

Camp puts college in reach

June 27, 2007

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ROCKFORD REGISTER STAR

DEKALB — Inside a Northern Illinois University laboratory, Derrick Amisi scraped blood and urine samples into petri dishes as he and his Jefferson High School classmates attempted to solve the mystery of what's ailing "Frank."

Diagnosing what's wrong with the 58-year-old hypothetical patient (*E. coli*) sounds like a daunting task for any student, even those who are already in college courses. But this is what the "Real NIU Experience" summer camp is all about: Exposing students who are not necessarily college-bound to life at a university.

Campers are sleeping in NIU's Grant Towers North dorm rooms, eating cafeteria food and attending college-level courses that make school and possible future careers seem more like fun than work.

"College has always been the No. 1 priority for me and this is kind of a way to boost that," said Amisi, clad in a white lab coat and wearing surgical gloves. "It's a way to experience part of it and gives me an idea of how it is."

In a city like Rockford — where 77.8 percent of adults over 25 have a high school diploma and 19.8 percent have a bachelor's degree — convincing youths they can have a future as scientists, engineers, doctors or lawyers is important.

Camp director Judy Cox-Henderson said most of the students don't have a parent who graduated from a university. That can make college seem like an impossible dream.

Cox-Henderson said the "Real NIU Experience," now in its third year, aims to make college a real possibility. It is paid for through a five-year, \$5 million federal grant that partners NIU, Rockford schools and Rock Valley College.

The camp and Jefferson's NIU Club, which most of the campers participate in, are just a couple parts of Project Real that works to improve teacher quality and student achievement.

"We're really trying to get them excited about going to college and thinking about careers," Cox-Henderson said.

In the second week of this year's camp, 50 Jefferson students got a taste of the NIU experience. Forty students attended the first session last week, Cox-Henderson said.

The first week targeted entering sophomores who had not previously been to the camp. They investigated a crime scene, made balsa wood bridges and tested blood samples. They also got to do collegelike night activities like bowling, dancing and going to movies.



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Rockford Jefferson junior Michael Washington, 17, prepares a streaking plate Tuesday during Medical Mystery in DeKalb. Washington was participating at the third "Real NIU Experience" summer camp.

Most of this week's campers have been to previous camps and got more of a challenge, such as taking writing-intensive English 110 and fiction- and poetry-reading-intensive English 103.

Other classes include computer programming, journalism, photography, Photoshop and pottery. Students are learning how to design roller coasters, how to play Indonesian percussion instruments, and how medical professionals test and diagnose patients.

Jefferson juniors Katie Bowers and Kristiani Groeling, roommates during the NIU summer camp, said the best part is becoming friends with people they otherwise might never have met, a staple of any college experience.

"It helped broaden my horizons and made me more of a leader," Groeling said.

After getting used to what at first appeared to be a cramped dorm room, they discovered life in the towers is a great time despite the 11 p.m. curfew. And the "Real NIU Experience" has become a time to savor.

"It's become the highlight of our summer," Bowers said.