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# Reaching a new UI mission

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Every Thursday, UI sophomore and RA Ryan Cumings meets with the students on his residence-hall floor to play poker and chat.

The meeting is not a one-time chance for the group to relax. It could potentially have a long-term effect on the students' lives.

Cumings is one of two RAs for the UI's first-ever Realizing Educational and Career Hopes (REACH), a two-year certificate program for college-age students with cognitive and learning disabilities to help them develop life skills and prepare for jobs and community involvement.

And while professionals primarily teach the participants, some UI students are involved with the program through mentoring, tutoring, and leisure activities.

"It is essential that REACH students interact with and get to know other students and that other students get to know and understand the challenges, talents, and abilities of REACH students," Jo Hendrickson, the interim director of the program, wrote in an e-mail. "These student-to-student relationships are meant to be reciprocal in nature."

The 18 REACH students live on the ninth and 10th floors of Stanley with non-REACH students.

Cumings said he became interested in the program because his mother was a special-education teacher.

In addition to his regular RA workload, he has extra duties as a REACH leader. Residents must check out every time they leave the dorm and must check in each night before bed.

Cumings also aids the students in everyday activities, such as helping them navigate Burge Marketplace and showing them how to use their flex dollars.

The 20-year-old refers to his work as guiding students through the "norms of social interaction," and he also takes the residents from his floor to university events to get them involved with such volunteer opportunities as the 10,000 Hours Show.

"I really think it's a great experience," Cumings said. "I think they've really grown a lot in the last semester."

There are only two REACH RAs this year, but increased membership in the program will require four next year. Though the number of RA positions is low, other UI students can work with REACH students as tutors.

UI graduate student Lindsay Nielsen entered REACH as a mentor, and she now tutors students three times a week. She is the only tutor in REACH.

"I just think the program is awesome in giving everyone an opportunity to attend college and get that experience," she said.

Nielsen looks forward to work, she said and she enjoys the opportunity to form connections and friendships with the students.

Though the goal of the program is to aid the REACH participants, Hendrickson said the helpers themselves also benefit.

"UI students may initially think that they are mentoring for the purpose of helping a REACH student, but they quickly come to understand that they are more alike than different," Hendrickson wrote in an e-mail.

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