A Real Taste of College

High Schoolers Get Preview of Coming College Attractions

By Marty Graham

Academic Connections, a high school to college immersion program now entering its 11th year at UC San Diego, gets rave reviews from parents and from the students, who often establish friendships that last for years.

“In my son’s case, it helped him refine his ideas of what he wanted in a college and in dorm life,” parent Rosie O wrote on the College Confidential Web site. “He made a lot of friends and had a great time.”

Some have nicknamed the program “smart camp,” for high school students: a three-week dive into college life including lectures and labs, a roommate and final exams on one of the most beautiful campuses in the world. Academic Connections, a UC San Diego Extension program, will offer up this college head start to students again this coming July.

“This is a real taste of college,” says Patrick Scott-Klingborg, program assistant with Academic Connections. “Most of our students have never been away from home, they’ve never lived in a room with three other people, they’ve never had to do their own laundry and they’ve never been in a class with kids as bright as they are.”

A maximum of 300 high school students are accepted each year into the $3,450 adventure. They live in Tioga Hall, a dorm with ocean views and strict supervision—and a cafeteria with long meal hours and unlimited servings. “That’s important with high school boys,” Klingborg notes.

The rooms at Tioga Hall come with residential advisors like Cristal Ruiz, who meet with the kids every night at 9 pm.

“It’s a combination of a lot of freedom and strict rules, and we have a buddy system,” Ruiz says. “Every night we go over the good and bad of the day and what the kids are struggling with.”

Each student picks one course of study, ranging from anthropology to robotics, for the three-week period. Students not only get college credit for the course, they attend an SAT preparatory course and can also boost their college application score for University of California schools by 40 points. “The entire experience is the value, but the application points and the SAT prep course definitely add value,” says Ed Abeyta, the director of the program and UC San Diego Extension’s head of K-16 education. “We have a professional company that specializes in SAT prep (to) give that instruction.”

Students are in class five hours a day; two and a half hours of instruction in the morning, two and a half hours of laboratory or field trip experience in the afternoon. They also learn how to use the library.

“There’s more dorm supervision than usual, a ratio of one advisor to eight students instead of the normal one to 12,” Abeyta says. “We’ve handpicked our staff for their ability to communicate with students.” Instructors for the 25 courses offered in 2010 are also carefully selected for their ability to teach and communicate effectively. “Most of our instructors are working on their Ph.D.s, and were recruited from the graduate schools,” says Klingborg. “We’ve interviewed them and selected them as much for their teaching skills as for their brilliance.”

This coming year students can choose from a wide range of course subjects such as fiction and news writing, photography, bioinformatics, marine microbiology, robotics, anthropology, political campaigns and elections and more. They earn up to six credits from UC San Diego Extension. Students also have access to a wide variety of extra-curricular activities, from tours of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography to sports and movies. “Last summer, when the latest Harry Potter film came out, we had so much interest that we bought out a theater for one show and went as a group,” Klingborg says.

To qualify, students must have a grade point average of at least 3.3 – it’s not unusual to see 4.0s, says Abeyta. They don’t have to commit to UCSD or any University of California schools, though the additional college application points are certainly a selling point.

“In 2009, about 60 percent of our students were local and the next largest groups came from Los Angeles and the Bay Area,” adds Abeyta. “We also had three international students and people from Texas, Washington and Las Vegas.”

Rosie O, who has sent a son and a daughter through the program and plans to send her remaining child as well, said it best. “I think it is very useful for kids to have a chance to live the life of a college student for a few weeks and to get used to doing their own laundry, keeping their own schedule, etc. within the supervisory framework Academic Connections provides.”

More information can be found at academicconnections.ucsd.edu

For more information contact (858) 534-0804 or academicconnections@ucsd.edu