

UNI Students work in customs' labs

by Scott Williams

"She's going to be a tough act to follow." So says Dr. Marjorie Rommell of Miriam Ramos, a senior at Northeastern who has helped open the door of opportunity for Chicago-area physical chemistry students.

Miriam began working as a student-trainee at the U.S. Customs Chicago Regional Laboratory in the summer of 1978. She is the first student ever to be employed by the laboratory, which is one of eight U.S. Customs labs nation-wide.

As the initial effort of the Cooperative Education Program in the laboratory, Miriam has proven that physical chemistry students are ready for on-the-job training, and are prepared to handle important jobs. "I was told in the beginning," Miriam says, "that if it didn't work out, they wouldn't hire anymore students."

Miriam's supervisor, however, Dr. Marjorie Rommell says, "Would probably not junk the program based on one student." But Dr. Rommell added that

Miriam has proven her abilities, and given the lab supervisors a good impression of Chicago-area students.

The Cooperative Education Program is a federally-funded program which provides fulltime students with on-the-job training in a specific field. Miriam alternates periods of full-time work and full-time study, each of at least 60 days.

At the U.S. Customs laboratory, where Miriam earns \$4.50 an hour, samples of imported items are analyzed, and sufficient information is provided to import specialists who are then able to classify the items and charge the appropriate duty. Although she is a declared chemistry major at UNI, Miriam says she had to learn some technique before starting to work. "Most of my laboratory technique was learned on-the-job."

Dr. Rommell says that although Miriam is classified as a student-trainee, her job is an important one. "Any one of the analysis done in this

laboratory," Dr. Rommell said, "is a potential lawsuit."

But Miriam, confident in her work, isn't frightened by the responsibility she possesses. The analysis are run several times, and if there is any question of the validity of the results, they will consult other labs to prevent any threat of lawsuits.

Being the first student to work in the lab raised a few skeptical eyebrows from her fellow workers. But Miriam says they were all willing to lend her a helping hand. "I had to prove myself, and prove that I could do what they ask me to do. But if I had any questions, I could ask any one of the workers."

After completing a period of full-time study, Miriam went back to her full-time job at the laboratory on August 20, continuing to help pave the way for other physical chemistry students. When she graduates, Miriam will become a full-time chemist. And someday, she may find herself looking over the shoulder of an anxious, young chemistry student.