Deal will draw Indian engineering students

By Janese Silvey

Thursday, December 16, 2010

The University of Missouri’s College of Engineering has forged another international partnership that should bring more Indian students to campus.

Yesterday, Deau Jim Thompson was in India, where he signed a memorandum of understanding with Lovely Professional University that will allow undergraduate students to finish degrees here after taking general education courses at IPU. The signed contract finalizes months of discussions.

Lex Akers, associate dean of the college, said he isn’t sure when MU can expect to see the first class of LPU students. But starting in the fall, he said, administrators will work closely with interested students to make sure they’re taking classes there that will easily transfer to MU.

The partnership is the latest in a string of agreements MU has made with engineering schools in China, India and Ukraine over the past year. There are various benefits from the international push, Akers said. In addition to providing valuable degrees to the students who come here to study, having a more diverse college also benefits American students, he said.

"Engineering is a growing international profession," he said. "When students leave here, they work for companies that have projects all over the world. Bringing international students in to mix with our students is valuable for both."

This fall, 4 percent of engineering undergraduates at MU are international students, which includes those coming from these international agreements. At the graduate level, 56 percent of engineering students are foreign, said Jan Wiese-Fales, a spokeswoman for the college. That doesn't include 10 Iraqi students who began pursuing graduate-level degrees at MU this year as part of the Iraqi Education Initiative. Those students must first complete English proficiency courses before enrolling in graduate-level engineering courses, Wiese-Fales said.

Under the latest agreement, some MU students could have a chance to study or work in India, said Vlad Likholotov, director of the college’s international programs and initiatives.

"Not only do we want to see Indian students coming here and completing their undergraduate degrees, potentially our students will be going there and potentially staying a short time to study or work in internship experiences," he said. "So it is going to be two-way traffic for us."
Akers said MU should continue to see benefits of international partnerships even when students complete their degrees here and return home.

“They are our alumni,” he said. “We look forward to close connections to all of our alumni. So that international network provides very valuable connections.”
Holiday stress can be handled

THE POINT — Dealing with the long-term effects can be a good way to gain perspective.

The end-of-the-year holiday season is intended to be a celebratory time, but there are more than 12 days’ worth of issues, situations and pressures that increase stress levels for many people.

Dealing with such issues isn’t easy, mainly because we tend to be focused on the immediate results (holiday planning) rather than the long term. But some are looking at the bigger picture.

Last week, a team of University of Missouri health experts offered some tips for coping with seasonal sourness to help, as they said, “avoid Grinch-like tendencies.” Their tips are based on findings from Missouri research conducted throughout the year.

Kellie Shuck, adjunct clinical faculty in the MU Sinclair School of Nursing, got right to the point that turns many residents internal systems into a pressure cooker.

“Lower your expectations,” she said. “Attempting to achieve the perfect holiday will cause stress and set people up to fail. Remember that nothing is perfect, so embrace what you have.”

Following the “embrace what you have” theme, Clark Peters, assistant professor in the school of Social Work, urged celebrants to “be thankful for your family.”

“Each year, 29,000 foster youths become adults,” he said. “These young people face tremendous challenges in negotiating life on their own, and most spend the holidays without their biological or adoptive families.”

With end-of-year work responsibilities, gift-giving anxiety and the pressures of dealing with an array of family members’ personalities, some feel the need to try to be ElastiGirl from “The Incredibles,” stretching themselves to cover everything.

“Be clear about what you can and cannot do,” said Constance Brooks, adjunct associate professor in the nursing school and instructor in the Master of Public Health Program.
"Determine limitations and boundaries, and focus on living one day at a time to simplify your life. Be honest each day with yourself and with others. Then, let go of any emotional attachments to specific outcomes."

Brooks also provides an unconventional insight into gift-giving, noting that "simple gifts may be the most important gifts we can give." Her examples:

>> Refraining from judging ourselves and others.

>> Eliminating sarcasm and anger.

>> Refraining from hurtful speech or actions.

"These gifts greatly contribute to healing ourselves and others," she said.

Quite true — but how do you wrap them?
COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Allen Institute's iSocial shows promise for children with autism

By Michelle Markelz
December 16, 2010 | 7:24 p.m. CST

COLUMBIA — As the parent of a child with an autism spectrum disorder, it pains Tyeece Little to see her son rejected by other children.

“That’s probably the hardest part,” said Little, whose only child, Carleton, has Asperger’s syndrome. Asperger's is a disorder characterized by social awkwardness, delayed motor skills and unusual speaking patterns.

One experience stands out. When Carleton was in middle school, he approached a group of boys and asked to join them. His mother, who observed the exchange, said the response was a “sucker punch.”

“He went up to see what they were doing, and this kid was very insensitive,” said Little, 46. “He said ‘you’re not invited to play.’”

“I don’t want to witness that again.”

Since then, Carleton, now 15, has joined a building social confidence group at the Thompson Center for Autism. The group helps children communicate with each other and learn what is socially appropriate.

There Carleton discovered iSocial, a groundbreaking, virtual learning program under development at MU’s Allen Institute, part of the College of Education. The interactive online experience teaches social skills to children with autism.

Using a 3-D world where users create avatars, the program teaches children to interact with others and practice social rules such as turn taking.

Little realized this was an opportunity she didn’t want Carleton to pass up.

“I thought it’d be kind of fun for him,” she said. “But I also thought it would be good for him to see other people that are like him — other boys in particular.”
The virtual world presents a group of users with tasks such as designing a restaurant. They then make decisions about organizing the menu or arranging furniture.

As they make their choices, the virtual world changes. The process helps them practice teamwork and cooperation.

Little said she noticed Carleton’s progress after two sessions.

“He became more self-aware of how he comes across to people,” she said. “He can make adjustments if something happens. He can think of the other person’s reaction and how he contributed to it.”

Carleton said the experience was fun and educational, but he also liked the feeling of helping other children.

“In some sense, it feels good to be a part of something that could be great,” he said. “It’s being part of a history almost.”

Jim Laffey, leader of the iSocial project, said he believes the potential is also there to extend it for children to use independently, without a facilitator or other users online. To learn empathy, for example, a student would practice recognizing facial expressions.

Because it is Web-based, developers hope iSocial will become a tool used by schools and parents in both urban and rural Missouri.

Alan Baumgartner, 56, is an outspoken advocate for bringing iSocial in the schools. Watching his daughter, Abby, struggle in a rural school system made shortfalls in autism education apparent to him.

“I know what our families go through,” said Baumgartner, who lives in Auxvasse. “The rural areas especially cannot afford to have teachers that are trained to deal strictly with children with autism, and this is where iSocial can reach out.”

Little voiced similar concerns about her son’s public school experience.

“He constantly found himself in the principal’s office for disciplinary issues,” Little said. “The message they were seuding was that he was a bad kid.”

After speaking with representatives from the Missouri Department of Mental Health, Baumgartner said he wants to get support from state legislators.
"The economy is so bad right now, Mental Health does not have money," he said.

iSocial requires high bandwidth and computers that can handle its high-tech design. Though research and development is operating on $1.7 million from Autism Speaks and the Institute of Education Sciences, the Allen Institute is not responsible for the cost of putting the program in schools.

While parents and developers are anxious to see the benefits of iSocial, Carleton expressed concerns that taking the program into schools would separate students with autism from their peers and reinforce negative stereotypes.

"I do think that the future potential is interesting," he said. "But I think that if you label autism in schools, that's almost going to create a prejudice."

His mother concurred.

"People still think of autism as someone who is uncommunicative and hits their head against the wall," Little said. "Unfortunately that's the image people have."

Laffey said that the program could possibly be introduced as an after-school type of activity.

"We could envision, in the future, some type of a hybrid system," he said.

Perhaps there could be a club-like atmosphere where students could connect with others and be able to have a social exchange online, Laffey said.

Completion of the construction phase of iSocial is scheduled for June 2011. After that, Laffey said field testing will begin.

"We know this'll work," he said. "We just don't necessarily know how to make it work yet, so we have to keep improving it."

But, he added, "early results suggest to us that there's something really special here that we're doing."
Techies in California have launched an insurance service for farmers seeking insulation against the largest source of crop loss — bad weather.

It’s called WeatherBill, and the company’s deep-pocketed investors are betting that they’ve caught lightning in a bottle.

The San Francisco company, which already sells insurance against nasty weather to clients such as the U.S. Open tennis tournament, is in the midst of shifting 80 percent of its focus to agriculture.

“Clearly we think there’s a big market for this,” said Greg Smirin, vice president of marketing and product for WeatherBill.

On its face, the sales pitch to farmers is simple: Insure against bad weather during key times of year such as the planting season — a protection that goes beyond what is available through federally subsidized crop insurance. WeatherBill essentially insures against lost yields (and profit) during harvest that could be the result of, for example, difficult planting conditions.

The mechanics of WeatherBill’s product, however, are decidedly more complicated.

The company, founded in 2006 by ex-Googlc development team members, weaves together sophisticated weather models and market factors, then spits out scenarios on its website showing estimates of how much a farmer could lose due to bad weather — excess rain, heat, drought or freeze. The website then offers up plans that would, for example, pay if rainfall goes over a certain level more than six times during a prime planting month.

WeatherBill markets its product through crop insurance agents, who also sell federally subsidized insurance.

Bob Abel, a grower and crop insurance agent in Oskaloosa, Kan., about 60 miles west of Kansas City, noted that WeatherBill automates its claims process based on data from the National Weather Service.
“It’s kind of difficult for guys to get their head around: Well, if it doesn’t rain during this period of time, how do I tell them I have a claim?” Abel said. “I tell them, well, it’s automatic, you don’t have to tell them anything. Producers like that; however, it’s a change in mindset from what they’re used to.”

Describing pricing options that vary based on the crop and location can be tricky.

“What I tell my clients is that there’s a dollar menu, Applebee’s and Ruth’s Chris level,” said Steve Sims, an independent crop insurance agent in Indiana who started selling WeatherBill in November.

Sims laid out an example in which a corn farmer is looking for added protection against yield lost due to bad weather. If the farmer expects around 160 bushels per acre, WeatherBill premiums range from around $20 to $50 per acre.

But convincing farmers to take a chance on a fresh face in a crowd of crop insurance stalwarts is no small task.

“I think farmers will be interested in this product, but I think they’ll be hesitant as well,” said Ray Massey, a crop insurance expert with the University of Missouri in Columbia. “There’s going to be an issue of trust.”

But Massey added that in a boom year like this, farmers might be willing to roll the dice on added protection against a temperamental Mother Nature.

Tim Lloyd reports for Harvest Public Media, an agriculture reporting project involving KCUR in Kansas City and five other Midwest public broadcasting stations. Harvest is supported through a grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Go to harvestpublicmedia.org for more information.
Pinkel and Alden to ring NASDAQ opening bell on Friday

by Bill Pollock on December 16, 2010

in Sports

University of Missouri Head Football Coach Gary Pinkel, and Director of Athletics Mike Alden will take center in the world capital of commerce Friday morning, as they head to New York City to perform the ceremonial ringing of the opening bell for the NASDAQ market. The opportunity for the opening comes in conjunction with the 2010 Insight Bowl, sponsored by Insight Enterprises, Inc. (NSIT on the NASDAQ market ticker), in honor of the 22nd annual playing of the Insight Bowl.

Pinkel and Alden will be on hand at the ceremony, along with Gary Barta, Director of Athletics at the University of Iowa – Mizzou’s opponent in the upcoming game, which will be played Dec. 28th in Tempe, Ariz. It will take place tomorrow, Friday, December 17th at the NASDAQ MarketSite in Times Square, at 9:15 a.m. eastern/8:15 a.m. central.

“This is a big honor, it’s going to be a real thrill to be there in person and see the inner workings of the market,” said Pinkel. “I’ve always had an interest in the market and have followed it as much as possible, but certainly haven’t ever had this kind of opportunity, so I’m looking forward to representing Mizzou and the Insight Bowl,” he said.