



PRESS RELEASE

Honors Students Reach Out to Elementary Schools

Nov. 9, 2007

By Christine Dellert

The University of Central Florida is sending students out to elementary schools this fall to teach thousands of underserved youths what it means to be part of a community.

UCF's Honors Symposium seeks to educate students at 19 public schools in Orange and Seminole counties about civic duty and local leadership.

With so much of today's focus on "core testing subjects," little time is often left for educating students to become engaged and responsible citizens in their neighborhoods.

So this semester, about 500 Burnett Honors College freshmen are teaching weekly social studies curricula -- lessons about local government, the history of the American community and democracy -- to more than 9,000 grade-school children.

The service-learning course is required for every UCF honors freshman and has been lauded as a leading national example of involving youths in the community and inspiring them to improve the quality of their lives. In just more than three years, the program has become the largest service-learning partnership in the country linking an honors college, public schools and the nonprofit Junior Achievement.

"In many cases these elementary schools are not able to spend more time on social studies, civics and character building because they're so focused on content being tested through the FCAT," said Kelly Astro, director of Research and Civic Engagement for the college.

"One of the key components of every lesson is the ability to work within a team and to work with one another," she said. "That certainly helps to develop young leaders by teaching people how to work with those who are different from themselves."

While the program's syllabus is significant, it's the weekly interaction among students from different backgrounds that's making a real impact on the college students and children.

"The children have the opportunity to learn from college students who are in a variety of different disciplines," Astro said. "They're learning that going to college doesn't mean you just have to be a doctor or a lawyer -- you can be an artist. And that opens their eyes to the idea of staying in school."

In her second year as an Honors and Junior Achievement volunteer at Ivey Lane Elementary School, sophomore Shania Anderson, 20, said she has seen the program impact UCF students and the children they're helping.

"I see freshmen going through a change in their confidence – a change in their ability to get up in front of a group and speak," said Anderson, who after completing the service-learning program last year works with this semester's group as a team leader.

And for many of the elementary-school students, she said, "It's mostly likely their first time working with college students. They walk in and immediately see you as a role model and as a teacher, and more importantly, a friend."

Equally important, Astro says, is that the experience is also eye opening for some UCF students.

"We don't want to give the students any preconceived ideas of what they're going to encounter," she said. "These students drive through the neighborhoods different from where they're from. They also interact with children who are not afraid of what they've seen and are willing to talk about it."

Here are some interesting facts about the program:

-- UCF worked with the public school system to get involved with schools that are underserved in the community to boost leadership and character-building skills.

-- To better serve the region's Hispanic population, Spanish-speaking college students are placed in ESOL classes where they can help with the lessons and language.

-- Through the nonprofit Junior Achievement of Central Florida, the Burnett Honors College has provided more than 3,000 volunteer hours to the following schools: Bentley, Casselberry, Catalina, Hamilton, Durrance, English Estates, Washington Shores, Hillcrest, Chickasaw, Columbia, Ivey Lane, McCoy, Cypress Springs, Orange Center, Eccleston, Rolling Hills, Pineloch, Engelwood and Shenandoah.

-- Already actively teaching leadership, English Estates Elementary School in Seminole County requires its students to learn character-building skills in its "Leadership is Elementary" program. UCF students work with the program and supplement additional leadership and civic-based lessons through their service-learning curriculum.

-- American Coach Lines donated the buses that transport the honors students to and from the elementary schools.

UCF Stands for Opportunity: Established in 1963, the University of Central Florida is a diverse metropolitan research university that ranks as the 6th-largest in the country with more than 48,000 students. Located in Orlando, Fla., UCF offers high-quality undergraduate and graduate education, student development and continuing education, while conducting cutting-edge research that powers the region's economic development. For more UCF news, visit <http://news.ucf.edu>.