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Service learning a must

Honors college adds to symposium class

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Until the beginning of the 2006-07 school year, the Junior Achievement program was an optional part of the honors experience at UCF.

Participating students visited elementary schools throughout the Central Florida area and taught 40-minute sessions on social studies to students from kindergarten to fifth grade. The service learning program is a chance for honors students to become engaged citizens and understand what it's like to be on the other side of the desk.

Now, Junior Achievement has been incorporated into the Honors Symposium in the Burnett Honors College, a lecture series and discussion course required for freshmen in their first semester. That makes the new form of Honors Symposium an accredited service-learning class.

"Our dean feels it's very important that we educate all the students," said Kelly Astro, Director of Research and Civic Engagement. "We want well-rounded students, not only book smarts and [success] in classes. We want them to live and be engaged in the world around them."

Think of JA as similar to the lab component of any biology class: The only difference is that honors students' labs are local classrooms.

Even when it was voluntary, about 75 percent of honors students still elected to participate in the program. After students shared how much they enjoyed their experiences, the Burnett Honors College administration decided to make JA required, Astro said.

Honors student Heather Stinnett so enjoyed her JA experience that she has since gone on to volunteer for other programs like Honors Educational Reach Out.

Although Stinnett is a supporter of JA and felt it truly helped her college experience through the activities, she was still unsure about the recent change to make it mandatory.

"I have a sister who is a freshman in the honors college, and I was surprised when she told me everyone had to participate," Stinnett said. "I was even worried that because of it, there wouldn't be

enough spots for the upperclassmen to work in JA also."

Students like Stinnett are service-oriented people - the kind the honors college hopes to attract with its new mandatory policy.

"Service learning is a strong movement on UCF's campus," Astro said. "It would be a natural progression for the honors college to take a lead role."

But not everyone is so excited about the change. Students like junior Mike Falk feel that freshmen already tend to take on large workloads, and adding JA could be too much for a new college student to handle. In addition to the class-teaching sessions, students must also write three journals and one paper about the symposium experience.

"It seemed as though there were a large amount of students who decided to participate regardless of the lack of requirement," Falk said. "Students hoping to join the Honors College will most likely be taking a good amount of challenging courses, and although JA doesn't take much time out of your week, it can still cause more unwanted stress - especially if that specific student is trying to balance schoolwork as well as a job."

But Astro said that students are well aware of the requirement during the application process, so there are no surprises.

"We started talking about this requirement during summer orientation and end of last fall," Astro said. "The only concern most students have is a fear of speaking in front of people. But this practice comes in handy during their required Fundamentals of Oral Communication class."

Astro also said she has seen honors students bond so strongly with the elementary-schoolers they teach that they quickly take on a parental role.

"I think very quickly we see students turning from talking about 'the kids' and 'the class' to 'my kids' or 'my class,'" Astro said.

The program has gained recognition in the UCF community and beyond. American Coach Line provides transportation to the students free of charge.

"They wanted to participate because of the significance of the program," Astro said. "They felt it was a very important thing to be a part of."

With the overwhelming positive feedback, according to Astro and the honors college administration, students will be able to experience a new activity that was only an option before.

"I like to think that most students who participate, whether they're happy about it or not, will come out satisfied with the experience in the end," Stinnett said.

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