Freshman class most academically talented

A record number of students applied for admission to the 2009 fall freshman class. They also broke records academically, according to the UI admissions office. Average class rank and average ACT scores are the highest in UI history.

Applicants

- Total applicants: 26,057
- Offers of admission: 17,053
- Entering freshmen: 6,991

Academic Qualifications

- SAT composite (middle 50 percent): 1220–1490
- ACT composite (middle 50 percent): 26–31

Class rank (middle 50 percent)

- 85th to 96th percentile

ACT composite (middle 50 percent)

SAT composite (middle 50 percent)

Academic Qualifications

- Offers of admission: 17,053
- Applicants

Spring 2010
Spanish may be the most sought-after of all language skills by employers, according to undergraduate adviser Beth Chasco.

Andracki, a global studies major from Fairmount, Ill., and Anna Rose Floeter, a linguistics major from Evanston, Ill., join the Mary McCormack, right, leads the Mi Pueblo Spanish language conversation table at Caffe Paradiso coffee shop in Urbana. Thaddeus Japanese company in the United States.

Mica, a junior from Oaklawn, Ill., studying East Asian languages and cultures. Macas, a junior from Oaklawn, Ill., studying East Asian languages and cultures.

His skills are improving. Recently studying in Hawaii, he was able to strike up a conversation with some Japanese tourists. The experience may lead him to pursue a career in tourism, he said. Attending the conversation tables lets him use real-world applications of Japanese that are hard to delve into in class.

"You can get trapped in your head trying to put together some grand epic phrase, but it won't help when you're carrying on an actual conversation."

-- Andrew Macas, a junior from Oaklawn, Ill., on the value of conversation tables

"Let's talk"

continued from page 1

She's of Korean descent, but has come to know about her heritage more from her own study rather than from home. She'd like to become a translator or teach in Korea.

"I really love it," she said. "I was tentative at first, but (the conversation) drew me out of my shell."

Other heritage speakers – all of Korean descent – included Jae Kim, a sophomore biochemistry major from Elgin, Ill.; Stephanie Kim, a sophomore in art history and advertising from Schaumburg, Ill.; and Chris Park, a junior in communication and informatics from Cary, Ill.

The three are brushing up on skills they couldn't learn in class.

In class, there is more group discussion, said Stephanie Kim. Jae Kim said in those discussions, you only get to talk about basic concepts, such as food.

"I'd like to be able to use Korean in my career," Park said.

"I want to come up with my family members using less and less English." McCormack said with a laugh.

The afternoon of Feb. 2 saw a room in the Foreign Languages Building full of students practicing another Asian language, Japanese.

Among those attending the session was Andrew Macas, a junior from Oaklawn, Ill., studying East Asian languages and cultures.

Macas loves Japanese because it's so different from most other language offerings, and because he was introduced to it at a young age when he became interested in anime and Pokemon.

He has what he called "survival" fluency, but would like to enhance his speaking skills so that he could one day teach English in Japan or work for a Japanese company in the United States.

"More students take it because they want to play games and read comics in Japanese," she said with a laugh.

About 200 students study the language in any given semesters.

SPANISH

Some 400 students at the UI are majoring in Spanish and many more take Spanish classes.

It may be one of the most sought-after of all language skills by employers, according to Beth Chasco, undergraduate adviser for Spanish majors and minors.

Companies often call her office seeking applicants who are fluent, she said.

"Our graduates are being solicited for anything from finance to environmental issues," Chasco said. "Companies often tell us, 'We can teach the job skills but we can't teach language proficiency.'"

One graduate recently was hired by Proctor & Gamble because of her Spanish fluency.

"She was hired because she spent a year abroad in Barcelona," Chasco said.

Another recent graduate was applying to law schools and had obtained a summer internship only because she was fluent in Spanish.

Those who want to gain fluency can attend a Spanish conversation table session nearly any day of the week. It's called Mi Pueblo. The group is coordinated online on a Facebook site by sophomore Mary McCormack, 20, of La Grange Park, Ill.

The sessions are laid back and are often organized according to speaking ability. "It's the practical Spanish you'd be using in everyday life," McCormack said. "It's usually pretty casual. It's the conversation you would have in English, but in Spanish. In class it's more analyzing literary texts and grammar.

Although the sessions could be good grade boosters, most of the people who attend the tables are motivated students. "A lot of people probably already have good grades because they're already dedicated to learning a language," she said.  

"You can get trapped in your head trying to put together some grand epic phrase, but it won't help when you're carrying on an actual conversation."

-- Andrew Macas, a junior from Oaklawn, Ill.
As alternative to having a car on campus, Zipcars make lots of cents

By Anna K. Herkamp

Whether their motivation is saving almost $600 a year in parking fees or decreasing their carbon footprints, UI students have an affordable, practical option to having a car on campus.

The UI transportation department and the Champaign-Urbana Mass Transit District last year began to offer the community a car-sharing program called Zipcar. The company, which now has about 500 members in the area, allows users to pay for the use of a car only when they need it. “We want people to give up a car,” said Morgan B. Johnston, a transportation demand management coordinator in the UI Facilities and Services division.

“Don’t bring a car to campus – there’s absolutely no need for a student to have a car on campus,” Johnston said.

Johnston said the program, also available to UI faculty, staff and community members, is gaining in popularity and has 10 cars available for rent in increments as short as a half-hour or as long as four days.

The combination of transportation options available to students makes paying several hundreds of dollars to park unnecessary. In addition to Zipcar, the campus offers free MTD bus access and a friendly environment for walkers and bikers, Johnston said.

Undergraduates are catching on to the Zipcar idea.

Christie Gill, 21, a junior in the College of Applied Health Sciences from Chicago, has found that not having a car on campus is no problem.

“I take advantage of the Zipcar when I need to travel somewhere immediately and quick,” she said. “Since I don’t have a car it really comes in handy to rent one so fast and easy, especially since there are a few locations on campus.”

To rent a Zipcar, Gill reserves one online. She travels by bus to the Illinois Terminal, the intermodal transportation hub in downtown Champaign, to claim her car. Her membership card unlocks the car in the lot. The keys are inside each car.

Gill says the program offers considerable value for the cost. Members pay $35 up front, which can pay for $35 worth of rental fees for the first month.

Most car rentals would require the lessee to be 21 years old, but Zipcar members can be as young as 18 if they’re UI students.

Zipcar members also avoid paying down payments and insurance fees of $200 or more, she added. “And you don’t have to worry about gas because it’s already included,” Gill said. Gas is paid for with a credit card kept inside each car.

Zipcar membership also covers insurance costs and precludes car maintenance and repairs. Members pay any parking fees associated with their usage.

“I will say that having a Zipcar is very convenient,” Gill said. “It’s just paying the rental fee that is the disadvantage. Everything else is a positive advantage in having a membership.”

Huong Phu, 22, of Wheaton, Ill., a senior in the College of Applied Health Sciences, usually gets around town by bus. There are times, however, when she finds that she needs a car.

“I take advantage of it when I want to go somewhere that the bus would either be inconvenient or it just doesn’t take me there,” she said.

“I also use it when I have to do multiple errands by Market Street, or just buy groceries – since it’s a pain to walk back from County Market on campus to my place or from the bus stop. She also has taken advantage of her Zipcar membership when she has out-of-town visitors and getting around by bus is difficult. And she uses it for occasional trips to the Tuscola outlet mall, about 30 minutes south of campus.

Phu has not had a car on campus, but feels that Zipcar provides most of the convenience of having one without incurring so much extra cost. Sometimes she has to adjust her plans to the car availability.

“It’s a good program,” she said. “It’s a great alternative to having a car on campus. Even if I had a car on campus, I don’t think I would use one that much. With Zipcar, I only use it when I really need it.”

The UI and MTD worked together to convince the company to locate here. Most Zipcar locales are in larger cities, including Boston, Chicago and New York.

The campus atmosphere also provides an appropriate location.

“This can save students so much money by not bringing their own car,” Johnston said. “They still have all the convenience of using a car when they need it and they’re not paying for something to sit in a parking lot when they’re at school.”

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Career Center offers tools for every step of career-discovery, search process

By Craig Chamberlain

E
even while working toward the goal of a degree, at some point students must contemplate the future and a career, and for some it can be overwhelming. Some may panic early, trying to settle on the right major, or determining how that major might lead to a career. Some may panic late, having no idea where to start in finding that first job, or writing that first résumé, or preparing for that first interview.

And that’s even before they consider the mistaken belief that there are no jobs as a result of some have labeled the "Great Recession." But in the same way iPhone commercials describe a need and then declare “there’s an app for that,” the Career Center at the UI has services and tools for every student at every stage of the career-discovery or job-search process.

What’s important, however, is understanding it’s a process, says Gail Rooney, the director of the center. “We really encourage parents to have students come see us early,” she said. One reason is to help assure students that they don’t have to feel pressure to make all the important decisions immediately.

“The hardest thing is for parents to think ‘I make a decision now, it’s going to be for the rest of my life.’ And that makes it hard to make a decision,” she said.

For the undecided or unsure freshman, getting started on the career process might mean attending a center-hosted workshop such as “Finding a Major That Fits.” Or spending time on the center-designed online site EPICS (for Exploring Pathways in Career Success) or in the center’s Resource Center. Or scheduling a 45-minute appointment with one of the center’s career counselors, who can help students define their skills and interests, and where those might lead.

Rooney advises students – even those confident of their major or direction – to explore and get involved in other ways too: pursuing interests and new activities outside class, joining organizations, volunteering, seeking out internships, networking.

“My role for networking is to start with friends of parents and parents of your friends,” she said. The goal is to both learn about careers and develop contacts that might help lead to a future job, she said.

It all aids in the process of self-discovery, she said, which can aid in the process of determining what fits for a future career.

“Every step of the way, they’re finding out something,” she said. And many of those activities also will add to a résumé.

As students determine their direction and move closer to graduation, they can find other valuable services through the center, some of them made possible by fellow students.

Numerous workshops on résumés, interviewing, internships, networking and other topics are conducted by undergraduates. Those same undergraduates also advise fellow students on their résumés and cover letters through a drop-in, one-on-one critiquing service offered five times a week at the Career Center and Undergraduate Library, and once a week at nine other locations.

The students are part of the center’s Outreach Team, a group of about 25 trained and paid student staffs.

Nick Wood, a sophomore from Crystal Lake, Ill., majoring in French and linguistics, is a member of the current team, serving as its student coordinator. He found out about the opportunity during the second semester of his freshman year, when looking for a part-time job.

“It sounded more appealing” than other possibilities, he said, and he saw the benefits of the training – not only the content, but learning how to speak in public, give presentations and gain other professional skills. Those were similar to the motivations of team members Mark Aguirre, a senior from Plainfield, Ill., majoring in political science, and Izael Labao, a pre-med senior from Oak Brook, Ill., majoring in psychology and Spanish.

Wood said the team sees its share of students intimidated by the résumé process and not knowing where to start, sometimes showing up with nothing on paper only an hour before a career fair.

One common theme is students discounting their work experience, he said. They also fall into using “résumé jargon,” instead of clearly describing what they learned or demonstrated through the job, Wood said.

“Students sell themselves short, especially on résumés,” Aguirre said. They also fall into using “résumé jargon,” instead of clearly describing their experience, he said.

Labao said students often also sell themselves short by writing a résumé once, maybe for a career fair, and never revising it, or by never letting someone knowledgeable critique it.

Just as students have a resource for résumé preparation, they have another resource for interview preparation – and that’s where another set of students, in this case, graduate students, have an important role to play in another Career Center service: mock interviews.

The School of Labor and Employment Relations at the UI is among the highest ranked graduate programs in the country educating students for careers in human resources. Since interviewing others is an important skill they need to develop, that makes the matching of LER mock interviewers with undergraduate mock interviewers ideal.

LER students “have a genuine interest in the program and in perfecting their own skills through the program,” says Caroline Bobrecki, an LER student from New Lenox, Ill., who coordinates about 40 students conducting as many as 40 mock interviews a week. “It’s a learning experience for themselves as much as for the interviewees,” Bobrecki said.

Among her recent interviewees was Anna Volkova, a sophomore from Schaumberg, Ill., majoring in consumer economics. Anticipating law school, and with an interest in a career in international trade, Volkova had been unsuccessful in her first attempts at applying for several student business organizations on campus. Interviews had been a key part of the application process for each, and she thought maybe her interviewing skills could use some help.

“I thought I knew what my flaws in an interview might be, but I wanted to hear someone else’s perspective,” Volkova said. “I came in just to tease out those flaws and just get more practice and be more comfortable in an interview situation.”

Bobrecki conducted the mock interview and then gave Volkova feedback on how to answer questions more directly and avoid distracting mannerisms. And Volkova found success in a second application with a business organization. “I think everyone should take advantage of (this resource), because no matter what field you want to go into in the future, everyone’s going to have to interview,” she said.

As her example demonstrates, students need not wait until their senior year to do a mock interview, and Bobrecki said they are free to do more than one.  

Among the items in the Career Center’s toolbox:

• Career Center staff members offer workshops on such topics as “Exploring Careers in the Federal Government,” “Understanding Non-Profit Organizations,” “Anatomy of a Successful Pre-Health Student” and “Exploring Graduate School Options.” New this semester are workshops on “LinkedIn,” the online professional networking site, which is offering its own incentives to pull students onto the site. In all, between student- and staff-led workshops, the center offers workshops on more than 20 topics.

• With the UI Alumni Association, the center sponsors the Illini Internship Program, which matches alumni with students in job-shadowing experiences that take place over spring break.

• Online, the center also offers I-LINK for accessing job and internship databases, setting up alerts for jobs matching a set criteria, making appointments with on-campus recruiters, and filing résumés in electronic form where employers can view them.

• In addition to the Career Center, many other units on campus offer career services specialized in placing their graduates. All campus career services are linked through the Illinois Career Services Network (www.careerservices.illinois.edu).
Pollination fascination awaits visitors to campus prairie museum

By Diana Yates

B irds do it. Bees do it. Even some mice and tree shrews do it. Pollination, a marvel of the natural world and a service that supports scores of food crops, rarely gets the attention it deserves, however.

A facility on the south end of campus aims to remedy this lack of appreciation. The Pollinatarium, the first free-standing science museum of its kind in the U.S., is a little schoolhouse on the prairie devoted exclusively to the plants, insects and other animals that work together to make pollination possible.

The one-room museum, with adjacent prairie and gardens, has a lot to offer, said UI entomology professor and department head May Berenbaum, the founder and director of the facility.

“The Pollinatarium’s take on the ‘birds and the bees,’ while not X-rated, is definitely not just for children,” she said. “Everyone – even seasoned biologists – can learn something about pollination by visiting.”

The museum hosts a wrap-around exterior mural of flowers and pollinators painted by Glen Davies, an Urbana resident and UI alumnus. The interior is filled with bold and bright exhibits designed and built by researchers and staff members of the Illinois Natural History Survey with the help of entomology faculty members and students. Many of the exhibits are interactive, offering visitors a chance to match clues and answers to questions about pollination, label bee parts, or construct a puzzle depicting the interior of a bee hive.

The honey bee plays a central role in the museum. There are exhibits on the history of beekeeping and the anatomy of bees, along with displays of a beekeeper’s tools and protective gear. In warmer months, visitors can view a working hive through a glass wall and watch foraging bees come and go through a tube to the outside world. Inside the hive, the queen bee is marked with a red dot and go through a tube to the outside world. Inside

Honey bees may rule, but many other pollinators – birds, bats, rodents, flies, wasps and more – are also celebrated in the museum. A panel in the exhibit describes the astounding migration of monarch butterflies from Canada and the U.S. to their overwintering grounds in central and southern Mexico. Large photographs, drawings and paintings help visitors distinguish the different insects, birds and mammals that act as pollinators and the plants that they prefer.

One prominent photograph, of the tube-lipped nectar bat, Amoura fistulata, extending its tongue to drink sugared water through a clear tube, gives viewers a sense of the weird and wonderful adaptations that have occurred between pollinators and the flowers they visit.

“I really love this photo because the bat’s tongue is so long,” said Allen Lawrance, a junior in entomology and a member of the Pollinatarium staff.

When unfurled, A. fistulata’s tongue (also called a proboscis) stretches longer than its body. When not in use, the tongue retracts all the way to the bat’s rib cage. This adaptation allows it to extract nectar from the large tube-like flower of the plant species Centropogon migratorius. The bat is the only known pollinator of this plant.

Lawrence, a 20-year-old Champaign resident who hopes to pursue a career in entomology, caught

As a kid I used to go to Meadowbrook Park (in Urbana) all the time to catch insects. I also had a pond in my backyard so I would dig through the scum and look for dragonfly nymphs,” he said.

“I think that the Pollinatarium is important because there are kids who really like insects like I did,” he said. “This type of resource wasn’t here when I was a kid so it was hard for me to find a way to explore my interests more.”

The grounds are another attraction, Lawrence said. A broad swath of prairie plants allows visitors to capture, study and release living insects just outside the door of the museum. A structure nearby, a small, arched greenhouse, will soon be made into a “shade house” with free-flying pollinating moths, allowing visitors an up-close view of some of these important – and often overlooked – pollinators. A garden, still in development, offers plants that attract pollinators. In warmer months a hummingbird feeder is perched nearby.

Students from local schools make regular field trips to the Pollinatarium. Adults and older children also broaden their pollinator knowledge by attending lectures offered by researchers from the university and the Illinois Natural History Survey. The lecture series, called “Pollination Fascination,” includes topics such as “The Butterflies of Illinois,” “Honey Bees as Engineers,” and “Honey: From Nectar to Nutraceutical.”

“Given that close to 400,000 species on the planet are engaged in the process of pollination, it’s remarkable how little attention it receives,” Berenbaum said. “The UI Pollinatarium aims to shine a well-earned spotlight on one of the most important ecological interactions on the planet.”

For more information, visit the Pollinatarium Web site: http://www.life.illinois.edu/pollinatarium.
Looking at life through another lens
Industrial designers design products for all of us

By Sharrita Forrest

To understand another person's perspective, you have to walk a mile in their shoes or view a situation through their eyes – or perhaps not be able to walk or see at all, according to a course in the School of Art+Design.

The interdisciplinary course “Disability + Relevant Design” gives students interested in industrial design the opportunity to change lives by developing and redesigning products that enhance quality of life for people with or without disabilities.

An assistive device developed by Stephen Diebold, a senior majoring in industrial design, and his research partner, alumnus Jonathan Ko, recently tied for the $25,000 grand prize in the National Inventors Hall of Fame Foundation Collegiate Inventors Competition.

“Design is a way of life, and so is this course,” said Deana McDonagh, a professor of industrial design, a co-developer and co-teacher of the course. “It’s about looking at life through another lens, through a new perspective. It’s looking at mundane, everyday activities and making them extraordinary by small – but hugely significant – design improvements.”

The guiding principle of the course is empathic design research, which immerses designers in other people’s work, social, educational and personal environments to gain a holistic view of how they interact with, think about and feel about technologies.

“All of us are a breath away from having our abilities taken away – partially, temporarily or permanently” by aging, disease or accident.

A lot of the general population, especially kids, have no clue what it’s like to have a disability,” said Schneider, who is 51, lives in Champaign and uses a service dog to get around. “By being in the class, I hope to get information out there about what it’s like to be disabled, about the things a disabled individual has to go through every single day just to function, and how we live.

“I would like to see students looking for ways that they can help others, definitely in the design world, but also in day-to-day life. I think this class is making students more aware of students with disabilities, which is a good thing.”

Ko and Schneider were among several students who answered the Division of Disability Resources and Educational Services’ invitation for volunteers with disabilities to assist designers enrolled in the course during its inaugural semester in fall 2007.

“We were told to find the obstacles in the everyday lives of our partners and create an object or an adaptation to an existing technology to help them conquer those obstacles,” said Diebold, who was a sophomore when he took the course. Ko was then a graduate student in the College of Law.

During the 10-week course, Diebold shadowed Ko – and Schneider’s partner shadowed her – for several weeks to assess their needs.

Ko, who has quadriplegia from a spinal cord injury in a swimming accident more than a decade ago, uses a power chair for mobility and assistive devices such as head pointers and mouth pointers to type, operate switches and perform other tasks.

Ko isn’t entirely happy with head pointers, which require the help of an assistant to put on and take off between tasks and are conspicuous to wear, he said. Additionally, using a mouth stick, which is a rod connected to a mouth guard held between the teeth, sometimes causes cramps in his jaws and damaged a tooth to the point that it required a root canal.

Diebold briefly considered modifying a head pointer to type, operate switches and perform other tasks.

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— Deana McDonagh, industrial design professor
During empathy exercises, freshmen Bruno Principe, left, eats a bagel without benefit of his hands, and Kevin Wu experiences diminished vision with special glasses. Diebold, held Oct. 20 in Chicago, where the device Inventors Hall of Fame Collegiate Competition with Ventilation system will be updated, including new energy conservation equipment. Scheduled to conclude in October 2010.

The prototype that Diebold created, and continues to refine, began with an acrylic rod attached to a football chin guard. The device, called the Drop, is affixed to an elastic band that is worn around their neck and operate with their chin. The navigation watch sprang from Schneider’s own frustration with finding the classrooms where her classes would meet at the start of each semester.

“After struggling for years, I realized that products needn’t be so badly designed. If we continue to struggle with poorly designed products, they gradually strip us of dignity.”

For the spring semester, there are 22 students enrolled in the course, which is open to undergraduate and graduate students of all majors interested in industrial design and disability issues. At the end of the course, students’ designs are displayed at the Illini Union Art Gallery in an exhibition called “Disability+Design.”

The course and art exhibition evolved from conversations among McDonagh; M. Lydia Khuri, a program coordinator in the university’s Housing Division; and Susan Sears, a DRIS disability specialist, about developing programming on disability issues for “If These Walls...” an annual campus program focused on diversity and social-justice issues. Khuri, McDonagh, Sears and industrial design professor Joyce Thomas co-teach the course.

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Trelease Hall (part of Florida Avenue halls): $1.6 million
Outdated elevator equipment and technology will be replaced, improving safety and fulfilling requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Scheduled to conclude August 2011.

Medical Sciences Buildings: $3.5 million
Ventilation system will be updated, including new energy conservation equipment. Scheduled to conclude in October 2010.

Ewers Laboratory: $1 million
Main electrical service will be replaced with unit substation to bring power from other buildings to distribute throughout the facility, more than doubling electrical capacity. Scheduled to conclude in July 2010.

Diebold, a 21-year-old senior majoring in industrial design, and his research partner, Schneider’s partner created for her; a tool with a plunger-like device that can grasp objects of varying sizes and shapes; and a waterproof shower cushion that attaches to the shower stall wall so the user can lean against it for support while showering or shampooing their hair.

Schneider, a senior majoring in sculpture, is developing a campus navigation system in watch form. The user speaks into the watch or types in room and building names and the device directs them to their destination with on-screen or audible instructions.

The navigation watch sprang from Schneider’s own frustration with finding the classrooms where her classes would meet at the start of each semester.

“The students with disabilities bring a new life experience, a new vernacular to the course,” McDonagh said. “When you hear them explain how they’re feeling, it’s powerful. They find a voice when they realize that products needn’t be so badly designed. If we continue to struggle with poorly designed products, they gradually strip us of dignity.”

For the spring semester, there are 22 students enrolled in the course, which is open to undergraduate and graduate students of all majors interested in industrial design and disability issues. At the end of the course, students’ designs are displayed at the Illini Union Art Gallery in an exhibition called “Disability+Design.” The course and art exhibition evolved from conversations among McDonagh; M. Lydia Khuri, a program coordinator in the university’s Housing Division; and Susan Sears, a DRIS disability specialist, about developing programming on disability issues for “If These Walls...” an annual campus program focused on diversity and social-justice issues. Khuri, McDonagh, Sears and industrial design professor Joyce Thomas co-teach the course.

Far left, teaching assistant Mike Elwell takes his turn playing Pictionary with sophomore Caroline Hill and junior Matt Walters, both wearing vision-distorting glasses, during empathy exercises. Left, senior Kelly Sator loses use of her arms in class.
Just say ‘Ahhhhhh-some’

Student-run medical screenings aim to fill health-care gap for area poor

By Phil Ciciora

With the struggling economy only worsening an already precarious health-care situation for those without insurance, a student organization at the UI seeks to act as a social safety net and fill the health-care gap for the campus community’s less fortunate.

The Illini Medical Screening Society is a registered student organization with more than 100 members who volunteer their time to provide free medical screening for low-income and uninsured residents of Champaign County.

Grant Reed, a senior majoring in molecular and cellular biology from Ottawa, Ill., and founder of the IMSS, says he created the organization to provide medical screening and community-based health-care education to prevent disease.

“We provide patients with a basic bill-of-health screening, which means we test for hypertension, diabetes and high cholesterol, to educe further complicate coronary heart disease, kidney and retinal damage as well as indicate future risk of heart attack and stroke,” he said.

Lacie Durand, a senior majoring in molecular and cellular biology from Dunlap, Ill., who is also vice president of screening setup for the IMSS, says setting up a semester’s worth of screening usually requires a fair amount of administrative work outside of her regular course work.

“We expect about eight screenings per semester, that means our organization has to find eight different screening locations and physicians or another type of health-care professional who would be willing to volunteer with us,” she said.

Students, Durand said, are not legally able to diagnose or interpret test results for patients.

“That’s why we need a health-care professional on hand at each screening to provide that service to our patients for us,” she said. “It takes a lot of work to find and schedule physicians in the area who are willing to volunteer.”

The events this semester will be at churches, health centers and food drives in the Champaign-Urbana area.

“Outside of the Chicago area, Champaign-Urbana is arguably one of the fastest growing regions of poverty within the state,” Reed said. “There are more than 100,000 residents, 40 percent of whom either have Medicaid or have no insurance at all, with severely limited access to primary and specialty health-care services. We try to tailor our events to serve the most vulnerable members of our community — namely, the poor and uninsured.”

Grant said membership in the IMSS is open to any undergraduate willing to complete a few requirements: There’s a small membership fee, and a mandatory two-session training course, with additional training sessions spread throughout the semester. By the end of their training, students are certified to handle blood-borne pathogens, and are also able to administer a finger-stick glucose test for diabetes and take a patient’s blood pressure.

It’s a significant time commitment designed to filter out those who aren’t committed.

“We want to make sure they’re knowledgeable and confident enough in their abilities before they step into the screening environment,” Reed said. “We want them to understand everything that goes into the medical-screening process.”

Throughout the semester, members also work as volunteers at some of the screening-location venues.

“If it’s a food drive, our members work at the food drive,” Reed said. “So not only are we screening, we’re also helping out with volunteer work as well. It’s a unique service opportunity for any undergraduate who is looking to give back to the community.”

Sophia Li, a sophomore majoring in molecular and cellular biology from Vernon Hills, Ill., is the president of the IMSS. She says that working at her first IMSS event last fall was eye-opening.

“Looking back on it, I was so unaware of the conditions some people had to go through just to get basic health care,” she said. “At the screenings, I’m learning about public health issues like diabetes and cholesterol. It has definitely broadened my horizons.”

Durand, who will attend nursing school next year, says students looking to get hands-on experience working with patients will benefit from volunteering with the IMSS.

“If you intend to have a career in health care, then having this experience is definitely an advantage,” she said. “It is intimidating working with your first patient. But once you get more experience and practice you become more comfortable with it. People are really grateful, and that’s very gratifying to know that you’re helping people who really need this.”

Reed says he welcomes student volunteers of all majors and backgrounds to join the group.

“Anyone can join – it’s not just a group for pre-med students,” he said. “We always need students to help with our budget, public relations and other behind-the-scenes administrative work. Students who can speak Spanish are also a huge help.”

Reed, who hopes to attend medical school and eventually become a physician serving a rural or underserved community, says volunteering with the IMSS is a good way for students to gain the kind of extra-curricular experience in health care that medical schools look for in a prospective student’s application.

Li, who hopes to be an orthopedic surgeon, says she came to Illinois not entirely sure if she wanted to pursue medicine as a career. But volunteering with the IMSS has only helped to strengthen her commitment to her future career.

“It attracted me in that I actually got to do something that was hands-on and I could interact with patients,” she said. “I could work with fellow students in the same gale as me, and figure out what I wanted to do and if medicine is something I really wanted to pursue.”

The experience also has helped her become more passionate about medicine and public health.

“I feel that a lot of pre-medicine students are taking classes without realizing what they’re getting into,” Li said. “They know what classes to take, and the process of getting into medical school, but I’m not sure they really know what the health-care field is about. This organization helps you understand the realities on the ground, not only what it’s like to be uninsured, but also how a local health-care system works.”

“Ultimately, volunteers serve as an integral part of a free clinic which serves as a wonderful people,”

This whole experience has made me so much more knowledgeable about health care,” Reed said.

“We’re seeing first hand what the less fortunate have to go through in order to stay healthy.”

Ahhhhhh-some
Study Abroad program a springboard for careers, memories
By Jan Dennis

Dan Brencic studied in easy classrooms during his first two years at Illinois, getting an arm's-length look at the world's health-care challenges from lectures and textbooks. His lessons turned real during an eight-month study-abroad program in sub-Saharan Africa that put him to work in an impoverished region facing daily struggles with malnutrition, an HIV-AIDS epidemic and a host of other life-threatening problems.

"Now, international health isn't something I think I want to do, it's something I know I want to do," said Brencic, 22, of Brookfield, Ill., who will graduate in May with a degree in community health. "I've lived it. Once you've seen the suffering, you can't turn your back on it." The program that sent Brencic to Kenya is among more than 250 offered annually through the Study Abroad Office at the UI, where the number of students studying overseas ranks among the top 10 universities nationwide. Programs range from language courses in foreign classrooms that can last a week to once-in-a-lifetime opportunities outside the classroom. His spare time included white-water rafting on the Nile River, a tour of genocide sites in Rwanda and wild game drives that spotted packs of zebra, rhinoceros and hippopotamus.

Brencic also was on hand for history, watching huge celebrations erupt when President Obama - whose father is Kenyan - was elected and inaugurated. He met Sarah Obama, the third wife of Obama's grandfather whom the president calls "Ganny Sarah." "She told me that I know more Swahili than our president," Brencic said, laughing. "That's my claim to fame."

Nussbaum, who studied in Japan during college and has led the Study Abroad Office for two years, says the program provides a unique opportunity for academic and cultural experiences that students may never have again after graduation.

"Life happens, children come, careers develop," he said. "I've met huge numbers of people who say they regret not making the time to go while they were in college and had the freedom." Some students likely miss out on the chance to study abroad because of a misguided notion about costs, Nussbaum said. But he says a range of programs cost no more than studying on campus and some are cheaper.

Brencic says his two semesters in Kenya, including travel, cost about the same as a year on the Urbana-Champaign campus because the cost of living in Africa is significantly lower. Living with host families, for example, trimmed his housing costs. In Nairobi, his urban home had Internet access, but there was no running water or indoor plumbing in Kismu, where he took bucket showers and boiled rainwater to drink.

Brencic says those personal experiences and his interactions with suffering Kenyans only reinforced a career goal to help the less fortunate that grew from a service mission to Belize during his high school years.

"I'm the definition of privilege, but there are many people in this world who have not had the opportunities that I did," he said. "The term 'poor college student' gets thrown around a lot. But we're still a lot better off than the majority of the world."

Brencic now works part-time in the Study Abroad Office, speaking to students about opportunities and advising students who inquire about the program. "Knowledge is power, but sharing that knowledge is empowerment," he said. "It's no good for me to have this experience if I don't share the story."

Nussbaum says overseas studies have evolved over the last half century from predominantly language-based courses at foreign universities. Work-study programs such as Brencic's are more common, often partnering with private companies, non-profit agencies or other universities. He says Brencic and other students who have studied abroad are among the best ambassadors for the program, helping spread the word about new opportunities.

"They come back changed people, they come back more interesting people and they tell their friends," Nussbaum said.
The lack of affordable, high-quality on-campus day care programs that cater to undergraduate students who double as parents is a stealth issue that has the potential to harm both the student-parent and the child, says a UI expert in early childhood education.

According to Brent McBride, a professor of human development at Illinois, the college drop-out rates of traditional undergraduate students — college freshmen who have just transitioned from high school — who are also full-time parents is a growing problem in the U.S. One that’s further exacerbated by the dearth of acceptable child care options for students pursuing a bachelor’s degree.

“The student-parents themselves are also at a very vulnerable stage of their own personal development,” he said. “That only amplifies the concern we have for these students.”

“If you’re a student-parent, you’re at greater risk of not succeeding at any type of institution of higher education simply because you’re a parent, and the hardships and hurdles are that much higher,” McBride said.

While their friends and peers are attending class, studying and completing homework assignments, student-parents must do all that plus raise a child. A growing number of their peers are traditional undergraduate students, so there’s no organization to support them, and no way for them to congregate and seek out others in their situation,” he said.

The faculty at a traditional college or university is also usually in the dark about a student’s parental responsibilities outside of class.

“Now are student-parents supposed to complete group assignments if they have to take care of a child? Not being able to participate in normal undergraduate activities only serves to further isolate them, which in turn leaves them at greater risk of dropping out and not earning a degree.”

Faced with a choice between raising a child or pursuing a degree, McBride says student-parents usually have no choice but to drop out and go home, what many educators and economists see as a key problem.

“The lifelong trajectory of these students is, once they transition to adulthood, they don’t finish school,” he said. “And with the economy the way it is, this is a very vulnerable demographic. Their job prospects are really hamstrung.”

Having an on-campus day care center for undergraduate student-parents not only benefits the student who eventually graduates with a bachelor’s degree, it also benefits the child.

“It helps the student-parent, because it’s one less thing they have to juggle,” McBride said. “Trying to balance school and parenting is a tough thing to balance, especially if you’re a young single parent. But day care also benefits the child in multiple ways.”

Research overwhelmingly suggests that high-quality child care has a significant positive impact on the development of young children’s language and pre-math skills, along with other soft skills such as self-control, socialization and cooperative play.

A campus-based day care center could also leverage university resources easier than a commercial day care center.

“If there’s a language delay, for example, we can tap into campus expertise in that area,” McBride said. “If there’s dysfunctional parenting, we can step in and make referrals to campus resources to help with parenting.”

Campus-based day care facilities also offer better quality controls than profit-oriented child care programs. Research consistently indicates that as much as 40 to 60 percent of all child care in the United States has been deemed sub-standard — “so sub-standard that it’s harming the child rather than helping,” McBride said.

“For better or worse, the quality of community-based child care programs is not always what we would want it to be,” he said. “Having federal dollars being poured into something that’s less than optimal from the child care perspective, that could actually be to the detriment of the child, is not a good investment of taxpayer dollars.”

A good investment is one that’s made in human capital. That means valuing and supporting those who are unable to complete a college degree simply because of a child-care issue is, from a social justice perspective, a tragic mistake to make, McBride said.

“If a person has the human capital to go to college, we’ve got to help them cultivate that potential,” he said. “We need to encourage parents to be good parents, to be productive members of society and to be able to provide for their children. If you take away the opportunity for higher education, they’re not going to be able to provide. We don’t want to take away those opportunities. The consequences are just too great.”

To help low-income undergraduate student-parents complete their studies, the Child Development Laboratory at Illinois is accepting undergraduate student-parents and their children into the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program.

Funding for the program was provided by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education.
Dear Parents,

Last spring I was invited to talk to a group of students completing one of the many innovative programs we offer at our Illinois Leadership Center. In the course of my remarks I spoke of some of the characteristics of a leader — vision, courage of conviction, organizational understanding, integrity, the ability to work with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

Leadership is more important than ever. As Illinois alumnus and University of Southern California President Steve Sample writes in his book “A Contrarian’s View to Leadership,” “Of all the different kinds of human capital, leadership may well be the most rare and precious.” However, I should have included an additional characteristic that I believe also will serve young women and men well — an ability to deal with uncertainty because uncertainty very much defines our current environment.

At the administrative level we just don’t have a sense of the extent to which the state of Illinois will be able to provide the financial resources committed to the 2010 appropriation to higher education. There is no doubt that uncertainty does permeate the university, and I know all members of our community — faculty and staff members, students and local business owners — feel it to some extent.

As is the case with all public universities in the state, we face a cash crisis. In the current fiscal year, which began July 1, 2009, we have only received 18 percent of our annual appropriation from the state. As I write this letter, the state of Illinois owes the university more than $475 million of its appropriation. That number increases every month.

As a response, we have instituted a number of measures on campus to ensure that we have the necessary resources to get through the semester with an eye to confronting a similar fiscal shortfall in the next fiscal year. Our faculty and administrative staff began mandatory furloughs in February. (A furlough is a leave of absence without pay.) We also have been cutting costs at all levels of the university, and we are looking at ways we can consolidate services to garner even more savings. Finally, we continue to draw on cash reserves, but these are finite and we can no longer continue to go down this path.

Please understand that we are doing everything we can to protect our students — our number one priority — from the impact of these cost-cutting measures. We believe that each fiscal decision we make must not compromise the education of this state’s greatest assets, its daughters and sons.

Yet, I want to be straightforward with you: These are perhaps the hardest fiscal times this 143-year-old university has ever faced. Our core land-grant mission of teaching, research and public service is under threat. The state of Illinois is facing an unprecedented cash crisis and, as goes the state, so goes our university.

Let me give you one example how this cash crisis does affect Illinois’ bright young women and men. The current gap between what families need to attend our university and what we can offer in financial aid is somewhere in the neighborhood of $64 million.

If we increase tuition by 10 percent, that gap increases next year by $16 million to $80 million.

Taking these figures into account we currently need an increase in financial aid support of somewhere around $16.5 million to hold harmless our neediest students and families. And those neediest students and families are increasingly becoming the middle class.

But all of these mighty challenges hold opportunities to create the future for the University of Illinois. When I say create the future I am talking about a leaner, even more focused university, poised to contribute even more in addressing the educational needs of young women and men as they assume leadership positions and tackle the great challenges of our state, the nation and the world.

And in the challenging years to come we will need their leadership more than ever.

Sincerely,

Robert A. Easter
Interim Chancellor