The Researchers Initiative

Established in 2007, the Researchers Initiative, a program within University Housing, introduces undergraduate students residing in the Urbana South Living-Learning Communities to research by pairing them with faculty mentors. Living-Learning Communities are organized around themes and provide curricular and co-curricular programming for a designated group of students living in proximity to each other. Such communities are designed to foster students’ shared sense of purpose related to the themes of their communities, which, in turn, sustains their sense of belonging and academic persistence. The Researchers Initiative extends the notion of community to include a community of researchers.

Goals

When students are accepted into the Initiative, they work with faculty members on various projects broadly related to the theme of their specific Living-Learning Community or to their majors. Faculty members mentor students, act as role models, prepare them for graduate school, teach them technical skills, and help them develop theoretical frameworks to create research questions and designs and to interpret data. They also acquaint them with the process of research as a whole. The ideal is for students to continue working in the faculty members’ labs beyond the one semester afforded by the Initiative.

The Researchers Initiative is guided by the principle of providing information and access to research opportunities for a diverse student body. In addition to introducing undergraduate students to research, the Initiative facilitates their access to faculty members early in their college career. It is also designed as a retention tool, as sophomores are given priority. Finally, the Initiative can serve to deepen the students’ involvement in their own disciplines or expose them to research topics and practices outside of their disciplines.

Lydia Khuri, Psy.D.
Program Director for the Global Crossroads, Health Professions, Intersections, and Women in Math, Science, and Engineering Living-Learning Communities

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Application Links available fall 2017
Students apply at http://go.illinois.edu/ri_student_ap
Faculty members apply at http://go.illinois.edu/ri_faculty_ap
A NOTE FROM THE PROGRAM DIRECTOR

This year’s Researchers Initiative saw a class of 40 students, the largest to date. The majority had not done research before and they were excited and committed to staying on top of their work. Twenty faculty members participated this year and seven were new.

Students presented their work at the Researchers Initiative Poster Symposium on April 23rd, where we also had the pleasure of hearing from Dr. James Miller (Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences). He has taken on RI students for the past five years and each year they report what a wonderful lab it is to work in and how passionate and helpful are his graduate students. RI students were surprised to hear about Dr. Miller’s path to becoming a professor at a Research One University. He told them about his journey from an interrupted undergraduate education to never having considered graduate school to finding good mentors who encouraged him to pursue research and a doctorate. His word of advice? You never know how things are going to work out but be open to opportunities that come along.

There are many administrative details to running the Researchers Initiative, but my relationships with students and faculty are always in the forefront. I met with each student several times during the semester to make sure they understood what they were doing and to help them communicate effectively with their faculty or graduate student mentor. I also interviewed them individually at the end to find out what they learned and how they learned it. In turn, I shared this material with the faculty members so they understood what the students got out of the experience. Finally I interviewed the new faculty to learn what worked well and what did not. By far the two most important things to the students were simply getting to participate in research and getting to know a faculty member. The faculty, of course, appreciated the labor but saw their participation in the RI as a part of their role as educators. As one faculty member put it, “It’s the right thing to do.”

2016-2017 RESEARCHERS INITIATIVE STUDENTS

![Photo of students]

Christopher Ackerman Avila, Velimira Asenova, Eric Auster, Hayley Ban, Malikah Black, Zehao (Jeremy) Chen, Tiffany Chu, Megan Coleman, Galila Dandridge, Nathalia Davila, Dana Drinkall, Ashli Drummond, Kathleen Ferreira, Fatima Godfrey, RuthAnn Haefli, Vaughn Hage, Deonte Harris, Allisa Hastie, Emma Herzog, Agha Shuja Hussain, Jena Johnson, Min Kyoung (Megan) Kim, Fiona Kuo, Yujin Lee, Gabrielle Maloney, Logan Mullins, Alexandra Nebelle, Jacob Nguyen, Sylvia Peng, Kaitlyn Pugh, Kevin Qin, Julia Rajan, Ohm Shukla, Melissa Swire, Laura Tanase, Amelia Triplett, Kenyana Tysika, Grace Wackerman, Xinyue Wang, Max Wei, Matthew Young, Kevin Zhagui. (Names are in alphabetical order and do not correspond to picture.)
The Living-Learning Communities

Women in Math, Science, and Engineering (1996)

Women in Math, Science, and Engineering (WIMSE) is designed to foster community among women who major in traditionally male-dominated fields of study. Research shows that women benefit from a supportive network of fellow students who share similar academic interests. Academic courses and support, along with social programs, provide 135 women majoring in mathematics, science, and engineering with the resources to build a positive foundation for a future career. Nearly 50 percent of the women are enrolled in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, while about 40 percent are from Engineering. WIMSE occupies three floors of Trelease Hall, located in the Florida Avenue Residence Halls.

global crossroads (2000)

Global Crossroads, located in the Pennsylvania Avenue Residence Halls, is designed to challenge and motivate students whose interests, experiences, and aspirations have a strong international component. Both academic and co-curricular programs support the students’ sustained engagement across cultural differences. The community of 120 students has about equal numbers of international and domestic students. Just over 50 percent of the students have majors in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, followed by 22 percent from Engineering. Another five percent each come from the College of Business, Fine and Applied Arts, and Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences.

Intersections (2004)

Intersections introduces undergraduate students to diversity issues in the United States through the experience of living in a multicultural community and opportunities for academic engagement. Its purpose is to foster interpersonal and intellectual skills, and knowledge to live and work in a multicultural society. Intersections houses approximately 110 students and is located in the Pennsylvania Avenue Residence Halls. Since its inception, over half of the students have come from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, while about 20 percent come from Engineering. Another seven percent come from the College of Business and five percent from Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences.

Health Professions (2007)

Health Professions brings together undergraduate students who are preparing for careers in the health fields. It provides relevant academic courses and support, career development opportunities, and skill-building programs for students to consider working with underserved populations. Health Professions houses approximately 110 students and is located on two floors of Oglesby Hall in the Florida Avenue Residence Halls. Sixty-seven percent come from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, with biology and chemistry most heavily represented. Ten percent of the students come from Applied Health Sciences. There are also students with majors in the College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences, as well as Engineering and other colleges.
Program Administration

The Researchers Initiative is administered by the Program Director for the Urbana South Living-Learning Communities.

Who can apply
Students residing in the Urbana South Living-Learning Communities are eligible to apply to the Initiative. Any faculty member of the University who can supervise undergraduate students in research endeavors may participate.

How to apply
Both the student application and faculty request forms are available online in the fall. Students rank and provide explanations as to why they wish to work with their chosen faculty members. Faculty members fill out a one-page form indicating their research projects, what types of work they would like the students to do, and any other relevant criteria.

How students & faculty are matched
In mid-fall, the Program Director reviews applications and matches students with faculty members based on these factors:

• Clarity and cogency of students’ responses
• Students’ ability to meet faculty requirements regarding meeting times, etc.
• Giving as many students as possible their top choices
• Priority to sophomores
• Relative balance of number of students from each of the four Communities
• Faculty preferences for particular students

After students and faculty members are notified of their matches, students are required to meet in person with the faculty member. Faculty members have the final say in whether or not they will accept a particular student in their labs.

How many hours student can work
Students can work up to 75 hours for the semester, which averages about five hours a week, but must work a minimum of 35. How the hours are broken down depends of the faculty member’s needs and the student’s schedule.

How students are compensated
Students can work for pay or for independent study credit. They cannot do both. In either case, they must be enrolled in courses for the spring semester. The processing to get on the Housing Payroll is done with the Program Director and the Payroll Office. Students wishing to get credit must work that out with the faculty member.

How the RI is funded
Funds come from the Urbana South Living-Learning Communities Programming Fee.
**Students and Faculty Involvement**

**Student Participation**
Students must:

- Apply and be accepted to participate in the Initiative.
- Rank their preferences for the faculty members with whom they wish to work.
- Confirm with the USLLC Program Director that they have met with their preferred faculty member.
- Provide proper documentation for the I-9 form, if students work for pay.
- Attend an orientation on expectations for participation and how to use library resources.
- Attend two check-in meetings with USLLC program staff.
- Participate in the RI Poster Symposium to present a poster of their work.
- Participate in an exit interview with the USLLC Program Director at the end of the semester.
- Meet faculty members’ expectations for attendance at meetings/events, work hours, and quality of work.
- Work at least 35 but no more than 75 hours.

**Faculty Participation**
Faculty members are asked to commit to the following:

- Fill out one-page faculty interest form.
- Review student applications (not required).
- Confirm in fall semester that you and students have met face-to-face and agreed to work together.
- Engage in consistent face-to-face contact with the student, such as one-on-one or research team meetings.
- Explain to student if a graduate student is primary mentor.
- Give clear expectations regarding type and quality of work.
- Provide verbal feedback to students on quality of students’ work.
- If comfortable, share more personal stories related to own academic and career path.
- Suggest events on campus that would augment the students’ learning.
- Where appropriate, introduce students to others to facilitate students’ academic career.
- Attend RI Poster Symposium, Sunday, April 22, 2018, 4pm.

**Assessment**
Students met one-on-one with the Program Director throughout the spring to discuss their progress and they participate in an exit interview at the end of the semester. New faculty meet individually with Program Director at end of the semester to provide feedback on the program. Returning faculty meet as needed.

“It was a new experience that helps you grow and learn.”

—Deonte Harris, Media and Cinema Studies | Intersections
student outcomes

To date, 204 student have completed the Researchers Initiative. This year, all students indicated that they became familiar with the research process as a whole, noting that research takes a great deal of time, accuracy in work, and commitment. The all stated they had learned about topics that were new to them even if they were familiar in a general way with the subject. Many found participating in the Poster Symposium beneficial. First, the had to take the time to understand the overall project. Second, they had to communicate to a general audience. Most students shared that they enjoyed getting to know their mentors, whether faculty members, post-docs, or graduate students.

Twenty-four of the 40 students (60%) will continue to work with the faculty member, either during the summer or the next academic year.

The skills listed below reflect outcomes from 2009 through 2017. (not all student learned all skills listed.)

- Literature review and organization
- Navigating University Library website
- Using academic search engines
- Using Refworks
- Writing annotated bibliographies
- Data collection, analysis, and organization
- Conducting ethnographic interviews
- Transcribing interviews
- Coding qualitative data
- Coding quantitative data
- Categorizing thematically
- Critical thinking
- Developing research questions
- Designing experiments
- Differentiating relevant from irrelevant data
- Making meaning of data
- Understanding research process as a whole
- Communicating respectfully with research subjects
- Empathizing with research subjects
- Becoming familiar with purpose of the Institutional Review Board
- Becoming familiar with safety protocols
- Organization
- Managing time better
- Improving typing skills
- Performing more precise work
- Honing technical skills
- Learning new file formats
- Learning software programs
- Learning how to set up experiments
- Administering research protocols

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*Two students participated in research but did not complete poster.
The Benefits of Ongoing Work: Vinisha Doshi, Molecular and Cellular Biology

Vinisha, a graduating senior, was a member of the Health Professions Living-Learning Community for four years. She became a Peer Leader her second year and a Resident Advisor her third and fourth years. She participated in the RI for two years in two different labs. Program Director, Lydia Khuri, caught her on one of her typically busy days to ask her about her research experiences.

**Why did you apply to the Researchers Initiative?**

I knew [the University of Illinois] was a research based university and I am pre-med. For medical school, research is an important part of the application and I wanted to get my foot in the door.

**What is the benefit of doing research?**

I learned what research was about and it gave me career options between medical school and research.

**You worked in four different labs. What were they and what did they have in common?**

My first year with the RI was with Dr. Bethany Cutts [who left U of I for another position] in Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences. My second year in the RI was in Dr. Jarrett’s lab who is in Human Development and Family Studies. I then joined the Infant Cognition Lab and the Cognitive Development Lab, both in Psychology. In all four labs the people were fantastic and I made great friends. Everyone worked hard. The undergraduates helped the graduates finish their projects. I felt like I played a big role. Everything you do is for a reason.

**How did your research experience evolve?**

When I stayed more than one semester, as I did in the Cognition Lab, I got offered more tasks, trained new undergraduates, and worked on my own project for independent credit.

**How did you handle the failure that comes along with research?**

It’s upsetting but the graduate students taught me you can still write up your work and talk about how to improve your methods.

**How was the mentoring you received?**

I felt like I was guided in research, in learning how to write a research paper, and how to edit in a serious way.

**What advice do you have for new students?**

Definitely apply to the Researchers Initiative. One you’re in, no matter how hard it is, ask professors and graduate students for help. It can be overwhelming at first. When I started in Dr. Cutt’s lab my first year I had no idea what was going on. Over time, you will learn what to do and you learn more background information.
Wanting to know the real people: Christopher Avila Ackerman, Urban Planning with a minor in Latino and Latina Studies

Chris was a member of the Global Crossroads Living-Learning Community this past year. He worked in the lab of Professor Robin Jarrett in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies.

What was the focus of the research you were involved in?

The research I conducted was primarily based off of photo elicitation interviews. We used photographs taken by the mothers of the children to induce more detailed responses. Based on the responses that each mother gave, we tried to identify patterns on what they believed made their child be ready for kindergarten.

Why did you decide to apply to the RI?

The idea that I could potentially be doing research on my first year on campus sounded very exciting - it was a great opportunity. I had no idea what doing research in the social sciences was like and I wanted to get a taste for it. I saw the options that were available for research, ranging from neuroscience to human development and family studies, and there were a couple that interested me. Dr. Jarrett’s lab matched my interests most and I thought it was worth it to apply.

What skills did you gain that you can apply to your major or minor?

As a Latina/Latino Studies minor, I hope I can continue to learn more about Latino families in the United States and their perspectives and experiences on areas like education, especially first-generation immigrant students.

What were your relationships with Dr. Jarrett and Ms. Sarai Coba, the graduate student, like?

Dr. Jarrett was on sabbatical, so I only had the opportunity to meet with her once before research started. She was a nice lady and she helped my lab partner and me feel more comfortable in the research we were about to begin. Ms. Sarai was with us for most of the semester and she helped us with the day’s tasks. She gave us comprehensive instructions on what to do and was there to help us if we ever had trouble.
In what ways can you see your work in the lab as helpful to your future career as urban planner?

At the research symposium, one lady asked me how this research applied to my major. That was the most difficult question of the day for me. I’ve realized that as an urban planner, I want to develop communities that allow for African American and Latino parents to take their children to school and be involved as much as they can in school affairs. After all, urban planners don’t just create zoning laws or plan to build big buildings. They also aim to make daily life more equitable and accessible for all the people in a given space, whether that means having access to grocery stores nearby or schools that have culturally relevant programs for students or health clinics to provide health care for patients.

What was your favorite part about participating in the research?

There was something interesting about reading parent interviews and seeing pictures of children engaging in their everyday activities that allowed me to imagine what life for these families was like. I began to develop a voice for the parents and a character for the children in my mind. In a way, I was able to get to know them without them getting to know me. It’s odd, but I enjoyed it. It made me really want to get to know the African American and Latino families of the Chicago area.

What advice do you have for other undergraduates who want to get involved in research?

The Researchers Initiative is the best way to get involved in research as a freshman. It doesn’t hurt to apply. I honestly didn’t expect to get into any of these research positions, but I ended up getting into my first choice, and the experience I gained working in a lab this semester is something I believe will be very useful for me in the future.

“The opportunity to connect with professors is a little daunting as a freshman but there is a bridge in the Researchers Initiative that helps.”

Kathleen Ferreira, Mechanical Engineering
WIMSE
2017 PROJECTS, STUDENTS, AND FACULTY MENTORS

The Slavery Trade: A Comparative Study of Slavery in the United States and Jamaica
Ashli Drummond, Freshman, Undeclared
Professor Ronald Bailey, African American Studies

Integrating versus Discriminating in Relational Memory: the Role of Exploratory Behavior
Vaughn Hage, Sophomore, Integrative Biology and Psychology
Professor Aron Barbey, Psychology

Eye-tracking in Reading and Scene Perception
Xinyue Wang, Freshman, Division of General Studies
Jacob Nguyen, Freshman, Interdisciplinary Health Sciences
Sylvia Peng, Freshman, Graphic Design
Professor Kiel Christianson, Educational Psychology

How Cortisol Concentrations Vary with Mood
Velimira Asenova, Freshman, Biology
Professor Kathryn Clancy, Anthropology

Changes in Age at Menarche of Rural Polish Women over Time
Hayley Ban, Freshman, Biology
Professor Kathryn Clancy, Anthropology

Effects of Community Support on Ethnic Identity in Adolescents
Fatima Godfrey, Freshman, Sociology
Professor Kathryn Clancy, Anthropology
Inflammation and Bone Modeling in Healthy Adults
Ohm Shukla, Freshman, Biology
Professor Kathryn Clancy, Anthropology

Examining the Effects of Developmental Methamphetamine Exposure on Attention and Impulsive Behavior in Long-Evans Rats
Fiona Kuo, Sophomore, Animal Sciences
Professor Paul Eubig, Comparative Biosciences

Effects of Tree Mortality on Non-target Tree Species Growth and Above Ground Carbon Storage
Melissa Swire, Freshman, Animal Science and Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability
Professor Jennifer Fraterrigo, Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences

The Role of Ubiquitin Specific Protease 18 (USP18) in Defining Interferon Signaling Magnitude and Duration
Malikah Black, Freshman, Undeclared
Professor Sarah Freemantle, Comparative Biosciences

Defining the Role of G0S2 in Lactation
Alexandra Nebelle, Freshman, Animal Sciences
Professor Sarah Freemantle, Comparative Biosciences

Away from Home: The Hopi Experience at Off-Reservation Indian Boarding Schools
Deonte Harris, Sophomore, Media and Cinema Studies
Logan Mullins, Freshman, History
Professor Matthew Gilbert, History
Writing the Destiny for All Those Kids: How Low-Income African American and Latino Mothers Promote Their Children’s School Readiness
Christopher Ackerman Avila, Freshman, Urban Planning
Kaitlyn Pugh, Freshman, Mathematics
Professor Robin Jarrett, Human Development and Family Studies

How Might contact with Nature Affect Learning? Proposed Mechanisms
RuthAnn Haefli, Freshman, Industrial Engineering
Professor Ming Kuo, Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences

Empathic Understanding
Kathleen Ferreira, Freshman, Mechanical Engineering
Matthew Young, Sophomore, Engineering Physics
Professor Deana McDonagh, Industrial Design

Conservation in Human-dominated Grasslands of the Midwest: Ponds, Cattle Pastures, and Shrub Encroachment
Jena Johnson, Sophomore, Natural Resources and Sciences
Professor James Miller, Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences

Impact of Age-related Hearing Loss on Brain and Cognition
Julia Rajan, Freshman, Psychology
Professor Raksha Mudar, Speech and Hearing Science
The Effects of Body Size on Horse Locomotion
Galila Dandridge, Freshman, Undeclared
Kevin Zhagui, Freshman, Division of General Studies
Professor John Polk, Anthropology

Using Subchondral and Trabecular Bone Properties to Infer Postural Differences among Humans, Chimpanzees, and Gorillas
Emma Herzog, Freshman, Biology and Mathematics
Agha Shuja Hussain, Freshman, Chemical Engineering
Min Kyoung Kim, Freshman, Molecular and Cellular Biology
Professor John Polk, Anthropology

Does Variation in EphA4 Explain the Evolution of Hopping in Mammals?
Shaochong (Max) Wei, Freshman, Molecular and Cellular Biology
Professor John Polk, Anthropology

Modeling the Behavioral Interactions of Fish in an Educational and Informative Game
Megan Coleman, Sophomore, Computer Engineering
Professor Zoi Rapti, Mathematics

Modeling Crystal Growth Using Cellular Automata
Dana Drinkall, Sophomore, Geology
Professor Zoi Rapti, Mathematics

Analysis of Fall-related Injuries among Power Wheelchair Users
Kevin Qin, Freshman, Interdisciplinary Health Sciences
Professor Laura Rice, Kinesiology and Community Health
Racial Discrimination, Social Support, and Psychological Distress among African American Parent-Adolescent Dyads
Nathalia Davila, Freshman, Human Development and Family Studies
Gabrielle Maloney, Sophomore, Human Development and Family Studies
Professor Shardé Smith, Human Development and Family Studies

Social Equity of Urban Water Rates in the Midwest
Allisa Hastie, Freshman, Civil Engineering
Professor Ashlynn Stillwell, Civil and Environmental Engineering

The Effect of Water Stress on Electricity Pricing in Illinois
Grace Wackerman, Freshman, Electrical Engineering
Professor Ashlynn Stillwell, Civil and Environmental Engineering

Chemical Imaging of Brain Tissues and Single Cells using MALDI MS with Subsequent Immunocytochemistry
Tiffany Chu, Freshman, Biochemistry
Laura Tanase, Freshman, Biology and English
Amelia Triplett, Freshman, Division of General Studies
Professor Jonathan Sweedler, Chemistry

Analytical Methods for Studying Sensory Systems: From Eye Tissues to Dorsal Root Ganglia (DRG) Neurons
Yujin Lee, Sophomore, Bioengineering
Kenyana Tyiska, Freshman, Molecular and Cellular Biology
Professor Jonathan Sweedler, Chemistry

Using Computer Technology to Compose Music as an Evolving Entity
Eric Auster, Sophomore, Music Technology and Statistics and Computer Science
Zehao Chen, Freshman, Computer Science and Astronomy
Devarsh Ruparelia, Freshman, Computer Engineering
Professor Sever Tipei, Music
The Researchers Initiative Poster Symposium is part of University of Illinois’ Undergraduate Research Week. At the end of April, students present posters of their work, which address the nature and goals of the project, their specific tasks, and any results and conclusions that they can draw. They are also asked to reflect upon what they learned and what value such research has for wider society. The Symposium also includes a faculty speaker and a brief presentation by a student who previously completed the RI and continued with research.

Faculty members are invited to attend the Symposium; their presence is deeply encouraging and meaningful to the students as they introduce their work in a public forum, perhaps for the first time. It also helps students develop a sense of a “researchers’ community.” The Symposium celebrates the students’ accomplishments and they receive a certificate of completion for the Researchers Initiative.

### Analytical Methods for Studying Sensory Systems: From Eye Tissues to Dorsal Root Ganglia (DRG) Neurons

**Yujin Lee, Sophomore, Bioengineering**  
**Kenyana Tyiska, Freshman, Molecular and Cellular Biology**  
**Professor Jonathan Sweedler, Chemistry**

“[The Researchers Initiative] gave me connections to people in a career field I want to go into.”  
–Kenyana Tyiska, Biochemistry, Health Professions

“[It was a really good overview of the process of research, from participating to presenting.]”  
–Yujin Lee, Bioengineering, Health Professions

### Effects of Prescribed Fires on Drought Resistance: A Historical Study

**Melissa Swire, Freshman, Animal Science and Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability**  
**Professor Jennifer Fraterrigo, Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences**

“[I liked] that there was a community researchers even though they were not all doing the same thing.”  
–Melissa Swire, Animal Sciences and Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability, WIMSE
STUDENT THOUGHTS

“I liked working in a team and having a goal together.”

Jeremy Chen, Computer Science and Astronomy | Global Crossroads

 “[Research] takes patience. You have to be curious or you’ll get stuck. There are lots of ways through a problem.”

–Devarsh Ruparelia, Computer Engineering | Global Crossroads

 “[The Researchers Initiative] gave me connections to people in a career field I want to go into.”

–Kenyana Tyiska, Biochemistry | Health Professions

“I liked seeing the research aspect of a professor as opposed to the teaching aspect—“oh, this is what you do when you’re not teaching!”

–Max Wei, Molecular and Cellular Biology | Health Professions

“I liked learning from people who are passionate about the work.”

–Jena Johnson, Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences | Intersections

 “[The research] was a lot of fun. It was good for younger students to get involved and to be heard.”

–Kaitlyn Pugh, Mathematics | WIMSE

apply to the Researchers Initiative

The Researchers Initiative is open to students residing in Global Crossroads, Health Professions, Intersections, and Women in Math, Science, and Engineering Living-Learning Communities.

Application Links available fall 2017
Students apply at http://go.illinois.edu/ri_student_ap
Faculty members apply at http://go.illinois.edu/ri_faculty_ap