STUDENTS ENGAGED IN THE COMMUNITY
Students making a positive impact

For many local residents, Illinois State University students represent a large and mobile group of young people who pour into the community each August and retreat to their hometowns the following May. Lost in that ebb and flow are the facts that more than 7,000 Illinois State students attend summer classes and more than 1,500 students call McLean County their permanent home.

More important is the tremendous positive impact Illinois State University students make in the community during the school year. Too often, the headlines focus on the tensions that can be caused when more than 20,000 young men and women live in close proximity to each other. But Illinois State places a great value on positive student engagement – the relationship students have with their university community – actually making that partnership one of the core values under the University’s strategic plan, Educating Illinois.

Ours was the first public university in the state to offer a civic engagement and responsibility minor, combining classroom work with off-campus working and service-learning experiences. Illinois State was also among the first universities in the country to join the American Democracy Project and its spin-off, the Political Engagement Project, which are nationwide engagement initiatives cosponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and The New York Times. Last year, Illinois State received a national honor as the only recipient of The New York Times Political Engagement Project Program of Excellence Award. The award recognizes the efforts of faculty and staff to provide opportunities for students in the classroom, on campus and in the community to develop skills related to political processes and leadership. Illinois State has been recognized as a model for campuses across the country and as an innovator in the field.

Here are a few more statistics that I hope you will find impressive:

- Last year, Illinois State students provided more than 10,000 hours of community service
- More than 325 students participated in Alternative Break programs, contributing more than 7,600 hours of service locally and to communities across the United States and the Western Hemisphere
- Illinois State students helped lead local voter registration drives, sponsored health and wellness programs, spearheaded Normal and Bloomington environmental sustainability efforts, and supported production of documentary films on social and political issues
- Illinois State University ranked fifth in the nation as a Peace Corps Master’s International school. Local Peace Corps Master’s International students served both on campus as teaching and research assistants and with local organizations such as the McLean County Community Compact
- Along with our friends and colleagues from Illinois Wesleyan University, the ISU-IWU Habitat for Humanity Chapter is one of the most successful in the country, having already built 18 homes.

This year, Illinois State’s Division of Student Affairs will join just two dozen other colleges across the country to serve as a model university for the civic learning and democratic engagement of its students. Student Affairs will also offer students a new leadership experience called ISULeads, a campus-wide initiative that recognizes student involvement on campus and in the community. The ISULeads leadership certificate program incorporates curricular and cocurricular learning in the areas of civic engagement, global perspectives and leadership.

As president of Illinois State University, I am proud of the many ways our students contribute to the quality of life in Bloomington-Normal and throughout McLean County. I sincerely hope you share my pride and that you will continue to support and appreciate the efforts of these fine, young people.

Sincerely,

Al Bowman
President
Illinois State University
Students say thank you with Bring It Back to Normal

It is simply a way to say thank you to area residents.

Known as Bring It Back to Normal, the Illinois State program sees more than 300 students pour into the community to make a difference every spring and fall.

For years, Illinois State students have taken part in Bring It Back to Normal, helping out area residents who live close to campus by performing a variety of tasks such as raking leaves, painting, mulching and cleaning gutters.

“Last year, six very nice, young, fraternity members came and washed windows, scraped paint from the garage and pulled weeds from the garden path,” said Meredith Schroeder, who has been a resident on Normal Avenue for the past 33 years with her husband, Juergen. “They worked so hard and were so conscientious, I invited them all in for pie and ice cream afterward.”

The Schroeders have had volunteers come to their home since the program started. “It’s such a positive experience,” said Meredith, “and something wonderful for those of us who live close to campus.”

Over the years, the daylong program has expanded beyond neighborhoods to include work in the community with organizations such as the Ecology Action Center, the Center for Hope, the UNITY Community Center and Unit 5 schools.

A majority of the student volunteers with Bring It Back to Normal come from fraternities, sororities and student organizations that spearhead other local philanthropic efforts. All groups participating are provided with local, not-for-profit contact lists, and are encouraged to continue their volunteer work in the community.

Learning the ropes through volunteering

Incoming students get the chance to come face-to-face with the Bloomington-Normal community each year. Passages, a welcome program for Illinois State freshman and transfer students, connects around 150 new students with local volunteer projects.

“I loved the chance to see life outside of campus and be able to work in the community,” said Natalie Richardson, who took part in the service component of Passages as a transfer student during her junior year. “Working alongside fellow students not only gave me a sense of connection to the University, but a sense of belonging to Bloomington-Normal.”

Partnerships between Passages and area, not-for-profit agencies have blossomed. Students now help out with projects that range from restocking the Home Sweet Home Ministries warehouse and working in the Habitat for Humanity ReStore, to volunteering with the Cultural Festival at Miller Park and working with children at the Western Avenue Community Center.
Illinois State University interior design students have helped a local Route 66 historian with her efforts to restore and develop a historic building from the heyday of the “Mother Road.” The students prepared designs for rooms inside a 1930s-era service station owned by Terri Ryburn of Normal.

The Tudor Revival-style structure, located on Pine Street in Normal, originally housed a gas station, restaurant and garage with owner’s and mechanic’s apartments on the second floor. Ryburn, who has written and lectured extensively about Route 66 history and culture, purchased the building in 2006 and began restoration efforts. The interior design students talked with Ryburn about her vision for the building and then worked in teams to develop design ideas for a proposed coffee shop, theatre and office area on the first floor.

“For being able to be part of a real-live job with a real client is a great experience for any interior design major,” said student Lynzi Hostetler.

“Student designs aid building

Students from Illinois State University helped junior high students at Bloomington’s Western Avenue Community Center discover the joy of puppetry. Theatre education students in Assistant Professor Michael Vetere’s creative drama class helped the Western Avenue students design and assemble puppets and develop short performances in both Spanish and English.

For their performance, the children in Western Avenue’s Hispanic culture puppet troupe created short scenes that incorporated a number of cultural and social issues, such as cliques, teasing and bullying. Puppetry gave the children a comfortable outlet for addressing those subjects.

Theatre education major Sara Phillips played a leading role in organizing the puppet project. From the start, one of her main goals was to give the children a voice and allow them to develop the stories for their performance. For her and the other Illinois State students, working with the children at Western Avenue was an eye-opening and rewarding experience.

“You go in with all these lesson plans, all these ideas of what you want to accomplish, but with devised theatre, you really want it to come from them and their experiences,” said Phillips. “That task, combined with working with bilingual students, required me to really think on my feet, to adapt quickly, to be flexible, and to trust the students to show us what they needed and where we needed to go. It made me a more student-centered teacher.”

The excitement and enthusiasm for the puppet troupe was shared by community center leaders. “The puppet project had a positive impact on the students,” said Socorro Alvarez, Hispanic outreach director at Western Avenue Community Center. “It enhanced their self-esteem, developed their language skills and also strengthened their cultural identity.”

College of Business majors take time every year to perform a community service project as part of their celebration of Business Week.

Recently, students worked with the Center for Independent Living, PATH and Faith in Action to assist local senior citizens and individuals with disabilities.

“This project is a great way to give back to the community and hopefully leave a lasting impression on a site where many people will be visiting in the future.”

The student designs provide Ryburn with a creative vision for the building’s interior and assist with grant applications, which must show that the project involves a great deal of volunteer labor. The students’ work on the designs counts toward those volunteer hours.
Civic engagement now a minor at Illinois State

A growing number of students are making giving back part of their degree.

Illinois State recently began offering a civic engagement and responsibility minor through the School of Communication.

“It’s great to have the chance to be more educated on how to give back,” said Elly Rankin, who graduated in May with a major in communications studies.

The new minor, supported by the University’s American Democracy Project and State Farm Insurance Cos., requires students to take a minimum of seven courses intended to prepare students to actively engage in citizenship. The minor encourages students to gain a sense of self-awareness as a citizen, participate in community service, and develop an appreciation of diversity and the interdependence within communities, societies and the world.

During her work toward the minor, Rankin worked with the City of Bloomington to help promote the move to single-stream recycling, helped the Town of Normal organize the public Easter Egg Hunt and created a video titled Be the Change, which asked more than 400 Illinois State students what they would do to make a difference.

“The video was amazing,” said Rankin, who noted 72 students were chosen for the video. “To see so many students voicing how they hope to make the world and their communities a better place was uplifting.”

More than 40 students are enrolled in the minor. They will focus on becoming civically responsible individuals who embrace their membership in communities and society by owning social issues and working to be a part of the solution.

Trips combine service and learning

Each year during winter and spring breaks, Illinois State University students travel across the United States and around the globe to make a difference through community service. The students are participants in the Alternative Break program, coordinated by Leadership and Service, a unit of the Dean of Students Office.

Students participating in Alternative Spring Break programs have helped Hurricane Katrina victims, tutored teenage refugees, served individuals with HIV/AIDS, worked on home-building projects and helped feed hungry families. Since its inception more than a decade ago, nearly 1,000 Illinois State students have participated. Alternative Winter Break gives students the opportunity to travel internationally and domestically to meet the needs of other communities. Trips focus on social issues such as education, affordable housing and the environment.

Students examine the root causes of the social issues they address through pretrip education and reflection during the trips. Students also familiarize themselves with the history, culture and language of the locations. The lessons learned on the trips are carried forward after the students return to campus. Many participants are also active members of Club AB, a registered student organization dedicated to direct community service.

Helping children express themselves

Graduate students in the School of Communication are helping area schoolchildren find positive ways to express themselves.

Volunteering with the TRANSFORMERS program, an offshoot of the University’s American Democracy Project, students work with children in Unit 5’s elementary after-school program and at Parkside Junior High. The aim of TRANSFORMERS is to give children the communication skills they need for social and emotional success in order to reduce social aggression.

Last year, 25 students led children in developing empathy for others through arts and crafts, playground activities and PowerPoint presentations. The children learned methods of anger management, impulse control and problem solving through play.

Inspired by a production of The Women of Lockerbie,

Illinois State students in the School of Theatre put together the 11,000 Pieces of Clothing Drive that donated clothing to area shelters.
A game plan for volunteering

Illinois State University student-athletes give thousands of hours to the Bloomington-Normal community each year. They help nonprofits, service organizations and schools, and participate in volunteer activities in other communities while on the road.

Student athletes’ efforts include visiting people in nursing homes, reading to elementary schoolchildren and helping at major events such as the Special Olympics Illinois Summer Games. They also work with local youth at Illinois State summer sports camps.

The Redbird women’s basketball team has helped prepare and serve meals at Home Sweet Home Ministries in Bloomington. The men’s baseball team has partnered with the American Red Cross for the past seven years to conduct a blood drive. “One of the main aspects of being a team is finding some common goal and going after it together,” Redbird pitcher J.D. Learnard said. “This is something that we’ve done for a while and it seems that year after year people are getting more into it.”

During a spring break trip, the men’s tennis team helped restore green spaces in New Orleans with Hike for KaTREEna, an organization that plants trees to replace ones lost during the 2005 hurricane. While in Clearwater, Fla., for a tournament in February, the women’s softball team took part in an event honoring the academic achievements of students at a local grade school.

Last fall, students in the Community Project Design and Management class performed an assessment of recycling in Bloomington-Normal for the Ecology Action Center, and presented it to the Town Council.

The research helped the Town of Normal make an informed decision in the switch to curbside recycling.

Making friends with Best Buddies

For more than two decades, Best Buddies has fostered friendships between students at Illinois State University and adults with developmental disabilities. Illinois State’s chapter is part of the larger international Best Buddies organization and works with the staff and clients at marcfirst in Bloomington-Normal.

Each year up to 70 students from a wide variety of majors are paired with adults with intellectual disabilities. At the beginning of the school year, the students involved in Best Buddies make a yearlong commitment of friendship to their community buddies. They commit to contacting their buddies at least once a week, either through a letter, a phone call or a personal visit. Each month they engage in buddy pair activities, which may include meals, shopping, walks, movies or sporting events.

Student chapter members are also responsible for planning and facilitating monthly events throughout the academic year. All the members of Best Buddies meet monthly for large chapter socials and to engage in community service endeavors. For example, every September the members of Best Buddies work with The Knights of Columbus and assist with the Tootsie Roll Drive. Chapter socials involve a variety of activities, which often have a seasonal or holiday theme. Each year, the Best Buddies Ball holds an end-of-the-year celebration of friendship.

“The Best Buddies experience is life-enhancing and educational,” said E. Paula Crowley, a professor of special education and Best Buddies faculty advisor. “Our students learn a great deal about themselves and others through their involvement in Best Buddies.”

The program has grown in popularity since its inception at Illinois State in 1990. Crowley said that many marcfirst clients in the community return to the program year after year.
Reading is the word with students

Literacy is the key to opening many doors in life. Illinois State students help supply that key with a variety of reading programs in the community.

Each year, the Normal Public Library welcomes approximately 400 Illinois State students who volunteer one-on-one to help area schoolchildren take an interest in reading. The program, known as Partners in Reading, pairs a student with a child for 30 minutes of reading each week, followed by 15 minutes of playing games or just talking about books. The program is so successful that many students remain with a child all four years of college.

Members of the community also make their way to Illinois State to find services and volunteers. Many students from the departments of Special Education and Communication Sciences and Disorders partner with young adults from the Central Illinois Down Syndrome Organization (CIDSO) to explore literacy at Milner Library, by participating in activities such as reading for computer use and even social networking. The students encourage academic enrichment for the CIDSO members, catering to their interests.

Students with the Mary and Jean Borg Center for Reading and Literacy work with area elementary and junior high schoolchildren who are struggling with reading. The students learn assessment and tutoring strategies before working one-on-one with children to help them build confidence as readers, so they can forge a path for reading comprehension that will last a lifetime.

Promoting the arts in the community

In addition to numerous music and dance performances, theatre productions and visual arts exhibitions, Illinois State University’s College of Fine Arts also provides a number of arts-related community outreach programs. Undergraduate and graduate students play a key role in the success of those programs.

Music education and performance majors serve as teachers in the college’s String Project, which provides low-cost instruction on violin, viola, cello and bass to students in grades three through eight. Illinois State music students direct ensembles and conduct sectional and individual music lessons. String Project classes are taught on the Illinois State campus and in Fairbury.

Music majors also teach lessons on band and orchestra instruments, classical voice, piano and guitar to students ranging from kindergarteners to senior citizens through the Community School for the Arts. The Singing Redbirds children’s choir provides third- through sixth-graders the opportunity to develop their vocal skills in an ensemble setting.

Theatre education and art education students develop lesson plans and activities and lead sessions for the Saturday Morning Creative Arts Program, which features visual arts and creative drama classes for children. The classes allow children to work with a variety of art materials and processes, learn about art and artists from various countries and cultures, and use their imaginations to improvise action and scenes from appropriate stories, poems, legends and world events.

Bringing good health to others

Illinois State’s Mennonite College of Nursing students are taking the classroom to the community to encourage better health among vulnerable people in the Bloomington-Normal area.

Students in the Public Health Nursing course serve residents of two area homeless shelters Home Sweet Home Mission and the Salvation Army’s Safe Harbor, where they perform blood pressure screenings and administer flu shots donated from area hospitals. Students also volunteer at area health fairs, and lead an intergenerational project that connects children from Prairieland Elementary School with residents of a supportive living center.

Nursing students are also striving to bring good health to Bloomington-Normal schools with work on America’s Promise Alliance, funded by State Farm Foundation. Efforts include the collection of more than 700 toothbrushes and tubes of toothpaste that students delivered along with providing dental education programs in schools.
Illinois State University is taking its place as a lead institution in a national initiative on civic learning and democratic engagement. The University has been named one of only two dozen colleges in the nation as a Civic Learning Leadership Institution by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), the leading voice for the student affairs profession.

As a national leader for the NASPA association, Illinois State will continue to develop partnerships to increase student commitment to being engaged and active citizens, serving their communities through volunteerism and leadership roles.

“Illinois State has always embraced the idea that the college experience encompasses life beyond the classroom. Civic engagement is one of the core values of the University as stated in its Educating Illinois plan,” said Vice President of Student Affairs Larry Dietz. “Being recognized as a national leader in civic engagement is a reflection of the University’s commitment to inspiring students to challenge themselves through leadership and community service. At Illinois State, students are encouraged to develop the ethics of giving and service, which will enrich communities across the country as our students find their place as citizen leaders in those communities.”

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Illinois State University is home to more than 350 registered student organizations that cover a multitude of interests and engagement. Ranging from Braille Birds, which provides assistance to students with visual impairments, to the College Mentors for Kids, which provides mentors for at-risk children, Illinois State organizations are actively involved. Above, students from the Association of Latin American Students volunteer at Western Avenue Community Center and tutor area schoolchildren whose parents speak Spanish as a first language.

There are nearly 30 fraternities and sororities housed at Illinois State, and each one holds philanthropic efforts as a key element in Greek life. Each chapter dedicates time and work toward charities, from St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital and Habitat for Humanity to the American Cancer Society. Their efforts contributed to the 10,000 hours of community engagement Illinois State students performed last year.

The designation as a Leadership Institution comes as the University kicks off a new leadership and community service-based certification program for students called ISULeads. An outgrowth of Illinois State’s participation in the American Democracy Project, the new certification program joins the civic engagement and responsibility minor as an opportunity for students to develop a well-rounded view of leadership.

ISULeads is a campus-wide effort that will require students to complete the program’s three pillars – civic engagement, global perspectives and leadership. Those in the civic engagement pillar will explore becoming conscientious and active citizens through volunteerism and service leadership opportunities with the goal of working for positive change. Those in the global perspective pillar will explore what it means to be a global citizen and develop a sense of social identity and social justice. Those in the leadership pillar will form an identity of leadership through the development of critical, creative, communication and relationship-building skills.

“The goal of ISULeads, simply put, is for students to learn, get involved and be leaders,” said Dietz, who noted students can choose to complete any of the pillars, but must fulfill requirements of all three to be awarded an ISULeads certificate.