Mizzou taps rich Chicago market

BY TIM BARKER tbarker@post-dispatch.com | 314-340-8350 | Posted: Sunday, November 28, 2010 6:15 am

CHICAGO • Andy and Janice Nyberg finally get to ask the question that's been on their mind for months.

Weaving their way through a crowd of parents and teenagers, they zero in on the black-and-gold clad Jennifer Buxton, one of about 200 recruiters who have descended on Palatine High School in suburban Chicago for a college fair in early October.

Why, the Nybergs ask, is their daughter obsessed with the University of Missouri, a school she's never even seen?

"She won't stop talking about it," Andy Nyberg tells Buxton.

It is one of the more predictable exchanges of the evening, Buxton says later. She's been living and working in the Chicago area for four years as Mizzou — like other schools across the nation — seeks a greater share of students from the populous Windy City. And she's grown accustomed to the puzzled expressions on the faces of parents who can't find Columbia, Mo., on a map.

Fortunately for Buxton and Mizzou, that doesn't seem to be a problem. The Chicago area has become one of the school's most important feeder markets, providing an increasing number of applications that topped 3,000 last year. The St. Louis area, by comparison, generated 4,700 applications.

For Chicagoland teens, a school like Mizzou makes sense on several levels. It's close enough to reach in a few hours by car. The school has a strong reputation. And it offers out-of-state tuition rates that are comparable to the in-state rates charged by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

"It wasn't a hard choice," said Melissa Helm, a freshman from Deerfield, who said she never really considered her own state's flagship school.

Like many others who end up at Mizzou, Iowa, Indiana and other schools, Helm just wanted to be somewhere different.
The Right Fit

It's tempting to think of Buxton as a sort of traveling saleswoman. But she sees her job in different terms, saying it is her responsibility to help teens and their parents find the right college fit.

"We're not paid on commission," Buxton said. "Whether our freshman class is larger or smaller, I get paid the same."

On a recent day, like most during the heavy recruiting season, she starts before the sun rises. She leaves her Chicago apartment around 7:30 a.m., decked out in a gold sweater over a black skirt and leggings. She makes a quick stop at the neighborhood Starbucks before venturing onto a network of interstates and toll roads in a perpetual state of rush hour.

Buxton is one of three regional Mizzou recruiters — there's another in Chicago and one in Dallas. They've been tasked with beefing up out-of-state enrollment at a time when high school graduating classes are about to get smaller. It's part of a nationwide demographic shift related to baby boomers, whose children have worked their way through high school. And it's going to mean fewer Missouri kids available for the state's schools.

"There's no question it's going to happen. It's simple math," said Chuck May, senior associate director of admissions at Mizzou.

Buxton is part of the solution to that problem. Ten years ago, the Tulsa, Okla., native bucked family tradition and bypassed Oklahoma State University in favor of Mizzou to pursue a career in education. She happened into the Chicago recruiting job after hearing about it while pursuing a master's degree in school counseling in 2007.

Today, she's visiting a trio of suburban high schools and the college fair in Palatine. She'll spend the day talking about Mizzou's offerings, the student recreation center, financial aid, scholarships, student-teacher ratios, admission requirements and what it's like to be away from home.

During a meeting with a group of juniors and seniors, Buxton points out that Chicago-area kids make up 10 percent of Mizzou's current freshman class. She offers reassuring words to anyone worried about fitting in: "You can come to Missouri and still find your Cubs and White Sox fans. You'll have a little piece of home."

For many of these students, however, it isn't a big consideration. They're known for their willingness to travel 400 or so miles for college. It's students like Tommy Marcheschi who draw schools like Mizzou to the area.

He's one of a handful of students who gather in the counseling office at Glenbard West High School to listen to Buxton. He wants to study art. And he isn't even considering an Illinois school.
"My whole family went to Illinois, but it just didn't interest me much," Marcheschi said. "It seems like Mizzou, Indiana and maybe Iowa are the most popular schools for people to go to."

**Chicago Rich In Students**

With a couple of hours to kill between high school visits and the looming college fair, Buxton joins up with what might seem an unlikely circle of friends.

Through a series of phone calls and text messages, a dozen or so recruiters quickly pick a Chinese restaurant where they can relax before the fair. For an hour or so, they laugh and swap war stories from the day. Someone mentions the kid with a 22 ACT score who wants to go to medical school. They talk about high school guidance counselors who do a great job. And those who don't.

Most of those at dinner are members of the Chicago Area Regional Representatives, an organization for recruiters who live in the area. It started a couple of decades ago with half a dozen schools. Today it has 70 members, representing 56 universities from as far away as Hawaii and Massachusetts. The members include St. Louis University, Truman State University and Missouri University of Science and Technology.

What's drawing all of this attention is the simple fact that the Chicago area has plenty of students to export. There aren't enough schools in the city, or even the state, to educate all of them.

"The kids here are very mobile and prone to move out of state," said Julie Nelson, who's been recruiting in the area for nearly two decades.

The fact that so many schools are venturing into Chicago has not escaped the notice of the state's top schools.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign expects to collect 60 to 65 percent of its freshman class from the Chicago area each year. To protect its interests, the school now has four full-time staffers there, and sends reinforcements as needed.

"In the past five years, we've been ramping up our efforts as well. We're visiting far more high schools than we used to," said Stacey Kostell, director of undergraduate admissions.

Among the challenges faced by U of I and other state schools, is the dire state of Illinois' higher education system, which has been hit particularly hard. It's harder to compete with out-of-state schools swooping in with better scholarships.

Recruiters there say it's no coincidence that schools like Mizzou offer tuition to nonresidents that rivals what they would pay if they stayed home. Illinois residents can expect to pay $27,000 or more for a year at U of I. Students with an ACT score of 27 or higher can get essentially the same deal at Mizzou.

The draining away of Chicago students is even forcing some state universities to reconsider their own recruitment strategies. Illinois State University pulls 97 percent of its students from the
state, with most coming from Chicago. But with so much competition from afar, the school has to at least consider returning the favor.

"As each year goes by, we look at the possibility of whether we might have to go to other states to be competitive," said Nate Barger, an Illinois State recruiter.

The College Fair

After dinner, Buxton and the crew of recruiters make their way to Palatine High School, where the five schools making up Township High School District 211 have opened their doors. A pair of cavernous gyms are lined with tables brimming with brochures and banners from places like Arizona State, Baylor, Carnegie Mellon, Vanderbilt, Seton Hall and Dartmouth.

The next two hours at Buxton's booth will be little more than a blur of endless questions: Do you have pre-med? Do you have dermatology? Psychology? Tell me about the journalism school. Do you have a nursing program?

And then it's as if someone flips a switch and shuts off the stream of students and parents, bringing another whirlwind day to a close.

As Buxton packs her gear, a University of Nebraska recruiter working the table to her left snags her attention with a question that says a lot about the people who spend their days crisscrossing the region: "Where are we?"

"Palatine," Buxton answers as she starts toward the door, doing mental calculations over how much sleep she'll get between the two-hour drive home and a 5:30 a.m. alarm.
University mines Chicagoland for new students.

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

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Rep. Chris Kelly will try again next year to get Missourians to issue $800 million in bonds to improve public buildings on college campuses and at state parks.

If lawmakers were to approve the plan, the bond package would go to voters for final approval. But Kelly, D-Columbia, hasn't been able to get the bond issue out of the Capitol and onto a ballot for the past two years, and University of Missouri System administrators have stopped waiting.

Since July 2009, the university's Board of Curators has issued $627 million in bonds for building projects, taking advantage of historically low interest rates. The bulk of those bonds will be used to pay for buildings that generate revenues to pay them back. Bonds funding residential halls, for instance, will be repaid with housing fees, and patient care revenues will pay back bonds for health care facilities.

On Monday, though, UM System President Gary Forsee told curators at a special meeting that he couldn't justify issuing bonds for academic buildings on the Rolla and St. Louis campuses. Although the renovations and additions might have increased enrollment, bringing in more tuition dollars, the bonds would have needed a reliable revenue stream, which would have come in the form of new student fees.

Even though Benton Stadler science center at UM-St. Louis and a new chemical and biological engineering building at Missouri University of Science and Technology are critical needs, curators agreed asking students to pick up the tab would set a dangerous precedent.

"What they're saying is that there is no reason why students of this state ought to be paying for things that are the state's responsibility," Kelly said. "Basically, we would be asking students to be more responsible than their governor and their legislators."

A state bond would be paid back with general operating revenues. Although state dollars are limited, the time to issue the bonds is right because interest rates are low and the projects would create jobs, said Sen. Kurt Schaefer, R-Columbia.

"There are people in both the House and Senate who are philosophically opposed to borrowing money even though it's the right time to borrow," Schaefer said. "I happen to agree with Chris. Right now is the time to be borrowing money both for the low interest rate and for job creation. Hopefully, we can sway our colleagues that the most fiscally prudent thing to do right now is to borrow for capital improvements at low rates rather than defer the projects to when rates are higher."

Although Kelly stressed the bond would benefit colleges across the state, as well as improve state parks, the plan would likely include money benefiting MU. Last year, the package included $51 million to renovate and add on to the Lafferre Hall engineering building.
Kelly can scratch one MU project off the list, though. Curators earlier this year issued $30 million in revenue bonds to pay for a new Ellis Fischel Cancer Center, ending years of political bickering over state funds for the project.

The cancer center was in line to receive $31 million from the sale of Missouri Higher Education Loan Authority assets, but Gov. Jay Nixon froze that funding when he took office in 2009.Kelly also had tried to put the project in his failed bond proposals. In May, Forsee told curators the project couldn't wait because the cancer center is part of a new patient care tower already under construction.

On Monday, curators added $265 million to the debt load, approving bonds to build a new Green Meadows Clinic in Columbia, renovate Mark Twain residential hall at MU, replace a power plant on the Rolla campus and construct a parking structure at UM-Kansas City. The bond package was on top of a 2009 package totaling $332 million.

Last year's bond issue did include money to upgrade two academic buildings at MU. In those cases, though, Forsee identified a constant revenue source by reallocating a portion of MU's maintenance budget to pay down the debt. The university's approval of bonds, Kelly said, "means they're doing their jobs, regardless of the failure of the state."

UM administrators are likely hoping other lawmakers also get that message. In a prepared statement last week, Nikki Krawitz, vice president of finance, said the university is "doing its part" by taking on low-interest debt where it can. That doesn't mean the system doesn't need help, though.

"We continue to look to our state for funding non-revenue generating, but essential, classroom buildings and deteriorating infrastructure," Krawitz said.

Reach Janessa Silvey at 573-815-1705 or e-mail jsilvey@columbiatribune.com.
Colleges face learning curve with new legislators

By JANESE SILVEY

The *University of Missouri System* will rely next year on alumni groups and other advocates to help convince freshman lawmakers that supporting its mission is in the state's best interest.

"With 91 new legislators this year, the reality with term limits is the university is not going to be able to educate these legislators 100 percent between now and January," UM spokeswoman Jennifer Hollingshead said. "Now more than ever before, we'll solicit help from a number of groups — trustees, alumni — to tell the university's story. It takes everyone on board talking about what the university is, who we are, what we do and why we are important."

The 91 freshmen lawmakers include 12 new senators and 79 representatives. Most are coming in after term limits forced their predecessors out, although a few ousted incumbent rivals in the November election. Of those, 22 have ties to the UM System, having graduated from or attended one of the system's four campuses.

In the past, the state has provided new lawmakers with a tour of Missouri that included a stop in Columbia to see how the university operates. That tour has been cut because of budget shortfalls, meaning the opportunity to expose lawmakers to campus will be limited. Hollingshead said UM administrators are planning some informal and formal events to try to get to know the new lawmakers, and efforts will likely ramp up in January after they're assigned to committees. Formal events include the annual legislative day Feb. 24, during which university advocates meet with lawmakers to talk about specific needs.

Rep. Chris Kelly, D-Columbia, has hopes for the freshman class.

"It could be an opportunity," he said. "How could it be worse?"

Over the past two years, the more-seasoned General Assembly killed Kelly's attempt to ask voters for an $800 million bond package that would have paid for facility improvements on campuses. He plans to bring that plan back next session.

Kelly and fellow Columbia Democrat Rep. Mary Still are also interested in talking about increasing Missouri's cigarette tax to pad the state budget. Missouri has the lowest cigarette tax in the nation at 17 cents per pack, second to Virginia's 30-cent-a-pack tax.

It's unclear whether that discussion will go anywhere. Several of the new Republicans campaigned on promises of no new taxes, and Gov. Jay Nixon indicated this month he's not interested in talking about a cigarette tax increase.
But ignoring that debate implies lawmakers are “really saying it’s more important to have the lowest cigarette tax in the nation than it is to train nurses and engineers and chemists,” Kelly said. “That’s the decision that’s actually getting made.”

As with MU alumni groups and fans, Kelly said voters in other college towns need to make sure their representatives protect higher education. “The alumni association from, for instance, Truman, will have to say to its legislator: ‘We expect you to allow us to make a decision on the bond issue or tax or else we’re going to act accordingly next time,’ ” Kelly said. “It’s much more important than political parties. It’s important for people who live in these college towns and who care about higher education to say: ‘We’ve had enough.’ ”

Reach Janese Silvey at 573-815-1705 or e-mail jsilvey@columbiatribune.com
Thompson autism center director takes reins

By JANISE SILVEY

OPENING DAY

The Thompson Center will celebrate the grand opening of its new facility at 205 Portland Ave. at 10 a.m. Friday, welcoming new Executive Director Joel Bregman.

With a new director coming on board Wednesday and a new facility to boot, families that rely on the Thompson Center for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders can expect expanded services and programming in the future.

Joel Bregman was tapped in September to serve as executive director of the center, replacing Jim Poehling, who became assistant vice chancellor of health sciences at the University of Missouri.

Bregman will be new to Missouri, but he’s not new to the field. He has extensive experience with autism, having served as director of clinical research at the Fay J. Lindner Center for Autism and as associate investigator at the Feinstein Institute for Medical Research at North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System.

Bregman said he’ll spend his first few months “really getting to know the center well, and the programs and staff well.” He said he’ll also support and grow existing programs and perhaps identify areas where there might be gaps or opportunities to provide new approaches to complement existing services.

The Thompson Center’s new facility will allow him to do that. The center earlier this year moved to a university-owned facility at 205 Portland Ave. from the previous location at 300 Portland, where it shared space with a sleep diagnostic center and a paternity lab. The move primarily was funded from a $5 million state allocation.

The new center includes more exam, therapy, testing and telehealth rooms, as well as a large classroom, said Cheryl Unterschutz, spokeswoman for the center. That large classroom space will be used to expand a program that prepares toddlers with autism for school. Currently, that program focuses on speech and behavioral skills, but next year it will be expanded to provide therapy to help older children work on social skills, Unterschutz said.

Bregman also envisions stronger partnerships with local elementary schools. One idea is to have autism center staff provide more in-depth training to classroom teachers.
Another would be to find a way to allow students to serve as mentors for children with autism. Bregman oversaw a mentorship program at Long Island that allowed high school students to fulfill community service requirements by working with autistic peers.

Collaboration will be key to his approach, Bregman said. That’s one aspect that attracted him to the position: The MU-operated Thompson Center already has ties to MU Health Care, the College of Education and other academic research on campus.

“What impressed me with the Thompson Center is this goal to really integrate research and clinical practice,” he said. “That really is important for helping advance the field and for making sure what we’re doing in terms of treatment is the most effective.”

It’s also critical to providing a holistic-type approach to autism, and it builds on work he already has done. In past studies, Bregman found that symptoms of autism shouldn’t necessarily be treated the same as similar symptoms from other disorders. For instance, a prescription known to be effective in treating obsessive-compulsive disorder isn’t as effective when used to treat obsession or compulsion linked to autism, he said. The same goes for medication used to treat attention deficient disorders. In those cases, ADHD prescriptions have been shown to have a greater risk of negative side effects when used to treat attention problems associated with autism.

Reach Janessa Silvey at 573-815-1705 or e-mail jsilvey@columbiatribune.com
Gifts for special-needs kids take extra care

By JANISE SILVEY

Julianna Basi glanced at the pink dress-up gown her mother, Kate, offered her, but she wasn't interested.

The 3-year-old was even less impressed with the jack-in-the-box, pushing the toy off of the bench where her mother had placed it.

Buying gifts for little Julianna come Christmastime is tough, Kate Basi said. Julianna has Down syndrome and isn't quite ready for some of the gifts her peers will unwrap Christmas morning.

"She's much more interested in bows and boxes than what is inside them," Basi said.

If it's tough for parents to buy for children with developmental disabilities, imagine being a friend or relative trying to figure it out.

Julie Brinkhoff, associate director of the Great Plains Center at the University of Missouri, is lending some expertise this holiday season.

Oftentimes, she said, gift-givers either overestimate a child's ability — offering something that's potentially frustrating — or they underestimate abilities and run the risk of offending recipients.

"People just make the best guess they can. Frequently, though, they're even less accurate than ours," said Basi, whose husband is MU spokesman Christian Basi. "As a parent, you do have the responsibility to be honest with people."

And it's important to ask parents not only what a child might want but also what a child wouldn't want, Brinkhoff said. Children with autism, for instance, can have strong reactions to certain colors or sounds, but "you're not going to know that unless you talk to the parents," Brinkhoff said.

If relatives know the interests of a child, they can try to match that interest with the child's skill level.

An older child with reading problems might not be able to read the bound copy of "Harry Potter" his peers are reading, for instance, but he still might be interested in the storyline.

In that case, a book on tape might be ideal, Brinkhoff said.

As kids get older, they're likely to want similar gadgets regardless of development.

"Buying a pink, doll-themed CD player for a 15-year-old with a developmental disability is probably something to avoid," Brinkhoff said. "That 15-year-old is probably interested in an iPod, just like her peers."

It's also important not to buy gifts that try to "fix" a child's disorder, Brinkhoff said.
Her son, for instance, suffered from dyslexia, and friends and family members showered him with books every Christmas hoping to encourage him to read.

“Not that a book isn’t appropriate,” she said, “but he wouldn’t have minded something a little different for Christmas.”

Reach Janess Silvey at 573-815-1705 or e-mail jsilvey@columbiatribune.com.
Bin Wu knew the energy assessment center established on the University of Missouri campus six years ago had helped area businesses cut utility costs, but until recently, he didn’t realize how much.

New data reveal that about 30 Missouri manufacturers saved a total of $1.74 million after implementing suggestions identified by MU’s Industrial Assessment Center in 2008 and 2009.

"Of course, we’re quite pleased to see that,” said Wu, a professor of industrial engineering and the center’s director. “When the figures finally came back, it was really very satisfactory.”

Through the center, known as MoIAC, a team of engineering faculty members and students reviews a company’s utility use and flags areas where improvements could be made. Energy audits include a review of companies’ utility bills and all-day site visits where students and faculty members try to identify opportunities for savings.

Sometimes recommendations are simple, such as making sure unnecessary lights are turned off, Wu said. Other times, the team might recommend tweaking a thermostat or changes to a boiler system.

Many of the recommendations are easy for companies to implement, Wu said, and they have big returns. Companies that have worked with MoIAC are saving, on average, $80,000 a year, he said.

“There are so many low-hanging fruit out there, I wish to scream,” he said. “In fact, I do scream my head off because there are so many low-hanging fruit, so low you can literally bang your head on them.”

Although the center’s free services can mean significant savings for companies, the primary purpose is to give students real-world experience, Wu said.

“The main thing is to educate and train the next generation of energy-savvy engineers,” he said. “We expose students to energy efficiency issues so when they graduate they can become leaders in the field.”

Students who have participated in MoIAC assessments have gone on to start companies that provide similar assessments. MU spokesman Steve Adams said

“The really interesting thing is that it helps students and the companies,” he said. “It’s really a win-win for our students who get real-world experience.”

Although the center — established with a U.S. Department of Energy grant in 2004 — has mainly focused on manufacturing companies, Wu said he’d like to expand the services to other businesses and industries. Companies can see if they’re eligible for a free energy assessment and check out downloadable efficiency tools at the center’s website, iac.missouri.edu.
Although sustainable energy sources such as wind and biomass are important, energy consumers also "need to be savvy about how you spend it," Wu said.

"We need to find new sources of energy, but at the same time right now we need to be savvy and sensible in the way we consume energy."

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Americans hang on to Thanksgiving myths
By JANESE SILVEY

Most families sitting down to enjoy a Thanksgiving meal tomorrow won't try to hash out the true meaning of the holiday. For many, it's simply a time to enjoy turkey and stuffing and perhaps some football.

LuAnne Roth, who teaches American folklore in the University of Missouri's Department of English, enjoys that aspect of the holiday, too. It's just the Pilgrim-and-Indian myth that makes her cringe.

"A lot of elementary schools still teach the myth of the first Thanksgiving," said Roth, who defended her dissertation last week about unraveling Thanksgiving traditions.

Of course, many children's books portray the first Thanksgiving as the time American Indians welcomed European settlers at Plymouth Rock by sitting down for a meal together. That's the myth. By most scholarly accounts, the Pilgrims who came here were dying from illnesses and malnutrition before an American Indian helped them learn to grow corn and live off the land. Although many believe Gov. William Bradford organized a feast after the first successful corn harvest, Roth said there's no proof such a feast took place. In her studies, she found that Bradford often declared religious days of thanks.

Regardless, what followed was the demise of life as American Indians knew it.

Roth acknowledges it might not be appropriate to teach young children "the truth because it's ugly, stealing a country from people already here. I agree, maybe not. But when do we teach them the truth? Not until American history courses in college?"

The story of Thanksgiving took hold when President Abraham Lincoln declared it an official holiday in 1863, Roth said. The fable perpetuated in public schools, where teachers hoped the celebration would provide a model for how to treat the influx of immigrants arriving in America during that time period, she said.

But Roth is surprised the story is still presented as truth some 150 years later.

"I teach a section on American festivals, and most students are not aware that this is a myth and isn't historical fact," she said. "A lot of Americans assume it's true because why wouldn't you? It's what you were taught in school."

Activities in Columbia Public Schools involving Pilgrims and American Indians aren't part of any formal curriculum, said Sally Beth Lyon, chief academic officer. Rather, just like any holiday, it's up to individual schools and teachers to decide how to celebrate Thanksgiving.
"That topic would be discussed in context of U.S. history in fifth grade — the age of exploration, colonization, which includes a Native American unit in which students do activities like researching the lives and beliefs and cultures of indigenous peoples," she said. "Pilgrims and Indians are not part of that curriculum. Holiday celebrations are not part of curricula."

But the story also provides a kinder, gentler version of the truth that many cling to because it’s compelling, Roth said.

"I would argue that the story is so compelling it justifies colonization and makes it seem as though American Indians went along with it and welcomed Pilgrims to their land," she said. "It makes mainstream America feel good about that aspect of our history. The problem, of course, is it’s only taught through the lens of Europeans and rarely through the perspective of American Indians, for many of whom it’s a day of mourning for the demise of their culture and life as they knew it."

Don Hart, a member of the Northern Cherokee of Missouri, said it would be nice if schools taught children that Indians saved the Pilgrims from starvation instead of presenting it as a peaceful exchange at Plymouth Rock. But he is used to inaccuracies in American Indians’ history.

"There’s so much in the history books that is told entirely wrong," he said. "The real fact of the matter is had Indians not shared their food and taught them how to plant corn, they wouldn’t have made it two more months."

That said, Hart will be enjoying Thanksgiving dinner with most people tomorrow.

"It’s a good day to meet with family and give thanks to the creator for having made it through another year," he said. "The central theme is to take time with your family to say to the creator, ‘Thank you for letting us be here one more year’ and forget about those things that are not accurate."

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