Southeastern Illinois College has a reputation for retaining some of the most top-notch talent from its district high schools – as 51 percent of such students from the Class of 2010 ended up enrolling at SIC in the fall.

For those students, the college provides direction, and a starting point for an abundant variety of career goals and dreams.

Southeastern did the same for Dr. Robert Holmes, Jr. – the college’s 2011 Distinguished Alumnus.

Currently serving as the National Flood Specialist for the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), Holmes saw a slight change of plans take place as he started off in higher education after graduating from Harrisburg High School in the spring of 1983.

“I had planned to play college baseball, and SIC offered that to me. However, my priorities changed as I got into my courses and found it a challenge to excel both in the classroom and baseball,” Holmes said.

“I really blossomed academically at SIC,” Holmes noted. “Although I did fine, I never did challenge myself academically while in high school. When I got into my freshman year at SIC, I found the whole experience of taking calculus, physics and chemistry to be a challenging – and rewarding – experience. My instructors (among them Sam Porter, Alan Morgan and Frank Schneider) were first rate, and really inspired me.”

After earning his Associate of Science degree from Southeastern in 1985, Holmes went on to earn bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Civil Engineering from the University of Missouri-Rolla (now the Missouri University of Science and Technology), and a PhD in Civil and Environmental Engineering from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Holmes worked in several positions with the USGS prior to his current one. He was a Hydraulic Engineer for the Missouri District from 1987-1994, a Hydrologist for the Illinois District from 1994-1996, the Chief of Network Operations for the Illinois District from 1996-1999, and the Director of the Illinois Water Science Center from 1999-2008, before becoming the National Flood Specialist in 2005. Holmes has also served as an adjunct professor of Civil Engineering at both of his four-year alma maters.

In his current position as National Flood Specialist, Holmes serves as the lead flood scientist for USGS flood, operational and scientific endeavors nationwide. He is a technical expert and consultant in complex flood investigations and studies nationwide, and also advises the USGS Associate Directors for Water and Hazards.

“I was – and remain – truly humbled to be chosen,” Holmes said of the Distinguished Alumnus notation.

Holmes will be the keynote speaker at Southeastern’s commencement exercises on Friday, May 13, expounding on his advice to students.

“I would tell them to stay true to their core values, be humble, look to serve others, and always keep learning.”