Sandra Cisneros (DHL ’14) greets a fan at an event SNL hosted in Cisneros’ honor. Read more on page 8.
Over the years, Nafees Rahman (SNL ’99) learned to adapt his approach to clients based on their geographic locations. “[In] Canada, they have a completely different [business] model than in the U.S.,” he explains. “You see how laid-back people are in Europe versus Canada versus the U.S.” Yet, they all speak the same business language. “The office supply market is the same [no matter where you are],” he says.

As CEO of CI Filing (formerly Custom Index), Rahman hopes to make the company the largest manufacturer of filing products in North America. “Mergers and acquisitions [are] how we are going to grow in this industry,” he explains. Since joining the organization, Rahman has acquired two companies to expand their offerings to include labels and more folder options. He has plans to acquire three more companies in the near future.

“Restructuring an organization to make it profitable is the most challenging job,” he admits. “You need to keep your heart out of it and focus on the business.” His decisions are informed by nearly 30 years of experience in filing supply manufacturing, during which he’s held nearly every position in the field. “Having the market knowledge has helped me quite a bit with acquisitions,” he says. “Once we go through the whole reorganization process and you see that you’ve turned a company around—that the company is profitable and has the right people in the right capacities—that’s the most rewarding thing for me.”

Rahman has acquired two companies to help him achieve this goal. “Restructuring an organization to make it profitable is the most challenging job,” he admits. “You need to keep your heart out of it and focus on the business.” His decisions are informed by nearly 30 years of experience in filing supply manufacturing, during which he’s held nearly every position in the field. “Having the market knowledge has helped me quite a bit with acquisitions,” he says. “Once we go through the whole reorganization process and you see that you’ve turned a company around—that the company is profitable and has the right people in the right capacities—that’s the most rewarding thing for me.”

Nafees Rahman’s tips for recent graduates:

**Wait to get advanced degrees.**
Don’t jump into a master’s degree just yet. “Be sure to get at least three to four years of work experience first,” he advises. “I learned from my mistakes, but maybe we can help keep other people from making them.”

**Self-education never ends.**
From listening to your coworkers to reading about the next technological trend, learning never ends. To keep your brain going, you have to keep on learning.

**Be nice to others.**
It doesn’t matter who you are, you have to be nice to others and make sure you understand where they are coming from. Eventually, they will be nice to you.

**Maintain a work-life balance.**
That’s the most important message. People focus so much on work that it can hurt them. You can’t forget where you came from.
Master’s degree lends credibility to student pursuits
by Melissa Smith

Self-directed learning has always been a hallmark of an SNL education, but students in the Master of Arts in applied professional studies (MAAPS) program take it to the next level. Using at least three years of relevant professional experience as a backdrop for their studies, students explore ways in which a customized advanced degree can help them elevate their careers in unique and engaging ways. This competence-based program allows students to design their own areas of study in ways that are meaningful to their personal and professional lives. Read below for the experience of two classmates in the program.

WRITING FOR PERSONAL, PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

For as long as he can remember, Dane Erbach has been writing. “I wrote some little stories and created epic narratives with my action figures in elementary school,” he laughs. But it wasn’t until his senior year of high school that Erbach actually considered himself a writer. “They gave me a creative writing award, and it was the first time someone had validated my writing,” he remembers. “Until that point, I felt like writing was just something that I did, not something that I was good at. At that point, someone held the mirror up to my face and said, ‘Hey, look. You’re a writer and you don’t even know it.’” Now, he hopes to do the same with his English and creative writing students at McHenry Community High School in northwest suburban Chicago.

“When kids come up to me and say something like, ‘I don’t know if my writing is good enough’ or ‘I finished this section, but something doesn’t feel right,’ I tell them that this self-doubt they’re feeling is a sign they are real writers,” he explains. “You’re questioning everything you’re doing and overanalyzing it, and this is what every writer does.” When Erbach started thinking about going back to school for his master’s degree, writing was a natural choice. “I really care deeply about being a writer,” he says. “I care deeply about growing as a writer and the idea that when I become a better writer, I can help other people become better writers. That’s going to help me as a person and an educator.”

At SNL, Erbach enjoyed developing his own course content, examining concepts like literary fraud and how reading informs writing. “I got to explore subject matter that I’m sure you get to explore in a typical graduate study, but I also created classes,” he says. “The school gives you every opportunity to do what’s going to grow you as a human, but it also gives structure and ideas as to how to grow. In every way, the program helped me see a better me.”

With publishing credits that include a newspaper op-ed column and a music website, Erbach hopes one day to publish novels and short stories, which is why he chose to focus on engaging in, and facilitating, writing for publication. “I want to be a Writer with a capital W,” he asserts. While he sees himself continuing to work in education, Erbach longs to be published. “I’m going to do everything in my power to make that happen, but if it doesn’t, I’m doing something to have an impact on other writers at a formative age in an informed way,” he says. “I feel empowered by this knowledge.”

ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT LEADS TO NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Nearly 18 years ago, Janice Aull had an unplanned career change from catering to learning and development. “I stumbled into the field, and when I did, I realized this is where my talent is,” she explains. “My skill and passion are with helping individuals and teams improve and take themselves to the next level.” Now, as manager of organizational capability at CDW, Aull works with businesses to develop learning solutions for the workplace. She relishes the opportunity to work with individuals and teams on topics like communication, leadership and performance management.

“I like helping people step back and look at themselves as individuals to discover what they could do to improve and challenge themselves,” she says. “What I tell my participants when I’m facilitating a class is that I know I added value to the business when I see them apply what they learn back on the job.” After spending 15 years as a learn-as-you-go professional, Aull finally decided to obtain formal training through an advanced degree. “Before I discovered SNL, I didn’t think a master’s program was right for the direction I was going in my career,” Aull says. “Most master’s programs take the student down a path, and you just follow the leader, but with the SNL program, I was able to design my own curriculum based on what I’m passionate about.”

Now, armed with a focus area in facilitating human performance improvement in organizational settings, Aull is confident in her skills. “I feel like I’m validating that I really know what I’m doing and that I can really make a difference,” she says. “I’m truly a professional now because I have the academic training to support me.” She credits writing to get her master’s degree with helping her really appreciate this milestone. “[My degree] helps validate what I’ve experienced, and it helps answer questions that have come up over the years,” she explains. “It helps set the direction for your future.”

In Aull’s case, it opened up new avenues for training and development: creating community wellness programs. “I did research, networked, found this opportunity and wasn’t afraid to go for it,” she says. While she hopes to continue in her current fields, Aull is open to whatever the future brings. “I don’t know what’s next, but I know which direction I want to go,” she says. “The SNL program teaches you to be looking out toward the horizon, and you’re equipped with the skills, knowledge and confidence to be able to change direction if needed.”

To learn more about the MAAPS program, visit snl.depaul.edu.
Center explores emerging topics in adult education
by Melissa Smith

In today’s technologically savvy, fast-paced world, many adults are faced with competing demands and distractions. Often, they need help wading through the myriad opportunities to meet their personal and professional goals, which is where SNL’s Center to Advance Education for Adults (CAEA) shines. Sessions have drawn participants from higher education, business, nonprofits, human resources, and training and development. With engaging programs throughout the year—including the Adult Learning Innovation Institute (ALII)—learning professionals have even more opportunities to improve their practices with the latest research in a wide range of settings.

“During the institute, learning professionals have an opportunity to do a deeper dive into a burning issue or emerging topic in adult learning,” explains CAEA Director Pamela Meyer. “We’re able to jump on emerging trends as they are starting to get traction and assemble experts in the field to make them more accessible to our constituents.” CAEA was established thanks in part to Trish Parson (SNL ’78 and the Mason Parson Foundation. This summer, the center brought master trainers Jim Kelly and Bruce Williams to Ogden to where participants developed participatory presentations, worked in small groups and reflected on what they learned as they prepared to bring innovative approaches back to their practice settings. “We keep going around that cycle [of presenting, small group work and reflection], always asking, ‘How could this be relevant to the participants in their particular settings?’ says Professor Catherine Marienau, who sits on the center’s leadership team. “We want people to walk away with something they can actually put into practice.”

Launched in fall 2013, ALII’s are held several times throughout the year and cost $495 for each two-day session. Human resource and learning and development professionals can receive continuing education credits to maintain their certifications; SNL students can petition to apply institutes toward degree requirements. Previous topics have included learning and the adult brain, learning agility, and learning in a competence-based world. “We’re looking for topics that cut across sectors,” Marienau notes. “The center mirrors in many ways the settings in which our students work and live,” adds Meyer.

In addition to the two-day institutes, CAEA also offers several other programming opportunities throughout the year. The lunchtime learning program News from the Field explores cutting-edge topics and offers advice featured at various professional conferences. Learning labs provide the CAEA community with a workshop setting to test new ideas or practices. The Bertram L. Scott/Elizabeth A. Fender Distinguished Lecture series brings preeminent speakers to “stir the pot and get people to continue to think creatively about their practice,” says Meyer. Rounding out the offerings is the Master of Arts in Educating Adults (MAEA) Graduates’ Showcase, where graduating learning professionals showcase their final projects and network with others in the field.

For those unable to attend in person, many events are live-streamed on caeacommoning.com, and there is an online forum available for continued discussion on many topics. “[CAEA is] a space for people to share ideas, improve their practice, and find opportunities for creating and sharing innovative teaching and learning strategies,” enthuses Meyer. To expand the reach of program offerings, many events are held in conjunction with the Chicago chapters of the Association for Talent Development and the Society for Human Resource Management.

“We’re bringing together people from different contexts to talk about current issues in helping adults learn and perform better,” Marienau says. “The synergy of our alumni, students, faculty and people from other communities of practice is very exciting.” Meyer seconds that, adding, “Whether or not you’re an adult learning practitioner, if you enjoyed your experience at SNL, this is a chance to pull the curtain back and see what kinds of things go into creating high-engagement, innovative learning experiences.”

Two years after it was first proposed, the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN) has launched. DePaul, along with 17 other institutions of higher learning, passed a rigorous application process issued by the education-focused Lumina Foundation to become part of the network. C-BEN members are now committed to three years of research, sharing and conversation about best practices in competence-based education and how to deepen the understanding of the approach within and outside of academia.

The concept of C-BEN was introduced at an information-sharing meeting in 2012 held by the Lumina Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation during which competence-based education experts discussed challenges in the field and shared ideas about how the foundations might support the learner-centered approach. Among the issues explored were how registration and financial aid systems might be better designed to meet the needs of competence-based education programs. “The idea was that the network would conduct research, set standards, correct misconceptions and potentially effect change at the national level,” says Professor Catherine Marienau, who was invited to attend the meeting. “As veterans in the practice of competence-based education, SNL is excited to be a part of C-BEN,” says Dean Marisa Alicea. “We have learned a great deal already and have provided help and support to our colleagues. I look forward to sharing our findings with the DePaul community as we continue to learn more.”

C-BEN becomes more and more essential as students’ higher education needs continue to evolve. The changes in educational approaches, due in part to technological advances, make competence-based education more relevant, accessible and necessary than ever before. The approach is flexible, recognizes learning from experience and allows for individualization. It often results in shorter degree completion times, a less expensive education and a more focused approach for students who need specific skills or have relevant prior experience. The concept, first introduced in the late 1960s, had great success at a few institutions but was slow to catch on.

“After the economic crash of 2008, there was a decline in college enrollment,” Marienau explains. “Additionally, there was an increased need to fill positions for which formal education was required. Competence-based education provides a more succinct and accessible path to bridge this gap. SNL has been doing this for 40 years, and now others are seeing the value.” Associate Professor Michelle Navarre Cleary adds, “Our extensive history has allowed the DePaul C-BEN team to take a leadership role.”

Members of DePaul’s team include: Alinea; Sharon Guan, director of faculty instructional technology services; Marienau; Navarre Cleary; Nichole Pinkard, associate professor in the College of Computing and Digital Media; Maureen Talbot (LAS MA ’80), associate director of financial aid; and Associate Professor Denise Toliver Atta. The first of their four 90-day research cycles for the year focused on business and process systems employed at other institutions. The second cycle is focused on financial aid. “To have the opportunity to share what we know and to learn from others after having done this mostly on our own for so long is truly an honor,” says Navarre Cleary. “It’s a very exciting time.”

SNL provides leadership in Competency-Based Education Network
by Jamie Sokolik

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SANDRA CISNEROS BREAKFAST
Critically acclaimed author and honorary degree recipient Sandra Cisneros (DHL ’14) kicked off commencement weekend activities with a breakfast presentation on June 13. She spoke to a packed room, reading excerpts from her upcoming collection of essays, “A House of My Own,” fielding questions from the audience and offering advice on how to combat writer’s block.

COMMENCEMENT
On June 14, nearly 225 SNL students officially became the Class of 2014 at the university’s 116th commencement ceremony. Cisneros received an honorary doctorate and spoke to the audience about their great responsibility. “You are blessed and cursed to be living in an age of susto, of intense fear,” she said. “I believe we can transform susto, fear, into light. It is possible. It is not only possible—it is vital that we do so. If we do not transform our demons, they will transform us.” Tecora Rogers (SNL ’12, MA ’14), a participant in the Adult Bridge Program with Truman College, delivered the student address. [Photo credit: DePaul University/Jeff Carrion]

ALUMNI RECEPTION
The alumni reception held on May 29 provided alumni and friends with the ideal setting to network and catch up with old acquaintances. More than 180 guests enjoyed complimentary beer, wine and hors d’oeuvres while listening to Dean Marisa Alicea relay university updates. Michael Johnson (SNL ’02), vice president and chief human resource officer at UPS, addressed the crowd, delivering humorous and inspiring remarks about his time at SNL and his career. [Photo credit: DePaul University/Jeff Carrion]

EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING AWARDS
Associate Professor John Kinsey and part-time faculty member Elisabeth (Biz) Lindsay-Ryan (EDU MA ’00) each received a 2014 Excellence in Teaching Award at convocation on Sept. 5. Issued by the Quality of Instruction Council in the Office of Academic Affairs, the awards provide public recognition and a $2,000 stipend to high-quality educators across the university. [Photo credit: DePaul University/Jamie Moncrief]

MACRAE SCHOLARS RECEPTION
On May 29, a group of Macrae Scholars gathered to reminisce about their time at SNL and celebrate the opportunities made possible by their Macrae scholarships, which provide financial support to adult learners at SNL who are also single parents. This scholarship is supported by the Jeanne Deevy Larmee family and the WJD Foundation.

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES SUMMER SCHOLAR
Associate Professor Deborah Wood Holton was selected from a national applicant pool as a National Endowment for the Humanities summer scholar. She participated in the “Black Aesthetics and African Centered Cultural Expressions: Sacred Systems in the Nexus between Cultural Studies, Religion and Philosophy” institute, which was held at Emory University in Atlanta from July 13 through Aug. 1.
SNL International provides competence-based approach to study abroad
by Melissa Smith

Somber students tour the sites of long-abandoned slave forts in Ghana, which have been preserved by the United Nations as world heritage sites. The locations represent the ghastly world history of oppression, but Associate Professor Derise Tolliver Atta encourages students to reflect upon a full and balanced picture of Ghana as part of her “History, Culture and Spirituality: Studies in Ghana” study abroad course. With a thriving economy and bustling urban centers, Ghana and west Africa come alive in Tolliver Atta’s course.

“We’re traveling through the country, meeting educational, political and spiritual leaders and actively engaging with them so that students can get a feel for Ghanaian culture, history and spirituality beyond what they may be able to read in a book,” says Tolliver Atta, who is faculty coordinator of SNL International and program co-director of the aforementioned course. This trip is just one part of the larger SNL International offerings, a series of short-term study abroad courses geared toward adult students, including working professionals. “Like our academic programs, we focus on competencies,” she explains. “We really get students to think about what skills, knowledge and abilities they want as a result of participating in the travel study.”

Depending on the program, 15–30 students spend 1–2.5 weeks immersing themselves in a foreign culture during winter intersession or spring break. Initially, Gretchen Wilbur, associate professor, was hesitant about the short-term nature of the courses, but she quickly changed her mind. “I was very pleased and excited that in a concentrated amount of time, a lot of learning and awareness can happen,” she says. Wilbur, who is program director, along with Nancy Morgan, online instructional designer at SNL, took a group of students to explore cross-cultural communication in Italy and Estonia in 2012 and hopes to bring a similar program to Jamaica in 2015.

“One of the things that was fascinating and enriching is that we were a microcosm of what we were studying in other countries,” Wilbur explains. While she and her students were examining communication strategies and body-language cues in foreign cultures, they started to recognize patterns in their own behaviors. Wilbur delights in the fact that “all the students in their analyses of their experience spoke about how much they learned being a part of the group, in addition to how much they learned being part of another culture.”

In addition to international courses, SNL also works to promote travel opportunities in the United States, which can be more affordable than their international counterparts. Previous trips included explorations of Boston, Washington, D.C., and Eatonville, Fla., where American author Zora Neale Hurston grew up. “We try to support domestic travel because we really believe in the opportunity and the value of travel study,” stresses Tolliver Atta. She knows how life-changing these experiences can be, especially when she hears from her students. “They say, ‘I learned so much about myself and understand and appreciate who I am and the opportunities I have,’” Tolliver Atta explains. “People often come back with a renewed sense of commitment to making the world a better place.”

For those wary of study abroad due to financial restrictions, Tolliver Atta mentions the scholarships, advising and other resources that are available to students. “We’re really here to support them in finding ways to fund it because they won’t be disappointed in going,” she stresses. “People say, ‘I can’t afford it,’ but we say, ‘You really can’t afford not to go.’ You really can’t afford not to consider this as part of your academic journey.”

SNL International provides competence-based approach to study abroad

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When Kim Werst moved to Chicago in 2008, she wanted to empower communities through gardening and food accessibility, but found it difficult to find work that would allow her to pursue her goals. “It was harder to find jobs without a degree,” explains Werst. “When you move somewhere and you don’t have contacts, you don’t have that community yet. I found myself not being able to do what I wanted.”

Now a senior in SNL, Werst is building that network by focusing on nonprofit management and sustainable food systems. “I like the freedom to bring whatever you’re going through in your adult life into the work that you’re doing in class,” says Werst, who previously managed the Logan Square farmers market. “I really appreciate the flexibility as a working adult.” As Werst continues to flourish in her program, she credits a course taught by Martha Commons and David Morris with helping her find encouragement as an adult student. “It was good because it made me think hard about things,” she says. “It challenged me, but then it was also really supportive and edifying. It made me feel like I made the right decision to go back to school.” She also appreciates the small class sizes, service-learning components and personalization of SNL courses.

The scholarship support Werst received felt like an affirmation of her efforts, especially as an adult student. “Scholarships give confidence,” explains Werst. “It’s positive reinforcement that working hard and being at your computer at two in the morning is worth it. Scholarships affirm that other people recognize that something you did is important, something about you is worthy of support and praise.”

After graduating from DePaul, Werst hopes to work at a nonprofit or even start her own. “I want the focus to be on food barriers, food and accessibility, and empowering communities through preservation and gardening in areas where it’s necessary and useful,” she says. Werst is already well on her way, if her experience at the farmers market is any indication. “It’s really great to just walk around and go to get to know these farmers on a personal level, to talk about things that are going on with their families, their farms, the industry and food in general,” she says. “The personal relationships that you make in that environment are what spur me on.”
We welcome your story ideas, questions and comments. Please contact Melissa Smith at (312) 362-5266 or msmit134@depaul.edu.

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