Economics major named 2004 NIU Student Lincoln Laureate

by Tom Parisi

NIU economics major Roberto Bento is himself a model of efficiency.

He maintains a 4.0 grade point average in the University Honors Program, works 20 hours a week as a tutor and serves in several student leadership posts. Yet, he still makes time for countless volunteer activities, from helping children learn to read to serving up meals to the needy.

All the hard work is paying big dividends for the native of Brazil, who first came to this country as an exchange student at Rockford Guilford High School. Bento has been named NIU’s 2004 Student Lincoln Laureate, an honor reserved for the university’s top senior.

Bento and fellow Lincoln Laureates were recognized during a Nov. 1 ceremony in the House of Representatives of the Old State Capitol in Springfield. Each of the state’s four-year, degree-granting universities selects one student Lincoln Laureate. The award recognizes excellence in both curricular and extracurricular activities.

After his experience as a high school exchange student, Bento returned to the United States, studying two years at Rock Valley College before transferring to NIU for his junior year. He credits his exchange family, Rockford’s Reuel and Dixie Johnson and their children, and his mentor, Larry Boeke of Rock Valley College, with providing him with years of support.

But those who know Bento say he deserves much of the credit for his own success.

“Roberto is just an amazing guy. He has wonderful enthusiasm, and yet he has a great humility about him, which is just extraordinary given his achievements,” says Michael Martin, director of the University Honors Program. “He’s very active in the honors program and has really developed his leadership abilities. And his academic accomplishments are all the more impressive when you consider that English isn’t his first language.”

At NIU, Bento has won several major scholarship awards. He is vice president of the Honors Student Association, an Honors House leader and chair of the program’s Service Committee.

The list of places where Bento has donated his time reads like a who’s who of social service agencies. He has mentored at-risk children at The House in Rockford, helped raise funds for the YWCA, served food at the Rockford Rescue Mission, worked on toy and clothing drives for such agencies as the Salvation Army, participated as a member of the Rockford Youth Advisory Committee and raised funds for the American Red Cross.

“Roberto is naturally very intelligent and works incredibly hard,” says Carl Campbell, assistant chair of the Department of Economics, who nominated Bento for the Lincoln Laureate.

“It’s extremely impressive that he has been able to work more than 20 hours a week and to be involved with so many extracurricular activities, while maintaining a perfect GPA,” Campbell says.
Bento says the extracurricular activities enrich his education. “There are some things you can not learn in the classroom,” Bento says. “It’s important to develop leadership skills, as well as the ability to work in groups to solve problems.”

Bento, who will graduate in May, says he chose to study economics because it provides him with a unique perspective on the world around him.

“Economics is a subject that gives you a different way of looking at things, a very good way of looking at things,” he says. “I like monetary and fiscal policy, but also the way economics tries to make things efficient, based on the principle of maximizing benefits and minimizing costs. You look at everything progressively, trying to make every situation better.”

Bento plans to attend graduate school in the United States. He says he will return to Brazil to work in the field of economics.

Ultimately, he hopes to get involved in politics.

“Many Brazilian students who study abroad end up living abroad. I don’t want to be one of those students. I have the idealistic view that I have something to give back to Brazil,” Bento says. “It’s something that, after I’m settled with my career, I want to do.”

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