

News Articles

MAP quest: SGA joins grant rally

The Student Senate of IIT sent two of its members, Kevin O'Leary and I, on a road trip to Springfield, IL to join a rally of nearly two thousand students from colleges throughout Illinois.

The goal of the rally was to convince the General Assembly and Governor Patrick Quinn to restore funding to a crucial financial aid program used by approximately 25% of all Illinois college students.

Thanks to the state government cutting funding of Illinois's Monetary Award Program (MAP) by half over the summer, over 260,000 Illinois college students found their financial aid awards reduced by thousands of dollars. This cut was made worse by the fact that it targeted those most in need of aid: low-income students who have few options outside of loans. Some lack even that luxury.

Not surprisingly, students and administrators from nearly every college in the state stood up and sought ways to address this problem: lobbying, signing petitions, contacting representatives, and writing news articles to spread awareness of the situation.

Being among the estimated 600 IIT undergraduates whose funding was cut, in addition to my positions within SGA and TechNews, I wanted to get involved as much as I could. So, armed with cameras, energy shots, and copies of an SGA petition, Senator O'Leary and I trekked the three hours from IIT to the Illinois Capitol.

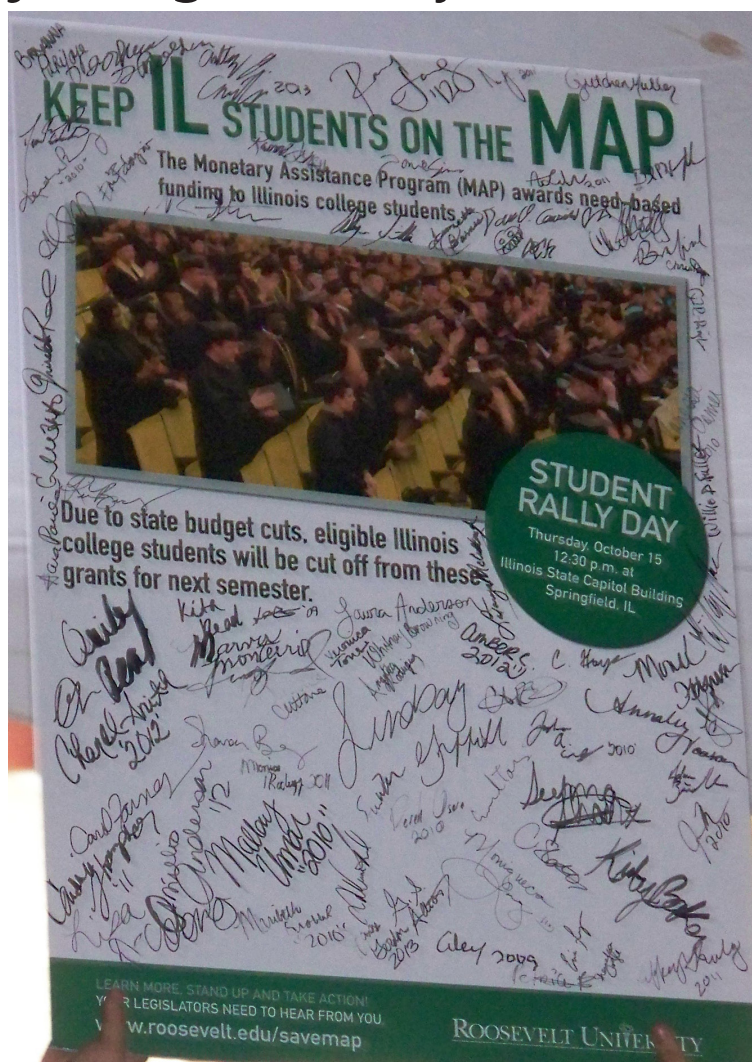
Upon arrival, we located the offices of several state representatives and attempted to meet with them to stress the importance of funding MAP. However, we found that the representatives were in session voting on, among other things, future funding of MAP.

During our wait, we sent the SGA petition to every office we could find: House Representatives, State Senators, and Governor Quinn. While asking about representatives' position on restoring funding to MAP, an interesting trend developed.

While no one was against helping students in need, not a single method of ensuring funding was mentioned. MAP funding always seemed to be someone else's fault/responsibility.

Legislators point blame at the governor for approving the cut; Governor Quinn points to the financial mess left behind by former (impeached) Governor Rod Blagojevich for making such drastic budget cuts necessary.

Meanwhile, one out of every four Illinois students is left wondering whether they will be able to afford to remain in school next semester.



After waiting for over an hour for a chance to speak personally with representatives, we decided to join the rally, which was located down the street from the Capitol—letting our voices be heard, not as IIT students, but as Illinois students.

While looking over the mass of people, placards, and signs, one

thing became clear: MAP affects all of Illinois. In addition to the duo from IIT, there were students from Aurora University, Bradley University, City Colleges of Chicago, DePaul University, Loyola University, McKendree University, St. Augustine College, Trinity Christian College, UIC, and UIUC.

In fact, that list only includes schools which were written on signs and apparel.

A host of people, both students and state officials, gave passionate speeches about the importance of restoring funding to MAP.

The stories of struggle told by students at the rally reflect the consequences of cutting off aid to those most in need.



A large, diverse crowd of people, primarily young adults, is gathered under a white tent. The atmosphere is energetic, with many individuals cheering and holding up signs. Visible signs include "MAP", "FUTURE", "SAVE MAP", "ABOUT Illinois Students", and "The BLACK Student of Detroit Union Benefits from MAP". Some people are holding blue and red pom-poms. The crowd is densely packed, and the scene is brightly lit, suggesting an outdoor daytime event.

Another speaker commented that funding education “is a priority for the Obama administration in Washington; it should be a priority for Illinois.”

After one last attempt to speak with House Representatives, Kevin and I decided to call it a day and head back north. David Baker, Vice President of External Affairs at IIT, commented that by participating in the grassroots rally and distributing a petition on behalf of the student population of IIT, Kevin and I accomplished more in the hours we spent at the Capitol than he could have done through lobbying.



News Articles

NIU, one month later: What has changed?

It has been over a month since the lives of those at Northern Illinois University (NIU) were wracked by violence and tragedy.

The consequences of that February afternoon have been felt nearly everywhere: law enforcement's ongoing search for answers about the shooting, affected communities' need for security and desire to commemorate those lost, and legislators' arguments on how to prevent similar events from happening.

In an effort to address safety concerns at campuses, state representatives at an Illinois House appropriations hearing discussed possibilities for state-funding for college security upgrades.

NIU has already taken steps toward improving security on campus; among them is having the electronic locks at the entrances of all residence halls, which used to be active only during the night, remain locked all day. These locks require students to swipe their student IDs, OneCards, in order to enter. Several colleges have already started using text-messaging and e-mail to alert students in the event of a crisis.

However, many have questioned the effectiveness of these methods. One of the more costly safety measures being considered by some universities is a system that could remotely lock the doors of a building. This would enable campuses to contain a violent situation even before appropriate personnel arrive to confront it.

A much less expensive option which has been discussed by many, including psychologist and author Dave Grossman, who visited Waubesa last year, is installing locks on all classroom doors so they can be secured from the inside.

This potential measure would give instructors, as well as students, added protection by not requiring someone to brace a door themselves, a situation which has cost lives in past shootings.

State and federal authorities announced to the media that subpoenas have been issued, and a grand jury formed, in order to acquire evidence about the NIU shooter's personal and medical background, as well as his online activities leading up to the incident.

One fact of the NIU incident which has attracted much attention is that the shooter purchased his firearms legally, from a dealer in Champaign. In apparent response to intense denunciation from numerous people and organizations, the shop, Tony's Guns and Ammo, has closed its doors.



According to a representative from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, the owner of the shop gave up his federal dealer's license to sell firearms and has gone out of business.

Federal authorities have commented that the owner had done nothing wrong and that he followed all proper legal procedures, including mandatory background checks and wait period, when he sold the weapons.

The shop's closing has added fuel to the already heated debate over state and national gun control. Many are in favor of lifting restrictions on guns, including allowing students to bring firearms with them to campus.

The idea is that if there is the threat of an immediate and deadly response to violence, an incident is less likely to happen and would involve much fewer casualties.

Supporters of lessening restrictions cite statistics suggesting that school shooters do not look for gunfights, but rather vulnerable and undefended locations.

Opponents believe that lifting restrictions on gun control will simply make things worse, and view the idea of armed students on college campuses as a recipe for disaster. They tend to favor tighter laws and more screening and oversight. These are far from the only sides in this growing debate.

Further complicating the arguments are concerns over the rights of people with mental illness, which some consider an even more pertinent issue than firearm regulation.

Attempting to address concerns over weapons being sold to those with mental disorders, the Illinois legislature passed a law, scheduled to take effect in June, requiring health professionals to report to the Dept. of Human

Services any patient “whose mental condition is of such a nature that it is manifested by violent, suicidal, threatening or assaultive behavior.”

State police will have access to the reports and prevent the individual from obtaining a firearms permit. Despite arguments from lawmakers, many health professionals feel that this law places too much burden on them, and could undermine their ability to help patients.

With impassioned arguments on all sides of this controversial topic, any rapid or drastic change in policy appears unlikely. However, the events of February 14 have had ramifications beyond federal investigations and legislature hearings.

There has been an immense outpouring of concern and support, both from local communities and across the nation. Numerous vigils, both official and informal, have taken place in and around the campus.

Groups from Virginia Tech have visited NIU to offer support and give comfort to victims and their loved ones. Additionally, donation drives and scholarship funds have been created to provide financial support.

There have also been several memorials constructed to honor the memory of those lost. Among them is a plaque at the Cicero Community Center commemorating Catalina Garcia, an education major. The inscription on it reads, “Live, Love, and Laugh.”

It was conceived by Larry Dominick, the Town President of Cicero, as a way to commemorate Garcia in her hometown. However, not all memorials are created so easily. Possibly the most contentious issue currently facing NIU is Cole Hall, where the shooting took place, and whether it will be demolished in favor of a larger “Memorial Hall.”

Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich, along with NIU

president John Peters, first announced plans for the razing and replacement of Cole on February 27, requesting that the state legislature approve the estimated \$40 million in funds required for the project.

The announcement received a mixed response from representatives, with some eagerly supporting it and others seeing it as an unnecessary expense given the state’s already sizeable deficit.

Peters’ position changed after the announcement caused an outcry from people who felt that decisions were being made too hastily and without consulting enough people.

In a letter to the entire NIU community, Peters wrote, “First, we must decide how we want to memorialize that which has been lost... Our goal is to create a special place on our campus where generations of the NIU family can come to remember those we lost and reflect on what we can each do to honor their legacy.”

Peters continued, “To that end, I am forming a February 14th Memorial Committee... to solicit opinions and develop ideas for a fitting memorial... Ultimately, our decisions on an appropriate memorial, reassignment of classroom spaces and the future of Cole Hall must address both the emotional and practical considerations we face as an injured but united campus community.”

Further complicating the situation are the 50-100 thousand archeological artifacts which are stored in Cole’s basement. Owned by the anthropology department, the artifacts could take a year or more to properly move out of the building.

Among the many questions which arose from the incident was, would there be a reduction in NIU’s current registration or future admissions? Immediately following the shooting, many students told reporters that they would not

return to classes; some even suggested that they might cancel registration entirely. Whether these statements have been backed up by official withdrawals is uncertain.

According to Adam Stone, Registration & Records Director at NIU, there has not been any significant increase in student withdrawals between this year and previous spring semesters.

Stone added, “In fact... [the withdrawals] are slightly less.” However, he could not provide records to verify this: “Universities... don’t work that way.”

That is to say that since student registration records do not indicate reasons for withdrawal, the department cannot confirm whether students who have withdrawn did so due to the events of February 14 or not.



What D&D taught me about HR

I was updating my resume and LinkedIn profile, trying to think of clever ways to highlight some of my non-“real job” experience, when I began arguing with myself over whether to highlight skills honed by running pen-&-paper roleplaying games.

In the job-seeking world, extracurricular activities are weird. Many people advise students to include activities that highlight transferable skills and efforts outside of the classroom.

However, some activities, like some jobs, carry more professional weight than others, because their relevance to work is easier to assume: student government (formalities and organization), robotics club (experimentation and technical expertise), student newspaper (communication and deadlines), etc.

At first, roleplaying seems too much like pure recreation to be appropriate for a resume, as though enjoying Netflix or comic books was a professional qualification. Sure, roleplaying is fun, but how could it stand next to business software and job skills on a resume?

Well, I'll tell you. Ask anyone who has played the role of Game Master (GM), or Storyteller for you “World of Darkness” fans: running a game is no small feat. Many skills are required to host an interesting, entertaining, and engaging game.

Conflict Resolution: Personality conflicts are not fun things to manage, neither in business nor at the gaming table. In gaming, there is the added complication that each person at the table is actually representing two people. There is the player—the human at the table—and the character—the orc, mage, or Venusian anarcho-capitalist cyber-dolphin from the year 3000 (god, I love “Eclipse Phase”)—being controlled by the player. Tensions can be character vs. character, player vs. player, and even character vs. player. Conflicts can be excellent opportunities for plot and character development or they can force the GM to take disciplinary actions: by killing characters in inventively gruesome ways, giving players less troublesome characters, or out rightly banishing players from the game table. In gaming, as in business, sometimes firing people is the only option.

Logistics: Depending on the number and preferences of players, GMs have to organize game sessions around varied schedules, estimate the duration of each session to fit those schedules, arrange appropriate snacks and refreshments (sessions typically run at least a couple of hours), and maintain a stock of necessary equipment (rulebooks, character sheets, dice, maps, and reference guides).

Accounting: If GMs do not keep close track of characters' experience and resources, or if they give rewards too generously, then

opportunistic players may take advantage of the poor bookkeeping to make their characters untouchable gods and disrupt the entire game. There is a reason there are “Twilight Zone” episodes about how boring omnipotence can be. Without challenge, victories are hollow.

Human Resource Management: In HR Management, the company's interests and the employees' interests have to align or bad things can happen. The same is true of game campaigns. If the GM focuses entirely on their own plots and goals then the players, and their characters, can become bored and cause trouble for the GM, or simply leave. But, if the GM gives players or characters too much leeway and not enough direction, then cooperation and the story can easily break down, wasting the effort and resources the GM put into the game.

Memorization: Nothing kills a game faster than a GM who needs to stop the story to consult a book because they forgot the rules for diplomacy, combat, or what certain actions/items/creatures do. GMs need to prioritize all of the rules, character actions, and details about the setting and then determine which things can be referenced without slowing the flow of play. A GM also must know what needs to be remembered immediately.

Creativity: I would say innovation, but that word is being overused to the point of becoming meaningless. Being creative is vital when creating a fictional setting, or even entire worlds. The setting has to be solid enough to work within. It has to be populated with interesting people and things to keep the game from being nameless drones yelling “Go there!” and “Do this!” Most importantly, there has to be some plot which is unique enough to pique curiosity and yet conventional enough that players do not feel lost.

Improvisation: As I once read on a “Magic: the Gathering” card, “There are only two rules of tactics: never be without a plan, and never rely on it.” That is sage advice for life in general. Plots and business models can look great on paper, but if they are not flexible enough in practice to adapt to the unexpected then what good are they? People come and go; expectations shift. Managers and GMs who cannot appropriately improvise and adapt to changes in the market/game can become uncomfortable for customers and players to deal with.

I realize that I may be intellectualizing gaming too much, trying to make it count for more than it rightly does. However, even if this article does no more than preach to a choir, it has at least accomplished one goal: It gives me more material for my writing portfolio. Conveniently, for a writer, that is resume-worthy.



"30 Days of Night" stakes romantic image of vampires

In most vampire stories ("From Dusk 'Till Dawn" comes to mind) there is one thought constantly running through survivors' minds: 'If we can just stay alive until sunrise, we'll be OK.'

Struggling to avoid becoming an unwilling blood donor for a few hours is usually scary enough for a horror movie.

"30 Days of Night" is not one of those stories. The movie, based on the bestselling graphic novel/comic by writer Steve Niles and artist Ben Templesmith, has a premise that is as simple as it is terrifying: a gang of vampires, lead by the coldly brutal Marlow (Danny Huston), descend upon the isolated port town of Barrow, Alaska, at the start of a period when there is no sunlight for 30 days.

The rapidly diminishing townsfolk, led by Sheriff Eben Oleson (Josh Hartnett) are left stranded, panicked, and unable to contact the outside world.

Together they must scurry from building to building, looking for food and supplies, and somehow evade the ravenous hemophiles for an entire month.

If the plot sounds simple, well, that's because it is. There are no deep philosophical arguments or brooding romantics here. In fact, diverting from the comic, there isn't even a real explanation for the vampires' sudden appearance in Barrow.

This is simply a straight forward, brutal tale of monsters ravaging a town with impunity. Accordingly, one should not have high expectations for acting. Unless the actors intended to convey the emotion-numbing affect of trauma.

The only one who really stands out is the wandering stranger (Ben Foster) who spends much of his time mimicking "Storm of the Century" in Barrow's small jail cell, all the while speaking of the town's impending doom. "Bar the windows, try to hide...they're coming."

The cinematography and visual effects in this movie are the real reasons to go see it. These are the areas in which the film surpasses the comic. I wished I could have rewound the 'invasion' scene, when the undead make their grand entrance through the streets of Barrow.

After some frantic ambushes, the camera takes an aerial view of the blood-stained snow, giving viewers a surreal glimpse of the carnage below. Imagine the first battle from "Gangs of New York" only with more snow... oh, and vampires. Needless to say, this movie gets quite violent and very bloody, earning every bit of its R rating.

WETA Workshop, the effects group behind "The Lord of the Rings," has done an outstanding job of bringing the horrid creatures from the stylized pages of the comic to the screen. Their appearance is as close to Templesmith's artwork as I believe possible while still being live-action.

Visually, the vampires are closer to the original nosferatu style than the more common Anne Rice or Bram Stoker. So, you won't be seeing any seductive foreign noblemen here, sorry Lestat.

These creatures are truly frightening, walking around Barrow looking absolutely feral, covered in drying blood that runs from their mouths down their necks. You also won't find the classic neat puncture marks in the victims. Instead of typical needlelike fangs, these vampires have horrid maws filled with irregular, pointed teeth. When they feed, they actually take bites out of their victims.

Unfortunately for fans of Steve Niles' original work, there is some bad news. As one might expect, since the source material is a comic, the makers of the movie made changes.

This is odd because I always felt that this was one of the few comic book stories that needed no alteration at make it appealing. It does not have guys in capes making flamboyant speeches or women wearing skimpy outfits that defy the laws of physics.

Most of the changes to the book's characters and plot seemed totally unnecessary. I am not saying this because I am a zealous, nitpicking fan of the comic; I just don't understand why some studio thought that the original story couldn't stand on its own merits without "improvements."

Eden's last name was changed from Olemaun. The character Vicente has been effectively removed from the story. Basically, imagine if Marlow was the only voice of authority in the group. Additionally, Marlow has been greatly dignified, taking some of Vicente's composure in his absence. One reason for this could be that the vampires have almost no lines in the whole movie.

In another change from the comic, none of the vampires speak English. Instead they employ an odd, throaty, hissing language. I assume that since the makers of the movie did such a great job of making the blood-caked creatures so utterly inhuman that having them throw around profanity-laden sarcasm would have made the story feel like Blade 4: Vamps in the Yukon.

While there were changes made that shouldn't have been made, "30 Days of Night" succeeded in taking the basic story and, more importantly, the creatures from Niles and Templesmith's work and unleashing them onto the big screen.

Overall, I would say that the movie has better looks, but the graphic novel has a better story.

