

\$30M poured into research at NIU last year

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Lesley Rigg believes that making the world a better place requires learning more about it.

Rigg, who was recently promoted to vice president for research at Northern Illinois University, sees people living by that notion daily.

Almost \$30.7 million was poured into research projects at NIU last year. The money comes from various federal and state agencies such as the National Science Foundation, and the Illinois Department of Public Health, as well as corporations such as Lisle-based truck and enginemaker Navistar.

As for what those projects are, Rigg said pick a topic or place and an NIU researcher would likely be found. The university boasts the foremost Antarctic submarine research program, a graduate student who discovered that young triceratops traveled in herds, and renowned poets.

Rigg said the value of the projects can be measured by looking at how many undergraduate or graduate students will benefit from the research, either by taking part in it or learning from it.

“We are at our heart an educational institution,” Rigg said. “Regardless if it’s fundamental or applied research, it’s broadening our knowledge.”

Student research also drives NIU. During the annual Undergrad Research and Artistry Day, weeks, months and years of research led by students and supported by faculty was on display.

Among the 350 student researchers on hand was NIU junior Alexis Lamb, who presented her study of the berimbau, a bowed, single-string percussion instrument commonly used in Brazil. She and Gregory Beyer, an associate professor of percussion, plan to compose 12 pieces of music for the berimbau.

Meanwhile, a group of senior students presented their research on a robot that performs tasks based on given instructions but also using visual and sensory information in real-time. Students think the robot could be developed for use in hospitals in places of nurses.

The University of Illinois also has deep roots in agricultural research in DeKalb County, where experimental work has been going on at the Northern Illinois Agronomy Research Center since 1948.

Russ Higgins, the extension educator, said scientists examine plant breeding, soil fertility, soil management, weed science, crop production, pest management and environmental quality. Work is primarily focused on corn and soybeans. The data gathered is then disseminated and used by agronomists for cropping decisions.

“I always think there’s some merit if you can get data from someone who’s not buying and selling the product,” Higgins said.

About 45 projects are conducted at the research center annually. One of the most important projects, Higgins said, is one focusing on managing corn root worm, a pest that can devastate corn crops.

“If you’ve lived anywhere else in the state, you know it’s just different up here,” Higgins said. “It’s nice to have research in your backyard.”