A visit to ESPN’s 123-acre, 18-building campus (the station’s common term for its grounds rather than headquarters) finds Heather Donahue ’02 heading the editorial design operations for ESPN.com. She majored in visual communication design in the University’s Hartford Art School and was hired by ESPN just after graduation. At the time, ESPN.com was moving from Seattle, Wash., to Bristol, and openings for entry-level Web designers were available.

“I knew I wanted to pursue a career in Web design. My senior design thesis was a website I created, which gave me a strong foundation for Web design,” Donahue says. “I played sports throughout high school, loved sports, and always watched ESPN, so I felt I would fit into the company’s culture.” Donahue was hired as a junior designer and is currently an associate art director, working with sports editors to bring new features to ESPN.com, the company’s official website.

There are nearly a million square feet on ESPN’s campus, but just a few cubicles from Donahue sits Chris Jason ’04. Jason majored in interactive information technology (now multimedia Web design and development) in the University’s College of Arts and Sciences. He is director of ESPN’s API (application programming interface) program, a platform that authorizes and delivers data and content to Web developers both inside and outside ESPN to create and construct new ESPN apps and products.

Jason applied to ESPN right out of college but worked elsewhere for two years—first, at a small marketing firm and, later, at an online start-up marketing company—before getting a call from ESPN, which had pulled up his application from two years earlier. He was hired as an entry-level Web developer, and while working on a Web project for Monday Night Football, he met—you guessed it—Heather Donahue.
After moving up to product manager and managing all of ESPN.com’s search technology and Web analytics, Jason became the first director of the API program just one year ago. “Technology is a highly competitive industry, and we have to constantly learn and evolve to stay current. The program I’m heading didn’t exist when I graduated from college, so our team really had to start from the ground up.”

If you hop on the ESPN shuttle and travel to the operation’s north campus, past the on-campus football field and basketball court, you will find Scott Connor ‘05, another interactive information technology major from the University. As senior manager of project development for WatchESPN, he is part of the development team that makes it possible to view live-streaming ESPN broadcasts on mobile devices like laptops, smartphones, and tablets.

Connor interned at ESPN his senior year, but the company wasn’t hiring when he graduated. He worked for 18 months at a local Web-development company. In 2006 he got a call from his friend Chris Jason saying ESPN was hiring. “The interactive IT program at the University had only 25 students at the time Chris and I attended. We were a really tight-knit group who worked together, knew each other’s skills, and kept in touch. That networking helped me land a job here at ESPN,” Connor says.

Across the office from Connor sits digital media designer Ron Pezzullo ’06, another visual communication design major. Connor and Pezzullo work on two separate teams who work hand in hand to create and design WatchESPN interfaces and apps. Pezzullo and his team design the product’s appearance and develop front-end coding. Each project is then handed over to Connor’s team for back-end Web development.

“ESPN is my first job out of school,” Pezzullo says. It all started with my senior art show. Graduating seniors invite companies to see our work. For the centerpiece of my exhibit, I created a fictional Minor League Baseball team, so I was hoping someone from ESPN would be present.” Pezzullo’s invitation was received by none other than Donahue, who delivered it to her creative director.

The creative director came to the senior show, was intrigued by Pezzullo’s work, and asked him to follow up for an interview. Not long after, he was hired as an assistant designer, with a focus on production design. “I came into a digital design job with a print background portfolio,” he said. Since then, Pezzullo has spent most of his time in editorial design, with a one-year stint designing for the ESPN fantasy team. Now he’s doing Web and user interface design for desktop and various mobile devices. “I didn’t plan on working for ESPN. I didn’t think it was possible coming right out of college. But it happened and I’m glad it did.”

The four alumni say they run into each other often as they walk through the sports mural-covered hallways of the ESPN campus. And occasionally, while eating lunch alongside superstar athletes and popular television personalities, they reminisce about their time at the University of Hartford because they all know that the connections made and learning acquired on the school campus helped put them on the ESPN campus.