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Mythical student 'alive, well'

Although nonexistent, Eustace B. Nifkin leaves mark on SUNY ESF.

January 12, 2004

By **Nancy Buczek**
Staff writer

When Le Moyne College, State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry and Syracuse University students return to classes today, Eustace B. Nifkin won't be with them.

At some point, Nifkin - a make-believe student who dates to the 1940s at SUNY ESF - was enrolled in classes. But Nifkin, who was made up by students, hasn't been enrolled in years.

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Yet his mark remains at the college. New students learn about him in an orientation video, an Alumni Lounge in Marshall Hall's basement is called the Nifkin Lounge and a make-believe girlfriend, Elsa S. Freeborn, was concocted by students for him.

"He's still alive and well," said Harrison "Harry" Payne, 78, a professor emeritus and vice president for student affairs at SUNY ESF. "He'll never leave. He'll come to life periodically and to the attention of the students."

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Payne, of Jamesville, is considered the college's Nifkin expert. A 1950 graduate of the College of Forestry, ESF's predecessor, Payne began teaching on campus in 1964 and served as director of admissions and dean of students and vice president for student affairs before retiring in 1987.

While working in student affairs, Payne wrote nearly a dozen letters to magazines or organizations asking that Nifkin's name be dropped from their mailing lists because he's not real. Students had sent in Nifkin's name as a prank.

Payne said he didn't mind. Nifkin was a stress reliever for students.

The college's archives are rich with Nifkin history.

In March 1952, then-registrar Raymond Crossman wrote to George W. Cox of the College & Specialist Bureau after receiving requests for letters of recommendation for Nifkin. Crossman explained that Nifkin did not exist.

"Quite frankly, he gets into all sorts of difficulties from which occasionally I must extricate the college, as well as Eustace," Crossman wrote.

In 1970, a federal income tax return was filled out for Nifkin, noting he earned \$13,747.45 and was due a \$32.21 refund. The form was never submitted to the government.

In a June 1985 letter, Payne explained to the Hosiery Corporation of America in Philadelphia that Nifkin's girlfriend wasn't real. He apologized and returned pantyhose and a bill the company had sent her.

College archives contain registration cards in Nifkin's name for fictitious classes such as basic ridge running, beginning chain saw repair and ethanol distillation/uses.

Students sometimes managed to enroll Nifkin in real courses.

Even today, Lee Herrington, a professor of forest and natural resources management, uses the fictitious village of Nifkin, near Lake Nifkin, which is in the county of Nifkin, for his students to study spatial analysis.

Some people think Nifkin can be traced to Payne. But Payne said three other students created Nifkin during a summer session at the Cranberry Lake biological station in the early 1940s.

"I'm not the guilty one," he said. "I'll never divulge them."

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