily "a chance to get to know each other better."

Other planned outings include trips to Pere Marquette State Park, Lincoln's New Salem, Cahokia, Dickson Mounds, Nauvoo and Chicago. Field

trips to sites closer to home, such as the Springfield Lincoln sites, also are planned, Stuart said.

Just as the outings will mix entertainment and academic elements, Stuart said, the line between what is in the classroom and what is outside it also will be blurred in the residence hall.

For example, when the students are studying the Great Depression and the Dustbowl era in the Southwest in class, the Friday night movie in the dorm will be "The Grapes of Wrath," and faculty members will be on hand to guide discussions that might be prompted by the movie — if the students are interested.

"We don't want to be heavy-handed about (mixing academics and entertainment)," Stuart said.

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