When Ben Gross was 6, he plotted his life path on a piece of paper and showed it to his mom. His career trajectory included stints as a paleontologist, storm chaser and president of the United States.

Although he isn’t searching for dinosaurs or chasing twisters, some things haven’t changed for the 22-year-old NIU senior. His passion for learning remains evident in his amazingly diverse range of interests and talents.

Gross holds a 3.87 grade point average. He will graduate next May with a degree in political science and minors in both mathematics and physics. Last year he was named “junior of the year” in the University Honors Program.

He also serves as a peer instructor to freshmen, is completing his second year-long term as president of the Alpha Phi Omega co-ed service fraternity and has worked three years as a sports reporter for the Northern Star, now assigned to what he calls “the best job on campus,” covering Huskie football.

Oh, yeah, and he’s also an Eagle Scout – one in a long line in his family who have achieved the distinction, including his father and uncles.

For his achievements in and out of the classroom, Gross, of Naperville, has been named NIU’s 2008 Student Lincoln Laureate, an annual honor reserved for the university’s top senior. Each of the state’s four-year public universities selects one Student Lincoln Laureate, recognizing excellence in both curricular and extracurricular activities.

Gross brings curiosity and enthusiasm to just about every aspect of college life, or life in general for that matter.

“I always joke that I could stay in college and learn forever,” he says. “Learning for me is just the most fascinating thing you could do.”

Gross says he jumped in the air when he opened a letter at 11 o’clock at night informing him he had been named Lincoln Laureate. He called his Naperville home and woke up his parents, Wendy and Jeff Gross, who met during their college days at NIU. The family will travel to Springfield for Saturday’s (Oct. 27) ceremony recognizing the state’s Lincoln Laureates in the House of Representatives of the Old State Capitol in Springfield.

A 2004 graduate of Waubonsie Valley High School, Gross initially intended to study astronomy. But his interest in political science was sparked during his first semester freshman year in a course titled “Democracy in America,” taught by NIU veteran political scientist Gary Glenn.

“I thought it would be a blow-off course, but in reality it was one of hardest classes I’ve ever taken,” Gross says. “It was very intense and a huge learning curve for me.”

Gross has since taken five more courses taught by Glenn, studying the likes of Plato, Socrates, John Locke and Alexis de Tocqueville.

“Ben is an exemplary student to teach,” Glenn says. “He has a truly astonishing breadth of intellectual interests that is unparalleled in my 41 years experience teaching at NIU.

“He excels at what he does, from his studies to his service and leadership, out of what appears to be some inner desire to make himself and his environment better,” Glenn adds.

Gross says he likes to stay busy.

“I had a lot of down time my freshman year,” he says. “I didn’t know what to do with myself so I just started taking on more and more. I always want to be involved and doing something. You only have so much time, and you shouldn’t waste any of it.”

Jes Cisneros, assistant director of the University Honors Program, says Gross “challenges himself intellectually above and beyond what most of his peers would be willing to risk.”

Gross has had a substantial influence on other students, particularly as a leader in the area of service. The NIU chapter of Alpha Phi Omega, the longest continually running chapter in the country, actively volunteers at campus events and with homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters and animal welfare agencies.

“When you’re around Ben, you almost can’t help but want to get involved,” Cisneros says. “His levity of
enthusiasm for anything he does is contagious."

Gross credits his parents with teaching the importance of volunteerism.

"Giving back to the community is just something I was taught as a child," he says. "I still remember my dad waking me and my brother on Saturday mornings to go off and help at a food pantry."

Following his graduation next spring, Gross intends to go to graduate school — although he jokes that the right job offer could sidetrack those plans.

"I still have a dream of one day announcing baseball for the Chicago Cubs," he says. "That's the dream, but my goal is to attend graduate school at Northern Illinois because I really enjoy studying political philosophy here."

Ultimately Gross wants to become a university professor. Or possibly a sportswriter.

No need to settle on one possibility just yet.

In winning NIU's Lincoln Laureate award, Gross was competing against top NIU seniors in a wide variety of disciplines. Other nominees for the award included first finalist Rachel Baker (Biological Sciences) of DeLand; Rachel Bruno (Communication) of Davenport, Iowa; Timerlee Haas (Clinical Laboratory Sciences) of Stockton; Amber Keyes (English) of Oregon, Ill./Eau Claire, Wis.; Artice Weston (Speech-Language Pathology/Audiology) of DeKalb; and Katherine Young (English) of Clare.