Teacher: Terri Slaughter

Course: Health Informatics

School: South High School — Columbus, Ohio

Principal: Edmund Baker

Students Jump Into Projects, Emerge With Lifetime Lessons

Inner-city students enrolled in an Advanced Career (AC) course at South High School (SHS) in Columbus, Ohio, are "jazzed" to find community leaders will listen to their ideas and give them positive feedback on their research topics. "It builds confidence and gets them excited about moving on to the next project," said instructor Terri Slaughter.

These students went from wearing "fat suits" while studying obesity to visiting a community organization that gives fruit and vegetables to needy diabetes patients who complete a healthy food preparation class. "Our students are familiar with government programs and are not interested in learning more about them," Slaughter said. "They are fascinated by the church ministries and community programs within walking distance of the school."

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Six seniors and one junior are taking the Health Informatics I: Data and Use foundational course being field-tested at SHS in 2013-14. "More students were interested in the course, but scheduling prevented them from taking it," Slaughter said. Health Informatics is a rigorous curriculum developed by SREB and the Ohio Association of Career-Technical Superintendents to prepare high school students for college and careers.

South High School is an urban comprehensive high school with 865 students. All of the AC students are in the top 10 percent of their classes and are college-bound. However, the course is available to any and all students. Three SHS students are interested in traditional health careers, while two others enrolled in AC to increase their technology skills.

More Than Doctors and Nurses

"Health Informatics isn't just about becoming doctors and nurses," Slaughter said. "This course can help students become administrators, entrepreneurs, engineers, data specialists, Web page designers and many other positions in the rapidly expanding health field."

Slaughter, who has taught high school for 14 years, is a technology teacher well equipped to guide AC students in the use of data sheets and PowerPoint presentations for their projects. She involves other teachers as needed for the English, mathematics and science aspects of the AC course. "The school nurse showed students how to check and record blood pressures, and one teacher who is a former paramedic provided assistance with another project," Slaughter said.

What about those fat suits? In the public health data mining project in Health Informatics 1, the students loaded their backpacks with 30 pounds of books and jogged up and down the stairs to get an idea of how extra pounds increase heart rate and blood pressure. They recorded their blood pressure and heart rate after climbing the stairs with and without the suits and created Excel spreadsheets and double bar charts of the results.

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When it was time to study the relationship between obesity and diabetes, they visited church- and community-operated food pantries, including a facility where dentists and physicians from a local hospital volunteer their services. "Some of our students became interested in working at such a facility to complete the community service that the school requires for graduation," Slaughter said.

Obesity in the Neighborhood

In researching the prevalence of obesity in America, students were shocked to find from their Internet searches that the condition was more widespread on the south side of Columbus, where the school is located. They incorporated this information into the project and presented it to a representative of the local health department who came to hear their presentation as a member of their "authentic audience."

"The final presentation contained recommendations about obesity and diabetes, obesity and heart disease, dietary habits and community programs," Slaughter said. "A few students took it one step farther and observed that the corner store in their neighborhood does not offer healthy foods for the children and adults who shop there. This situation contributes to the disparity of urban and rural fresh food offerings."

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Save a Life: Earn a Cord

One unique idea arose from students who returned from a field trip to the American Red Cross in the AC course's Disaster Preparedness Planning project. To partner with the Red Cross, the Health Informatics class will schedule three blood donation drives at the school each year.

"The AC students created a unique way for students to become involved in collecting blood for potential catastrophes," Slaughter said. The group voted on a tag line — a strong, concise phrase that sums up their message: "Save a Life. Earn a Cord." Students volunteering with the blood collection or giving blood six times during their high school careers would receive a red honors cord to wear at graduation. "The students were excited about the idea," Slaughter said. "It made the project more personal to them."

When students pitched the plan to Principal Edmund Baker, they received his full support. "The principal thought the idea was amazing," Slaughter said. He congratulated the AC class for getting involved in authentic learning experiences that incorporate so many 21st-century skills. "This type of project brings the outside world into the classroom and benefits students, no matter what they choose to do in life," Baker said.

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For information on AC projects at South High School, contact Terri Slaughter at tslaughter4664@columbus.k12.oh.us.

For information on adopting this AC curriculum or others available in fall 2014, visit sreb.org/AC or contact Gene Bottoms, SREB Senior Vice President, at (404) 875-9211 or gene.bottoms@sreb.org; Marna Young at marna.young@sreb.org; or Jim Berto at james.berto@sreb.org.