

## Newsletter



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January, 2026

## DIRECTOR,

- **Zafrul Amin**  
(He/Him)

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- **Tracy Rakes**  
(She/Her)
- **Jolene Vollmer**  
(She/Her)
- **Rachael Matingi**  
(She/Her)
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(She/Her)

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## STUDENT EMPLOYEES,

- **Mariam Abdulsalam**
- **Enimien Deborah Esangbedo**



**Walk-In Hours: Monday-Thursday 2:00-4:00pm**

 **University Plaza, UHB 1006**

 **217-206-6678**

 **ISS@uis.edu**

**If you need to speak directly with an immigration specialist (DSO), you can come during walk-in hours, or email ISS@uis.edu to book an appointment.**

## From the Director's Desk

Hello International Prairie Stars,

Happy New Year! Welcome to the first 2026 edition of the monthly ISS newsletter. As we step into a new year, we continue to highlight the incredible contributions our international students make to the UIS community and beyond.

As we start a new semester, we want to bring an important information to your attention. All international students are required to complete an immigration check-in at the start of every semester in which they are enrolled. This is a crucial procedure for maintaining your legal status in the United States. Please ensure this is completed promptly through the UIS International Student Services portal (I-Start).

ISS is hosting an OPT Workshop for students in F-1 status on Friday, January 30 in Brookens Auditorium from 2:00 to 4:00 pm. Due to the complexity of the material, we'll start promptly at 2:00 pm and do not allow late attendance. If you plan to complete your degree requirements this spring semester and want to learn more about the OPT process, please plan to attend. Additional details about OPT can be found on our website.

We have a host of engaging programs and activities that are designed to enrich your experience at UIS which includes a visit to the Field Museum in Chicago, ice-skating at the Nelson Center and a professional etiquette dinner at the Student Union Ballroom. Visit our website to find out more about the rest of the events.

In this edition of the newsletter, we will feature Satya Sai Ram Varma Manthena, an international student from India who works as an international ambassador. It will also feature Rick Martijn Brinkhof, who is a soccer player from the Netherlands.

Please remember the ISS website is a comprehensive resource for information regarding your status. Our advisors are available via email and phone, and you are always welcome to visit the ISS office during our Spring 2026 walk-in hours: Mondays to Thursdays (2:00 PM – 4:00 PM).

We take a moment to look back at our successful 2025 events, including the International Cultural Festival, International Education Week, and our trip to the Saint Louis Zoo. Additionally, you will find information on key January global celebrations and our traditional closing quote from Abraham Lincoln.

Enjoy the read and stay warm!

**Zafrul Amin**  
**Director of ISS, PDSO**



## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Pronouns: he/him

My name is Satya Sairam Varma Manthena, and I come from Andhra Pradesh, India known for its deep cultural roots, classical arts, and warmhearted communities. Growing up in a place where traditions and modern aspirations blend seamlessly shaped much of who I am today. My hometown taught me the importance of resilience, respect, and community-values that continue to guide me in every new environment I step into.



My passion for technology began early, and choosing to pursue a master's in computer science felt like a natural step toward my long-term goal of becoming an entrepreneur. When exploring, I wanted a university where I would not just study but also grow as a leader and contribute meaningfully to the campus community. UIS stood out to me for its supportive academic structure, strong faculty, and most importantly, the opportunities it offers students to step into leadership roles early on.

At UIS, I have the privilege of serving as an International Ambassador with the Office of International Student Services, a role that allows me to guide new international students through one of the most important transitions of their lives. Beyond orientation, I help lead programs that promote cultural exchange and build a sense of belonging. One of the most memorable experiences of my journey has been serving as the Master of Ceremony for the 47th International Festival, the oldest tradition and longest-running event in the history of UIS. Being entrusted to host an event of that scale, representing my culture while honoring many others, felt like a defining moment in my leadership journey. I am also the sole host for the upcoming Spring 2026 International Welcome Party, where I will be leading one of ISS's key community-building events. These roles have allowed me not only to contribute but to shape the campus's most meaningful cultural experiences.

Academically, pursuing my master's in computer science has been both challenging and deeply rewarding. During my program, I had the opportunity to collaborate closely with my professor on research, which led to the publication of our paper at ICNC'26 a milestone that strengthened my confidence in contributing to advanced, real-world innovation.

My experience in the United States has been enriching in every way. From exploring new cities to learning from people with vastly different backgrounds. Springfield, with its calmness and close-knit community, has offered me a sense of belonging that I truly appreciate.

A word to my fellow students "Take every opportunity that helps you grow. Leadership starts with showing up, helping others, and being willing to step forward. Don't hesitate to ask questions, meet new people, and get involved - it will shape your entire journey."

## Pictorial of 2026



International Festival



Professional Etiquette Dinner



Ice Skating



St. Louis Zoo



Ski Trip



International  
Congratulatory Ceremony

## Athlete of the month

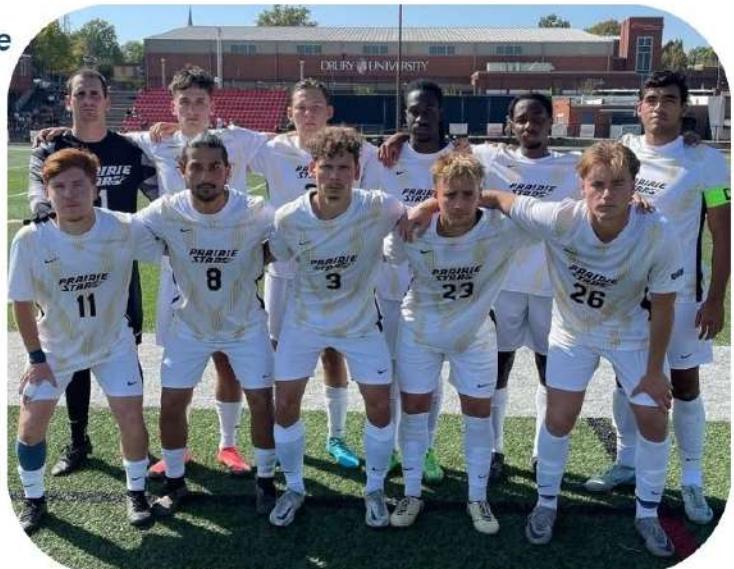
My name is Rick Martijn Brinkhof. I am from Amstelveen, The Netherlands.

I play for the UIS men's soccer team as a defender. Specifically, the middle center-back in a five-defender formation.

I chose soccer because it has always been a big part of my life. My dad, both my uncles, and my grandpa all played at a good competitive level for the same club in the Netherlands. My dad, who was a strong goal scorer, always helped me improve by practicing with me and giving me advice. Growing up in a family so involved in soccer, I started playing at a young age and became a striker. However, moving on, I realized my strengths were more suited to defending and I decided to switch positions. This change made me a stronger player, and I have fully committed to this position ever since.

We finished our fall season in seventh place in the GLVC and got knocked out in the first round of the tournament after losing in extra time to the second-ranked team. We felt we should have finished higher because we played well in many games but didn't always get the results we deserved. Even though the season didn't end as we hoped, we learned a lot as a team.

I've always played soccer at a high level and pushed myself to improve, but I don't plan on going professional. Soccer has given me great experiences and helped me grow as a person. Even though I won't pursue it professionally, I want to keep playing at a strong level. When I go back to the Netherlands, I plan to continue competing at a high level while focusing on my career outside of soccer. I also want to stay connected to the sport in other ways, especially through coaching, while continuing to play for enjoyment.



## Key Dates

January 1st

New Year's Day



January 4th

World Braille Day



January 20th

Martin Luther King Jr. Day



January 24th

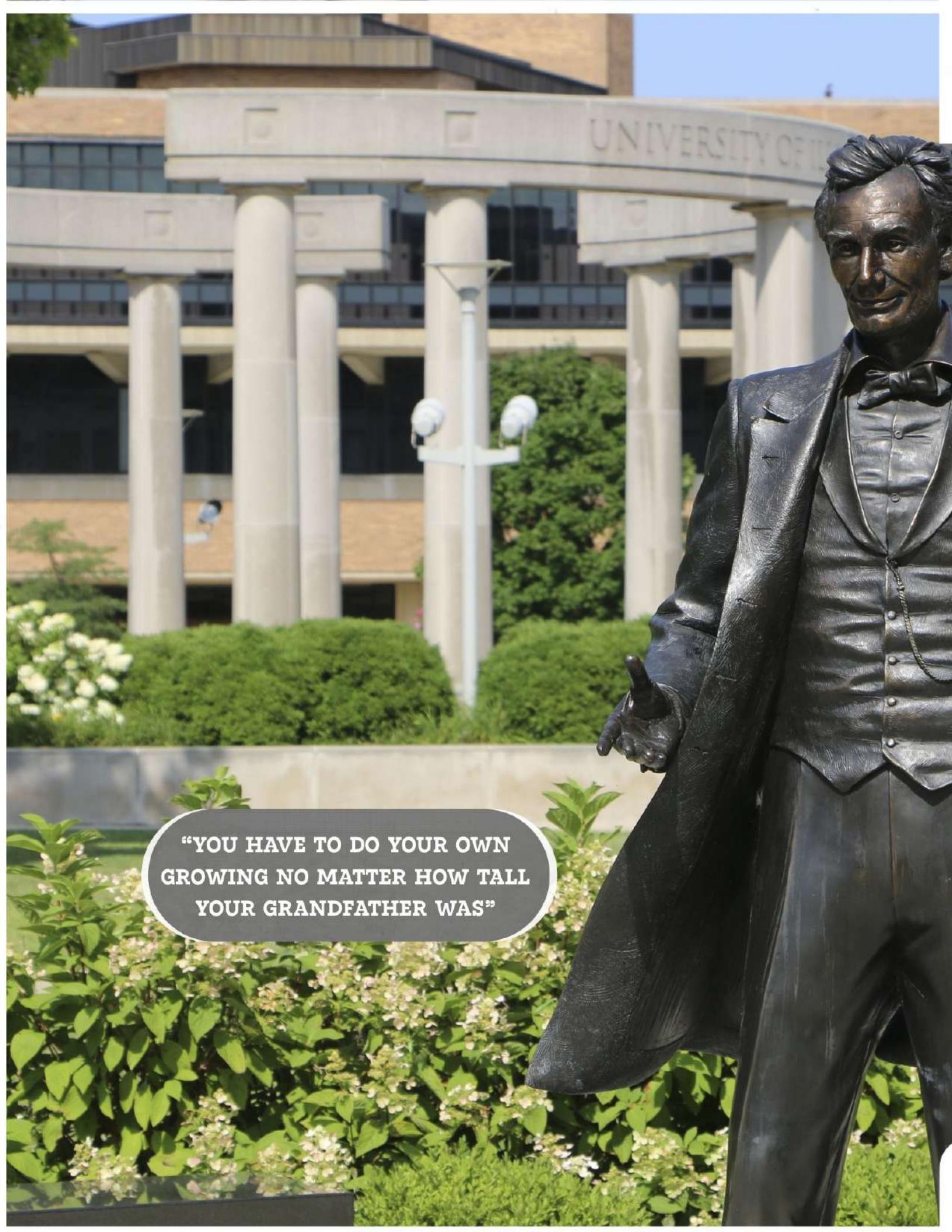
International Education Day



January 27th

International Holocaust  
remembrance day





UNIVERSITY OF...

**“YOU HAVE TO DO YOUR OWN  
GROWING NO MATTER HOW TALL  
YOUR GRANDFATHER WAS”**