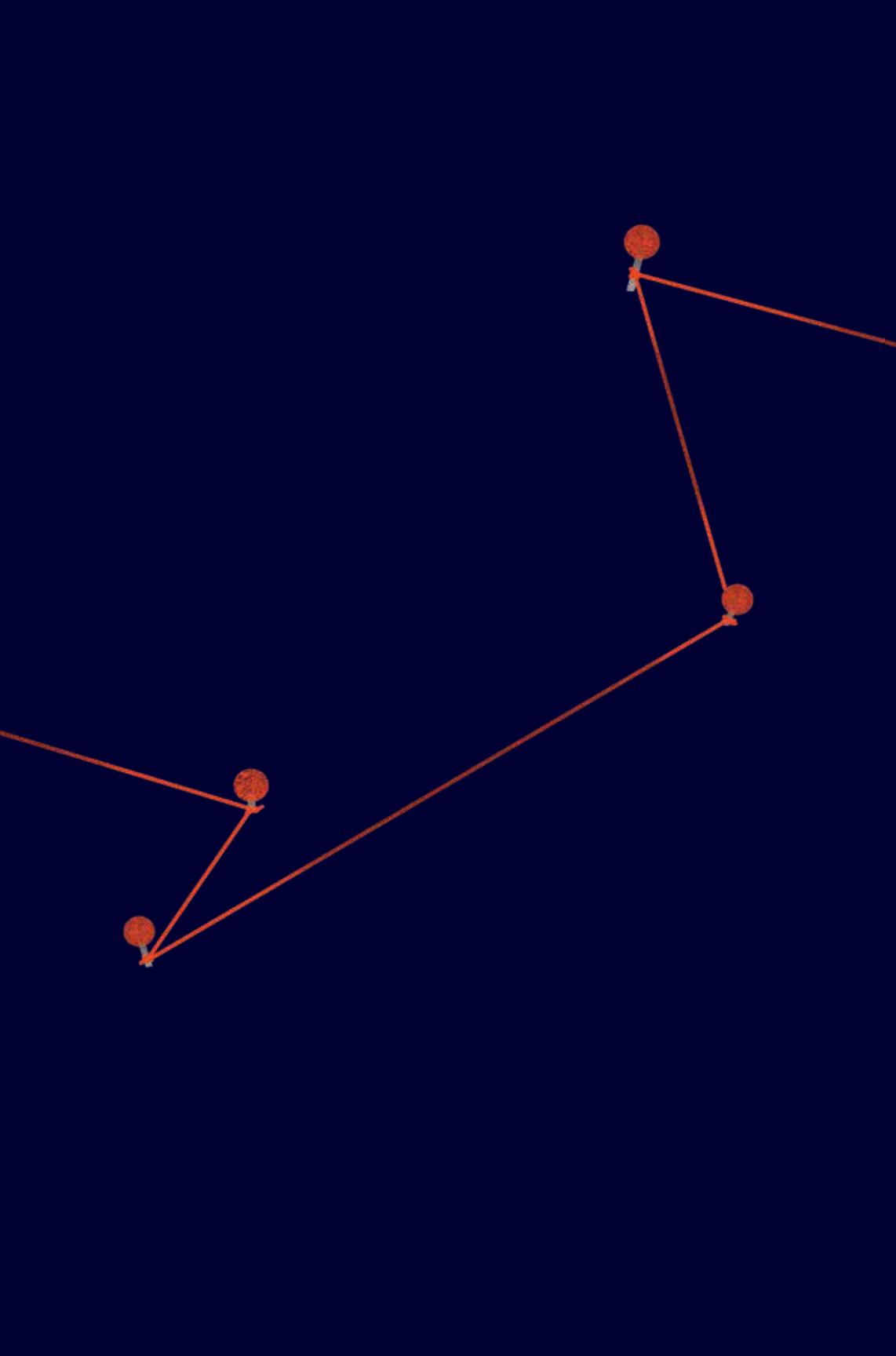


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Learning from experience and looking toward the future, each of our students carves their own exceptional path at Illinois.

*These are their journeys.*

4

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One class can make all the difference. In Alex's case, it reinforced her choice of major.

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## LOVING LITERATURE

One class can make all the difference.  
In Alex's case, it reinforced her choice of major.



Alex spent her initial semester on campus filled with uncertainty. She had chosen her major, English, mainly because she didn't know what else she enjoyed. "I knew I liked reading. I knew I liked the feeling of when I finished an essay or a piece of work," Alex says. "But I was still a little unsure about it."

One class—namely, one professor—eliminated those doubts.

The first day back from winter break, Alex walked into English 207: Romanticism expecting the same old setting: a boxed classroom, small semi-attached desks, and fellow college students, saturated by the cold and still numb from oversleeping during winter break. What she got instead was a nonexistent classroom, 20 confused kids sitting in the hallway, and an exuberant professor with a bright smile on his face declaring that it was going to be a wonderful semester.

That professor was Dr. Gillen Wood. "[He] was very passionate—is very passionate—about everything in the romantic period," says Alex. "He loves poetry."

Throughout the semester, Professor Wood introduced his students to all the famed romantic poets, including Byron, Keats, Shelley, and Coleridge. He spent the hour-and-a-half class time discussing and dissecting their works with both enthusiasm and thought-provoking questions.

Alex laughs as she describes his teaching style: "Dynamic, very effusive, lots of arm movements. He got into a lot of the details, and he wasn't afraid to call you out. I tried to move my position around the room so as not to be called on, but he found me."

She didn't mind. "He made it so it was okay, even if you didn't necessarily know the answer," she explains. "If you had a good thought, he would really capitalize on that."

Professor Wood's questions forced Alex to extend past her previous barriers of thought, and his inexplicable effort to infuse the class with the same sense of wonder and connection he felt with each poet has stayed with Alex ever since. "He made me interested in the material and made me want to look past it and look at what it could mean," she says. "And then that also reflected a lot on my view toward life and what life could mean."

The class itself also cemented Alex's belief that her decision to major in English was a good one. "I think it was when we were in discussion about certain pieces of poetry. Like, we'd read 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' or 'Ode to Autumn' by John Keats. And everything kind of just clicked."

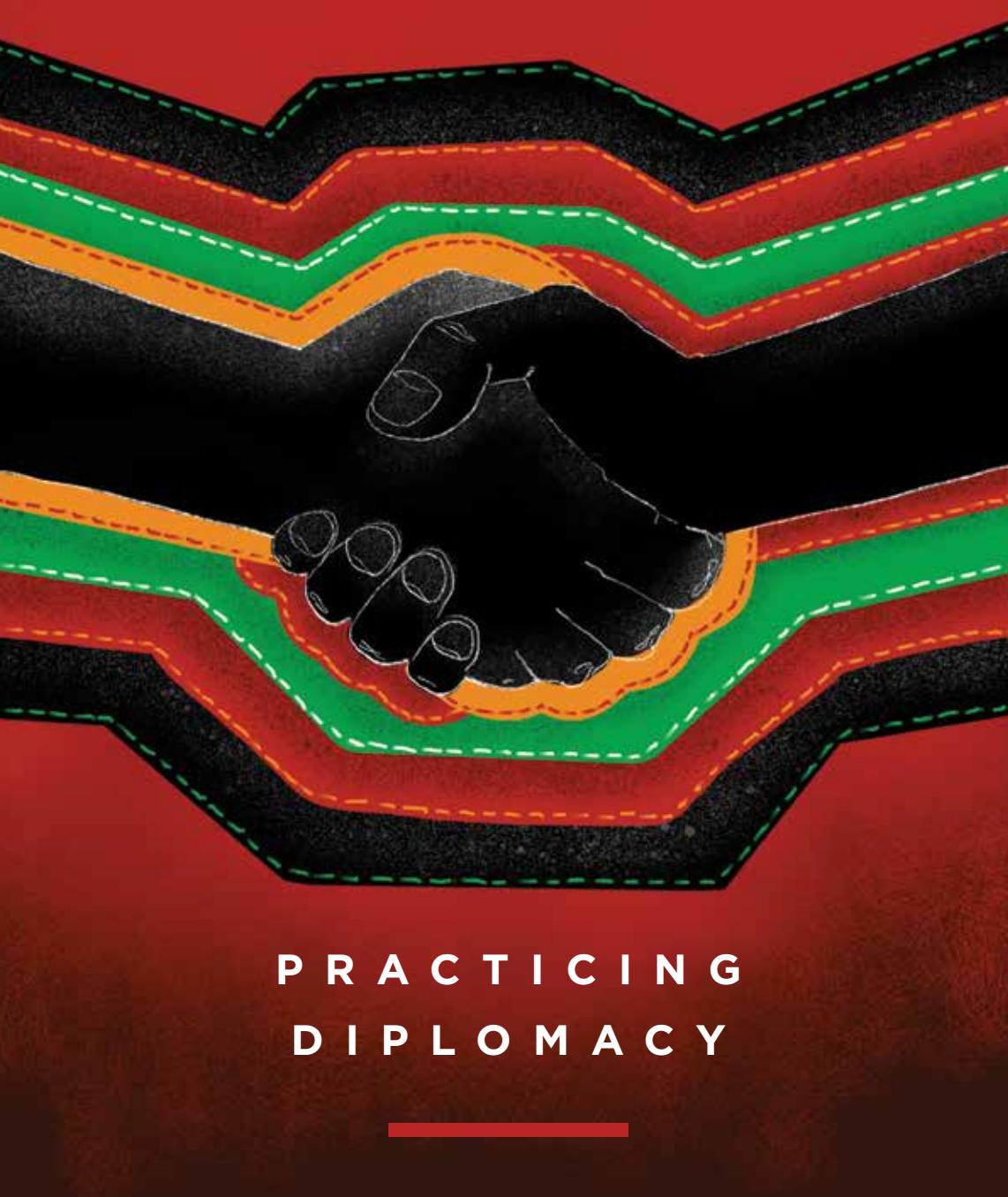
Alex took a second course with Professor Wood her sophomore year. Now a senior, she's also working with him on her thesis (which, Alex explains, is about "Lord Byron using poetry as a way to addict readers"). She'll graduate in May with her English degree, a Business minor, and an invitation to attend the Columbia Publishing Course in New York this summer, where she hopes to begin building a career in publishing.

When asked if she thinks she chose the right major, Alex answers in true English-student fashion: "There are a lot of other majors that I think would have also been right. But then ... it's like the same thing in English: There are multiple truths to something, and you can back them up with evidence. ... So I picked one of the right ones."



150+

majors in 11 academic  
communities at Illinois



## PRACTICING DIPLOMACY

Recent alumnus Larry is bringing a little bit of Chicago to Cameroon, his first post in the Foreign Service.

Larry Harris is the type of man who you can practically hear smiling through the phone. He's quick to joke and has an infectious laugh—you're bound to hear it often.

If you ask Larry (LAS '15), he'll say that's the Chicago in him. He grew up on the south and west sides of Chicago before moving to Chicago Heights at 14 and says the overwhelming, consistent community support stuck with him.

Chicago is often regarded as a surly and even dangerous city, but Harris would politely disagree. That's just not his Chicago. When his family didn't have electricity and he had to study at the school library, it was the kind support from his neighbors and teachers that shaped him.

His father, who worked as a CTA bus driver for 30 years, spent his entire career driving through Chicago's neighborhoods and interacting with countless people—and Harris saw his father's love for the work every single day.

"For me, Chicago is about the kindness of its people, and it informs who I am. It taught me to treat everyone like they are a person. To listen to them. Three times now I've met someone from Chicago abroad and they always say, 'I knew you were from Chicago because you are so nice.'"

That's the type of attitude Larry is bringing to his work as a diplomat in Cameroon, a post he started last August. Harris spent two years as a Rangel Fellow, in which time he completed a master's degree from American University in return for at least five years of foreign service.

He is spending his first year adjudicating visas for Cameroonians who want to visit the U.S. and, likely, he will be among their first impressions of Americans. That first contact is something Larry doesn't take lightly.

"This first impression will stay with them on how America is for a very long time. Regardless of any decision we make, it's important to put our best foot forward," he says.



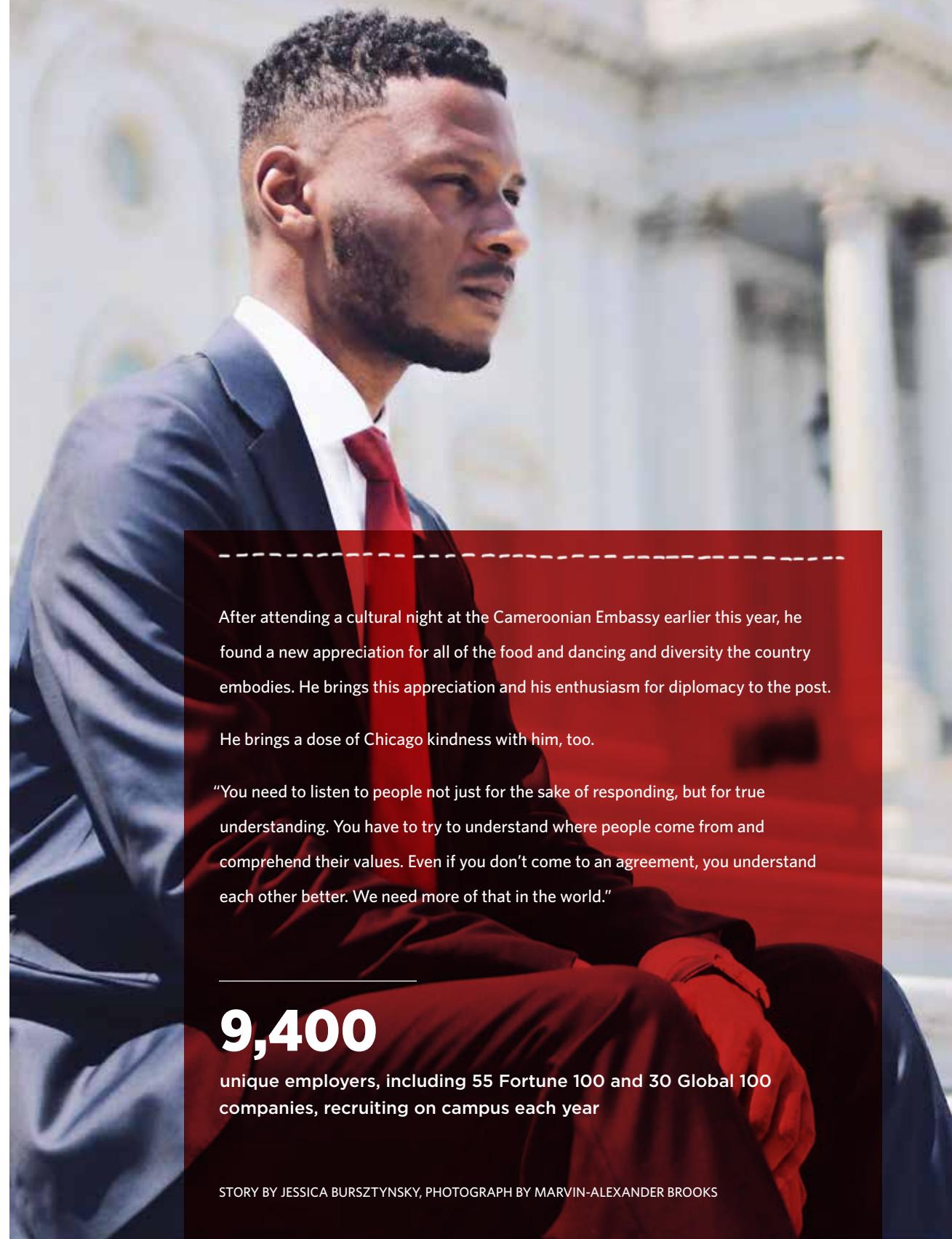
His second year in Cameroon will be spent on the political side, and most work will involve maintaining the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and the Cameroonian governments.

"I have the opportunity to serve my country, its people, and carry out U.S. policy throughout the world and represent one of the many diverse parts of this great country," Larry says. "Every single day will bring something different to my life."

Diplomacy is a "delicate dance," Larry says. "You are trying to get into lockstep with the other person, but you are also trying to lead the dance ... to get them to see your side."

His post comes at a time of unrest in the Central African country. Amnesty International published a report this year detailing Cameroon's deadly cycle of violence between the French-speaking majority and the English-speaking minority.

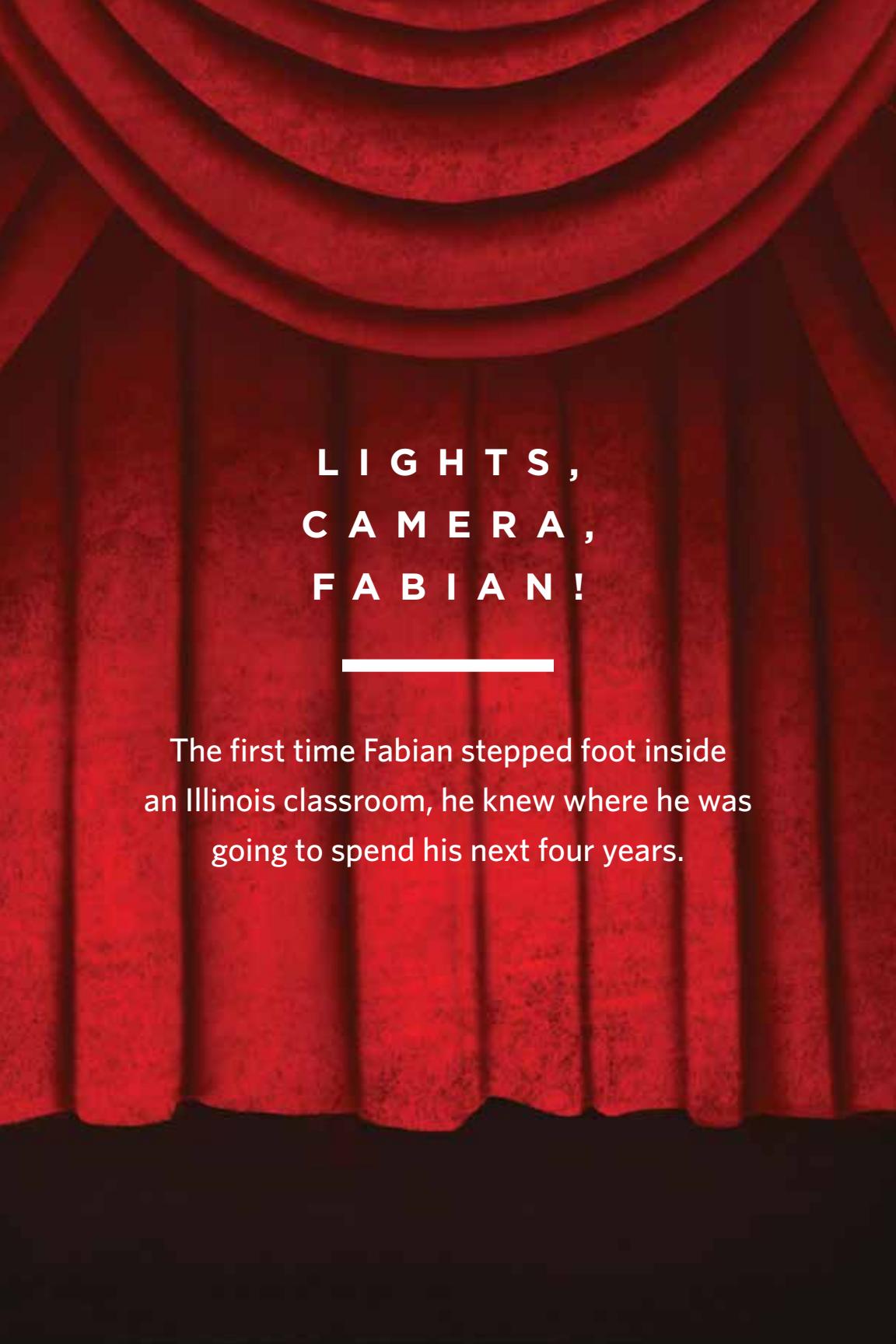
The country is relatively stable compared to the rest of the region, but Larry is aware of the challenges that lie ahead. He and fellow U.S. diplomats will work together to advance U.S. interests and promote economic growth, security, and overall prosperity of the country.



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STORY BY JESSICA BURSZTYNSKY, PHOTOGRAPH BY MARVIN-ALEXANDER BROOKS



# L I G H T S , C A M E R A , F A B I A N !

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The first time Fabian stepped foot inside an Illinois classroom, he knew where he was going to spend his next four years.



Acting was always part of Fabian's plan. Illinois wasn't.

"I felt the stigma that if I stayed in the state, I wouldn't be successful, especially with a theater curriculum," the Aurora, Illinois, native says. "All of these places that you find online say, 'Go to New York. Go to LA. Go to this remote town in Pennsylvania.'"

Fabian applied to Illinois anyway. "I felt like I had to," he explains. He knew the university was well respected, even though he didn't know much about the acting program (spoiler alert: it's also top tier, ranked highly by multiple sources).

"When I got accepted, I was like, 'Oh, maybe we should consider this more,'" says Fabian. So in March, as he was trying to decide between colleges, he and his dad drove the two and a half hours to campus for an Illini Day—an open house program for admitted students and their families.

"It was like a party," he remembers. "It was a Wednesday or a Thursday, the middle of the week. Everyone was so cheerful about this place. Imagine, I had friends who were back at school, and I was having a ball here."

After beginning their morning with a presentation in the Illini Union, Fabian and his father headed across campus to Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, where Fabian was scheduled to sit in on a class, Theatre 170: Fundamentals of Acting.

## #13

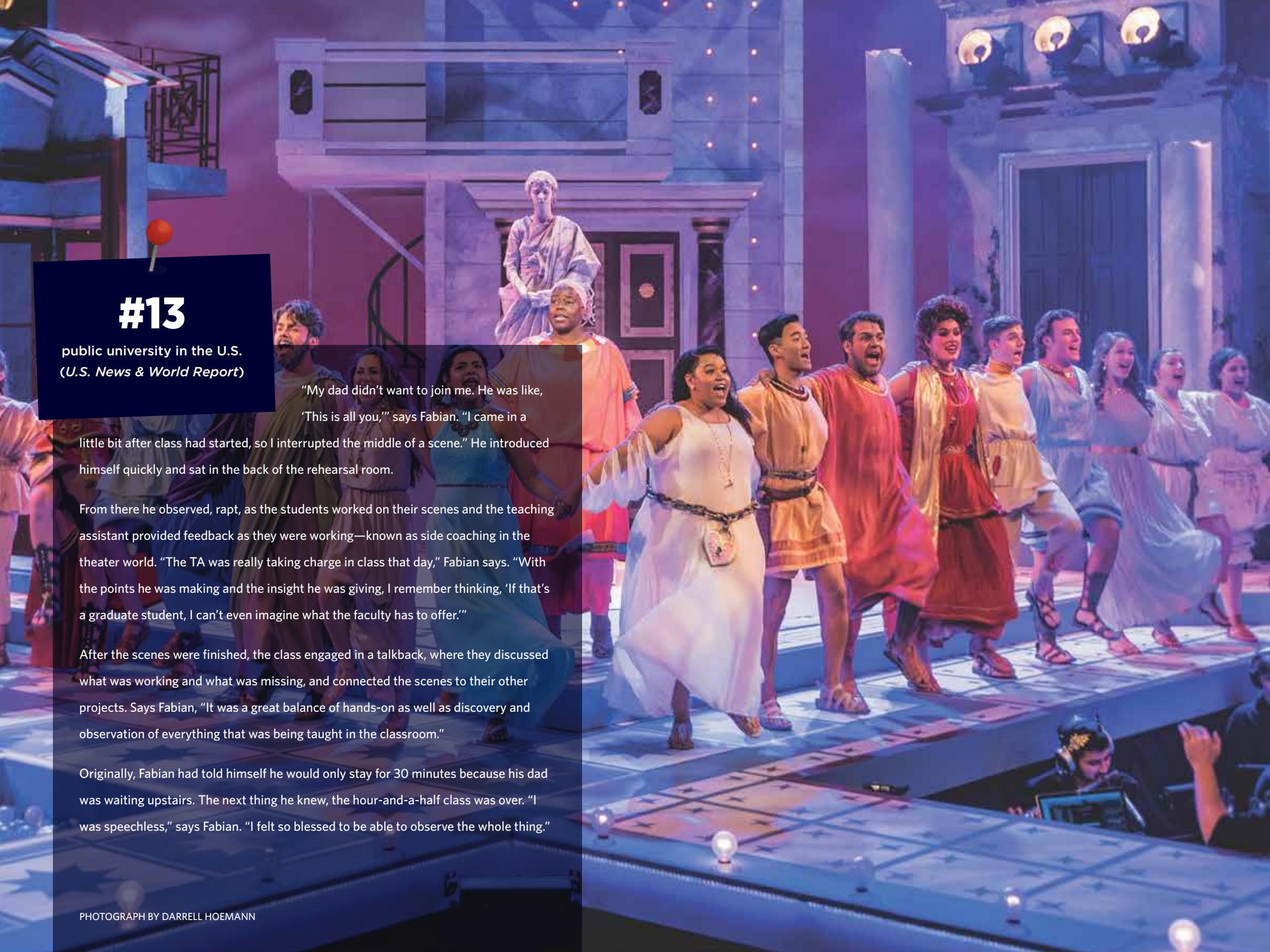
public university in the U.S.  
*(U.S. News & World Report)*

"My dad didn't want to join me. He was like, 'This is all you,'" says Fabian. "I came in a little bit after class had started, so I interrupted the middle of a scene." He introduced himself quickly and sat in the back of the rehearsal room.

From there he observed, rapt, as the students worked on their scenes and the teaching assistant provided feedback as they were working—known as side coaching in the theater world. "The TA was really taking charge in class that day," Fabian says. "With the points he was making and the insight he was giving, I remember thinking, 'If that's a graduate student, I can't even imagine what the faculty has to offer.'"

After the scenes were finished, the class engaged in a talkback, where they discussed what was working and what was missing, and connected the scenes to their other projects. Says Fabian, "It was a great balance of hands-on as well as discovery and observation of everything that was being taught in the classroom."

Originally, Fabian had told himself he would only stay for 30 minutes because his dad was waiting upstairs. The next thing he knew, the hour-and-a-half class was over. "I was speechless," says Fabian. "I felt so blessed to be able to observe the whole thing."



Before reconnecting with his dad, Fabian talked with some of the students. They were both engaged and encouraging, peppering him with questions to get to know him better. The conversation gave Fabian an even stronger sense of the program's fostering community.

Fabian and his father followed up the class with lunch and a tour of campus, but Fabian didn't need any more convincing. He was going to spend his next four years at Illinois. "Right there in that moment," he says, "It was a really deep, gut instinct: 'If this is how I feel right now, not even being an enrolled student in their community of actors, I can't even fathom how I would feel once I get my group, once I get my curriculum, once I get my shot to get going in this program.'"

And "get going" he has. Now a second-semester sophomore, Fabian is part of the cast of *Crazy for You*, a main-stage production at Krannert. He's also co-producing and acting in *Red*, a play about the prominent painter Mark Rothko, in association with the Armory Free Theatre, the student experimental theater on campus.

When asked how it feels to have now taken the class that once cemented his future as an Illini, Fabian says, "It's like one door opens and the next one's even better, so I just can't wait to get to the next door. Yeah, it happened, but there's another thing that has yet to happen, which makes me excited. That search for curiosity and that search for fun never stops."





**Studying in a country you know nothing about is intimidating to say the least, but Steven was up for the challenge.**

**S**teven could have opted to study abroad in Sweden, a country that was somewhat familiar to him because of his family roots. Instead, he chose the unknown: Hong Kong, a bustling, vibrant city in southeastern China where old meets new.

"It was a little scarier to me," Steven says. "But it was a challenge that I felt was worth taking."

Steven did his best to prepare before leaving Illinois. He attended study abroad meetings and reviewed all the information he could get his hands on. He also reached out to other students who had done the same program for both advice and recommendations.

Yet even the best preparation can only go so far when you're traveling to an unfamiliar place. "I was more underprepared than I thought I would be—as in, I was not very familiar with Hong Kong itself or the surrounding area," Steven says. "But that was a tremendous experience once I got there, being able to learn on my feet and get used to it."

When he first arrived on his new campus, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST), Steven made it a priority to get to know the other exchange students. "I wanted to have a good group of friends when I got there, especially because I didn't know anyone on my way over there," he explains. "I was lucky enough to have a roommate who I really liked, and we remained very close throughout the semester."

Steven also began to establish a new routine. "That was something I didn't realize would be really important," he says. "But being in a place that was so foreign, such a very different living arrangement, even—going back to a dorm, having a roommate, being in a shoebox-sized room again—I found that developing a routine was really important to adjusting."

Much of Steven's time was spent in the classroom, taking business courses on organizational behavior, negotiations, and corporate strategy. HKUST is an English-speaking university, so Steven didn't need to know a second language. He also found the structure, from the grading rubric to the semester's timing, to be almost identical to that of Illinois.

Steven was able to experience all aspects of the city, including the Fifth-Avenue-like atmosphere of Admiralty, the chaotic street-market haggling of Mong Kok, and the scenic seaside of Sai Kung. As time passed, he was also able to fully immerse himself in it.

"If it was a Saturday and I knew I had a test on Monday or Tuesday, I would go into the city to a coffee shop and I'd study there for hours—a very normal, average thing to do. But the fact that I had gotten to the point where I felt comfortable enough to do that and go out on my own and experience the city in a very real, residential way was really exciting for me."

Having that familiarity in his coursework made it easier for Steven to explore his surroundings in his free time. "One of the first things I noted was that Hong Kong felt like the New York City of the east," he says. "The amazing part is there is something to do on every single street and every single inch of that place. It's so small, but it's so dense."

Between attending classes and enjoying Hong Kong's culture, Steven also managed to take three side trips to other notable locations in Asia. His first visit was to Hanoi and Halong Bay in Vietnam. Later in the semester, he flew to Beijing, where he walked the Great Wall of China. He rounded out his extra travels with a trip to Kyoto, Japan.

The sights Steven saw along the way were part of what he enjoyed most about his time abroad. "What I loved about my travel experiences was how distinct each of them was and how I was able to get unique things from all of them," he says.

Steven will also remember the people he met. "I made some really, really amazing friends over the course of four months, and we got to do some pretty amazing things together just because of where we were."

When Steven reflects on the ways he improved himself through his study abroad experience, he emphasizes two things: communication and adaptability.

Because of the language barrier, Steven had to learn how to communicate more clearly by speaking more directly and paying more attention to his body language. He also became a better active listener. "That's incredibly valuable," he says. "Because even if I never travel again, I'm going to be able to better talk to people from different cultures all over the world."



Steven is also proud of how he was able to adapt to new surroundings, including orienting himself to the culture and settling into a routine. "Before I left, Hong Kong was a massive question mark. I had no idea what to expect," he says. "Going to a place that I knew so little about and getting to the point where I felt comfortable there has eliminated a lot of barriers and excuses that I might have for traveling in the future."

From the places he saw and the people he met to the insights he gained, Steven's time abroad will remain with him long after he crosses the graduation stage in just a few weeks.

"It was almost like a capstone experience of my university experience here at Illinois," he says. "It was something I learned a lot from and truly will never forget."





### On Beijing, China

"The clear highlight of that trip was being able to visit the Great Wall. That was the first time I was nervous to visit a place. It was akin to meeting a massive celebrity—but instead of talking to them, where there's some pressure of saying the wrong thing, you just have to walk. And I was still incredibly nervous to be there. It felt truly surreal to see something that I had seen in textbooks for 10 or 15 years and genuinely thought I'd never, ever get to see."

### On Kyoto, Japan

"Kyoto was tremendous, and exactly what I needed at that time in the semester. It was before finals, and I'd been a bit stressed out with work. I was ready for a change of pace from the Hong Kong scenery, and Kyoto provided that. It's an incredibly quiet and friendly and beautiful city. It was a really great experience to simply be quiet and interact with the city in my own way without any pressure of doing what other people were interested in doing or seeing. That was really valuable to me."

CHINA

PACIFIC OCEAN

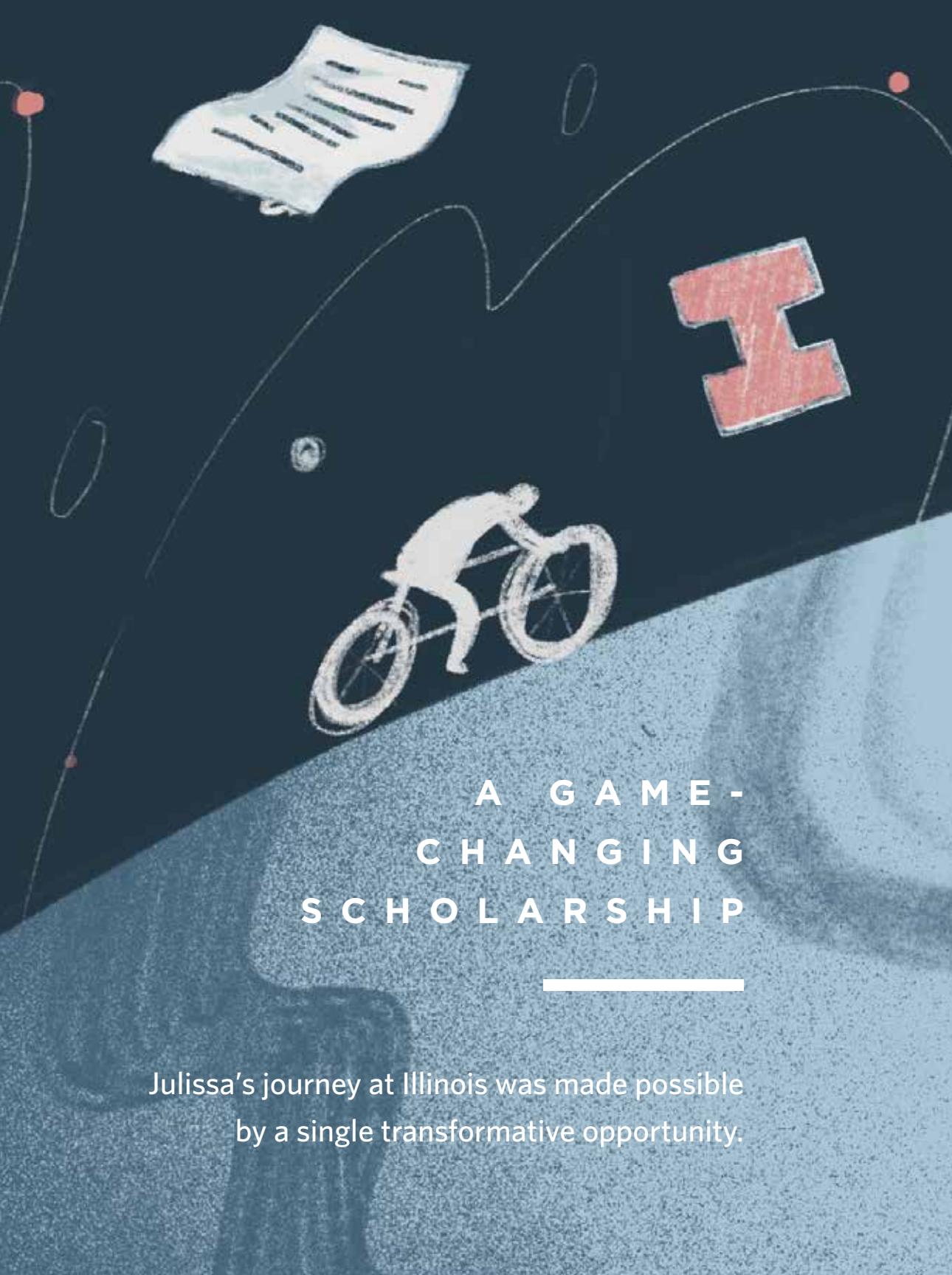
### On Hanoi, Vietnam

"While Hong Kong has a very distinct Asian culture to it, Hanoi is deeply rooted in its history in a way I have never seen before. It frankly put a lot of things into perspective for me. For example, rarely had I thought about the United States of America being 300 years old. But then I'd go to a temple in Hanoi, and it's been there for over 1,000 years."

## BEYOND HONG KONG

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## A GAME- CHANGING SCHOLARSHIP

Julissa's journey at Illinois was made possible by a single transformative opportunity.



etting into college wasn't Julissa's biggest concern. She had to figure out how she was going to pay for it.

When Julissa was nine years old, her family moved to Lemont, a southwest suburb near Chicago. Adjusting to her new school was tough; she wasn't used to the lack of diversity in her classes and often felt like she didn't quite fit in. "I was one of five students who were not white," Julissa says.

Not much economic diversity existed, either—most students seemed to have plenty of money. So when it came time to start thinking about college, Julissa realized her concerns were not the same as her classmates'. "My parents didn't go to college," Julissa explains, "so I was confused about the process and didn't know how I was going to pay for it."

In the end, Julissa set her mind on college, regardless of the obstacles. She sent out applications, thinking she'd just have to figure out the process as she went along. When her financial aid letter arrived from Illinois, though, Julissa's world changed. She had been awarded the Illinois Promise scholarship.

Illinois Promise, better known as I-Promise, covers the cost of attendance for Illinois students with the greatest financial need. This is a game-changer for people who are qualified to get into college but lack the funds to attend. To improve the transition to campus, I-Promise also pairs its recipients with older students, academic professionals, and community members who act as mentors.

This mentorship program introduced Julissa to Catherine, a woman who was instrumental throughout Julissa's first year on campus. Catherine gave her scheduling advice when it was time to register for spring classes and encouraged her to take advantage of Illinois resources.

She told Julissa about tutoring services offered by the Office of Minority Student Affairs, where you can study with students who have already succeeded in the courses you're taking. Julissa was worried about the idea of someone tutoring her and told Catherine so. "It was one of those things that you shouldn't really be nervous about," Julissa says. "She was like, 'No, go do it!'"

Catherine also sent Julissa a list of clubs she thought Julissa might have an interest in. Like most freshmen, Julissa was nervous to start new things, but Catherine kept encouraging her. "Go! Go check them out!" she told Julissa.

Fast-forward three years: Julissa is working as an Illinois Student Admissions Representative (better known as an I-STAR around campus), has biked across the U.S. with the Illini 4000 to help raise money for cancer research, and is part of a group attempting to design a better water system for a town in Honduras. "Catherine was really empowering, because I was too scared to do a lot of those things," Julissa recalls. "Things that people would've gotten through sororities, fraternities, Greek life, and social RSOs, I got through I-Promise."

Julissa is still following Catherine's advice. I-Promise recently hosted an instructional etiquette dinner, and Julissa, hearing Catherine's voice in her head, decided it would be a good opportunity to learn more about professional conduct. "Fun fact: You pass salt and pepper two at a time to your right," Julissa says. "They were like, 'They're married, so you can't separate them!' But how are you supposed to know?"

#1

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When asked how she thought her life would be different had she not received the scholarship, Julissa can hardly imagine. "I have no idea what would've happened. ... I don't think I would've been able to do Illini 4000 because I would have had to get a job for that summer. I also wouldn't have been able to study abroad," she says, explaining that she used a previous semester's refund check to participate in the Honduras Water Project over spring break.

Illinois Promise made possible so many of Julissa's best college experiences. It's not an exaggeration to say the program changed her life. "I-Promise gave me the opportunity to be here," Julissa says. "I was just so lucky, and I have no idea why it turned out so well, but I'm happy it did."



Julissa is currently pursuing a contextual engineering degree in the department of agricultural and biological engineering, a new program that's being developed as she and her classmates make their way toward graduation. "It's really confusing because it doesn't exist anywhere, so this is the first place where it would be," Julissa says, humbly admitting that she would be one of the first students from the university to graduate with such a degree.

As Julissa looks ahead, she sees graduate school in her future, where she considers acting as a mentor for new I-Promise students. "Why not?" she asks, adding: "This is exactly the attitude they gave me."



## A CALIFORNIA CONNECTION

---

Siddhi and Surabhi met one another their very first week on campus. They've been best friends ever since!

**A**lthough their hometowns are just 5 miles apart, it wasn't until Surabhi and Siddhi left California for the University of Illinois, a school over 2,000 miles away, that they first met.

"What day was it?" Surabhi asks Siddhi. "That day when the whole freshman class was together?"

"Ohhhh, it was that weekend, when we all went to Memorial Stadium," replies Siddhi.

"Memorial Stadium, yeah!" says Surabhi. "The whole class had a barbecue lunch together. It was that day."

The girls are referring to New Student Convocation, one of the first activities new Illini participate in as part of the university's annual Welcome Days. Following an official welcome from the Chancellor, students enjoy a picnic with their college.

"I was completely alone because I didn't have a roommate and I didn't know anyone," Surabhi says. "I was like, 'The first person I see, I'm just going to go and sit down right next to them and somehow make conversation.' So I just picked out a random person. And it turned out to be a mutual friend of ours, and that's how we got introduced to each other."

Over the course of conversation, Surabhi and Siddhi discovered not only that they were from the same state, but also that they were living in the same residence hall, Saunders—Surabhi on the third floor and Siddhi on the fourth.

Like all new freshmen, Siddhi and Surabhi were nervous about fitting in at their new school and looking to make friends. Soon after the picnic, Siddhi asked Surabhi if she wanted to get dinner in the dining hall. Surabhi was quick to say yes.

That night, as they bonded over California and missing home, the two clicked. "I hadn't met many people who I could immediately just start talking to," Siddhi says. "You know how sometimes you talk to someone and conversation flows so easily? That's how it was with Surabhi."

It wasn't long before the pair began hanging out every day. Although they weren't in any of the same classes, they did everything else together. They could often be spotted studying at Grainger Library, playing Frisbee on the Quad, and grabbing Bangkok Thai for dinner ("It's soooo good!" says Surabhi).

Surabhi and Siddhi are often confused for sisters, and sometimes even twins. Throughout their freshman year, they were regularly mistaken for roommates, too. "Surabhi didn't have a roommate, but everyone on the third floor was convinced that I lived there and I was her roommate until the end of the year," says Siddhi. "People were like, 'You live on the fourth floor? No way!'"

Now actual roommates, Surabhi and Siddhi reflect on the significance of their friendship. "Freshman year, you meet a lot of people, but not all of them stick," says Siddhi. "We were some of the only ones who actually stayed friends to the end of the year."

"We saw a lot of friendships break," Surabhi says, "and it just wasn't like that."

The girls recognize that their experience was unique, and they're thankful for it. In fact, the two insist that had it not been for each other, they wouldn't have formed as many friendships at Illinois.

50

U.S. states and 116  
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"I always find myself thinking back," says Surabhi. "Since I didn't have a roommate, I don't know how I would have made friends if I didn't meet Siddhi. My life would be so different than it is now."

When asked if they have a favorite memory together, Surabhi describes their last day as freshmen: "Before we moved out, Siddhi, myself, and another friend all went out to dinner, and then we hung out on the Quad at midnight and reminisced about the year. It just felt so rewarding to be able to think back and see how much things had changed."

As Surabhi and Siddhi near the end of their sophomore year, one thing hasn't changed: their friendship. The two will be rooming together again next year, and they're looking forward to everything still to come.

"We have two more years here," Surabhi says. "So many more memories can be made."

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