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Biology students tackle environmental service assignments with enthusiasm

DECEMBER 14, 2006

As professors in the Department of Biology at Georgia Southern University, Lissa Leege and Michelle Cawthorn encourage their students to take active roles in the learning process.

Be curious, ask questions, and search for answers.

However, a group of 270 students who were enrolled in classes taught by Leege and Cawthorn went above and beyond the call of duty during the recently completed fall semester.

Required by their instructors to take part in an environmental service project, the students attacked the assignment with surprising enthusiasm: they helped to clean up the Ogeechee River, encouraged tailgaters at Paulson Stadium to recycle, picked up litter at a local apartment complex, and performed numerous other acts that displayed a genuine concern for nature.

‘Dr. Cawthorn and I were flabbergasted at the positive response,’ Leege said. ‘We expected some resentment from the students for being required to do something out of class time and out of their comfort zone.

‘Many of them admitted that they weren’t too thrilled when they first heard about the assignment, but once they were out there doing it, they enjoyed it so much that they would gladly do it again.

‘And I have been approached by many people in the community who thanked me for what the students have done. It was truly an inspirational experience.’

The students were enrolled in Environmental Biology 1230, a course that is part of the core curriculum that all Georgia Southern students must take.

Wanting to add a new wrinkle to the course, Leege and Cawthorn required the students in their classes to complete an environmental service assignment.

‘Often, lecture is not enough,’ Leege said. ‘We wanted to give the students an opportunity to experience first-hand what we were discussing in class. Getting involved brings the concepts across in a way that they are much less likely to forget.’

To that end, Leege and Cawthorn gave their students the option of choosing from an established list of environmental service activities, or coming up with their own projects.

Some students volunteered for Rivers Alive, a statewide effort to clean up Georgia’s streams, rivers and coastline. Working with Keep Bulloch Beautiful, the students spent a day on the Ogeechee

River, picking up litter from the water and the shore. Over 3,500 pounds of trash and debris were removed from the river and its banks.

Meanwhile, other students assisted the Ogeechee-Canoochee Riverkeeper by spray painting storm drains throughout Statesboro with a stenciled message. The message reminds people to be careful of what they dump into the drains because they flow directly into the Ogeechee River.

In addition, some students patrolled the Paulson Stadium parking lot on several game days during football season. Working with Keep Bulloch Beautiful, they distributed trash bags and recycling bags to tailgaters and informed them what types of items were appropriate for each bag. Over 3,400 pounds of beverage containers were diverted from the landfill and recycled.

Also, other students participated in one of several activities at the University's Botanical Garden. They assisted with the annual Farm and Forest Festival, helped to prepare the children's garden for a new season, inventoried plant species in the longleaf pine area, and worked with endangered pitcher plants in the bog.

Finally, various students volunteered at the Bulloch County Animal Control Shelter and the University's Center for Wildlife Education; initiated a litter pickup at a local apartment complex; started recycling campaigns in a residence hall and a sorority house; and helped to initiate and publicize a new recycling program at a hospital in a neighboring county.

'We were all extremely proud of the effort we were making,' said Connie Thrift, a junior from Nahunta, Ga., who participated in the Ogeechee River cleanup. 'The fact that it was a class assignment no longer mattered. We had a purpose.'

Many of the students also developed a newfound sense of concern for nature.

'Before this project, I had never gotten out and done something for the environment,' said Whitney Blackburn, a sophomore from Martinez, Ga., who also participated in the river cleanup. 'But when I was kayaking down the river and saw so much trash and how it is ultimately hurting nature, I was disturbed.'

'The Rivers Alive cleanup opened my eyes. I now want to get out and do more service projects and help better our environment.'

The work of the students did not escape the notice of the general public.

'One sweet old man stopped and took the time to say, bless your sweet heart,' said Diala Samawi, a junior from Round Lake Park, Ill., who participated in the tailgaters' recycling program. 'I immediately knew that it was worth all the effort and time. I felt good because, not only was I taking part in something great and bigger than me, I was also being appreciated for it.'

All together, the students from Leege and Cawthorn's classes performed almost 900 hours of community service. The executive director of Keep Bulloch Beautiful praised the students and their professors for tackling local environmental issues.

'Keep Bulloch Beautiful is about educating people, involving them, and changing their attitudes and behaviors as a result,' Brooke Brandenburg Carney said. 'The service component of the environmental biology courses completes the circle and helps the students develop environmentally responsible attitudes and behaviors that will stay with them longer than anything they read or hear.

'I am delighted that the professors have added this component to their courses and hope they continue to do so. The entire community benefits from what the students have done.'

According to Leege, several of her colleagues in the Department of Biology plan to add environmental service activities to their course requirements. She believes the activities will continue to be well-received by the students.

'The chance to do something about real environmental issues right here where we live gave the students a sense of accomplishment and pride,' Leege said. 'Many of them realized that as individuals they could really make a difference with their actions.'