

MercedSunStar.com

Program gives students hand with writing skills

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It's hard to get high school students out of bed before 8 a.m. in the summertime.

It's even harder to get them motivated to learn.

But for four hours a day, five days a week, that's what Rae Owens, instructor for the UC Merced Writing Project, is doing.

"Now we're going to get at the heart of the article," Owens said Wednesday morning, passing out small paper hearts to about a dozen high school students. "On one side, write down what you think the article is about. Then on the other side, tell me what you think the article is really about. What's at the heart of its argument?"

Paper hearts are just one tool -- along with beach balls, hula hoops and Frisbees -- that Owens is using to teach students who need it most the vital skills of critical thinking and writing in one of two three-week writing courses being held this summer at UC Merced.

"Colleges want students who can form their own ideas and support them in writing, not just regurgitate other people's ideas," said Owens, who previously taught English at Atwater High School for 31 years. "That's what the class is all about."

Mostly sophomores and juniors, students in the class are bused from Atwater and Buhach Colony high schools, where they were recruited into the program during the regular school year.

The day starts early with a "brain stretch" exercise, during which students write for 10 minutes about topics written on slips of paper that they choose from a small colorful box.

While Owens said leading the class can feel "like pulling teeth" for the first half-hour, with some students resting their heads sleepily on their desks, by the second half-hour most students are actively participating in the various hands-on activities Owens designs to keep things interesting.

By 8:30 a.m. students are identifying arguments from an editorial they read for the previous night's homework, and by 9 a.m. they're out of their chairs and debating their own stances.

"The key is to get them engaged," said Owens. "It's hard to get kids to give up their summer, but once they're here, they get pretty involved. They just need a little encouragement."

Activities after their snack break include "figurative language Frisbee" and "philosophical chairs." Their

day wraps up by noon, after more quiet writing time.

"I thought it would be boring," said 16-year-old Buhach Colony High student Jeanette Herrera. "But it's not. It's actually pretty fun. We even get to argue in class."

The summer writing courses are just one component of the UC Merced Writing Project, one of about 200 offshoots of the National Writing Project, an organization founded at UC Berkeley in 1974 to improve the writing skills of students across the United States from elementary through high school.

Universities around the country host similar summer courses, as well as a number of training programs for public school writing teachers.

"So many students come into college without the strong writing skills they need to succeed," said National Writing Project spokeswoman Mary Ann Smith. "Whatever course of study students are pursuing, they do better when they can use writing as a tool for understanding ... Writing is a real centerpiece of all academics, as well as career success."

The summer courses were first held locally in 2002 in anticipation of the new UC campus. Before the campus was built, classes met at Atwater High.

Atwater and Buhach students are targeted for the program because many of them come from racial and socioeconomic groups that are statistically less likely to attend college, said Owens.

"By holding the classes on a college campus, we're also trying to connect these students with the university experience and get them thinking about college," said Owens.

The class includes a guided tour of UC Merced, as well as a field trip to UC Davis.

Participation in the program is voluntary, though most students say they were encouraged to attend by their parents.

"I didn't have anything else to do this summer, and my parents thought this would be good," said 15-year-old Angela Duran, who attends Atwater High. "My writing skills are horrible right now, so I wanted to come, too."

With sponsorship from UC Merced and a federally funded grant, the class comes at no cost to students.

Owens said the program's current grant will support the courses next summer as well, but funding after that is uncertain.

"I hope we can keep it up," said Owens. "It makes such a difference for students to have good writing skills."

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Posted on 07/13/06 00:30:00

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