Inside USD

Freshman LLC Program at Full Capacity

Saturday, August 31, 2013

Emma von Tscharner is one of approximately 1,187 new freshmen moving onto the University of San Diego campus this weekend. Like everyone else, she’s ready to begin the life-changing experience of being a college student. The chance to meet other students and establish campus connections that can ease the adjustment to her new surroundings.

The University of San Diego understands von Tscharner’s desire and her approach 100 percent. While the university has long had programs in place to help freshmen adjust to the college environment, especially at the onset of the transition, this weekend is the start of something significantly bigger for all freshman students and USD alike.

The 2013-14 academic year marks the full, 100 percent launch of USD’s Living Learning Communities (LLCs), a program that takes the foundational approach of students with a common interest living and studying together. But clearly the LLCs have been designed to give all incoming freshmen a comprehensive first-year experience.

Freshmen living in residential housing in Camino/Founders halls, Maher Hall, Missions A & B, are placed near each other in conjunction with one of nine USD themed LLCs — Social Justice, Sustainability, Honors, The Natural World, Change, Globalization, Faith and Reason, Intersections and Space, Place and Sound. Commuter freshman students are also part of the LLC. Each theme gives students an immediate connection to 120-150 others who share some commonalities.

“I’m so excited to be living in the dorms, especially based on common interests,” said von Tscharner, who was assigned to the Social Justice LLC after researching the themes to pick the best one for her. “I think it’s very important and makes the transition easier because you can relate to people who share common views. I am excited to see how people think and talk about different social justice issues.”

Academically, USD’s LLC model links each theme to preceptorials, first-year core curriculum courses with up to 18 first-year students, and each is taught by a full-time faculty member who also serves as a valuable resource as the students’ academic advisor until they choose their major.

The depth of the living and studying aspect of an LLC also produces unique opportunities for students to combine education within fun activities taking place on- and off-campus.

Del Dickson, entering his third year as Honors LLC faculty director and a distinguished USD political science professor since 1987, has enjoyed seeing the experiential learning opportunities bestowed to Honors LLC students. Past student trips have included swimming with leopard sharks (considered harmless), apple picking in nearby Julian, a visit to the California Wolf Preserve and a Shakespeare play at The Old Globe in Balboa Park.

"I believe that learning ought to be fun," Dickson said, referring to past Honors LLC trips. "They’ll have fun and they get an education, too, but it’s something different. It’s a great introduction for students to learn about
San Diego. The LLC plugs students into USD, connects them to each other and plugs them into the community, too."

**Constructing the LLCs**

The evolution of USD’s LLC concept began in 2009. Top administrators were examining multiple ways to enhance its freshmen student retention percentage. The retention number was already above average, but the intended goal of 90 percent — which was attained last fall — brought different ideas to the forefront.

A committee led by then Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Noelle Norton (now CAS Dean) and Student Affairs Associate Dean Margaret Leary drafted a plan with input from faculty, staff and students.

"It is a proven, high-impact practice that has been shown to help with student success, retention, learning and enhances the intellectual climate on a campus,” Leary said.

A pilot program started in Fall 2010 with just 100 students and six linked preceptorial courses. In Fall 2011, a faculty director and a handful of faculty were linked to three themes (Social Justice, Honors, and Sustainability) for 300 students who lived together in Missions B. Last year, the LLC theme total went to five (adding The Natural World and Space, Place and Sound) with 53 percent of the freshmen class participating and living in Missions B and Maher.

Favorable responses from students, staff, faculty buy-in and an increase in both the fall-to-spring and fall-to-fall retention numbers fueled discussion last fall whether the LLC concept should progress to 75 percent student involvement or if 100 percent capacity was feasible for Fall 2013, one year ahead of schedule.

While there was some concern about moving too quickly, the move to full capacity was approved and plans were put in place. Leary credits the work of many people across many campus departments to give incoming freshmen such as von Tscharner the chance to connect quickly and access to all USD has to offer.

The increase in student and faculty involvement resulted in four additional LLC themes — Change, Faith and Reason, Globalization and Intersections — this year. Furthermore, the full blend of the popular preceptor program, Dickson said, strengthens both it and the LLCs. Dayanne Izmirian, assistant dean of residential life, said each LLC now has an RA theme coordinator and they’ll work closely with preceptor assistants.

Moving the LLCs to full capacity puts USD on pace to deliver results for students, staff, faculty and administrators. It also has the potential to strengthen a diversely connected community.

"It’s really powerful,” Leary said. "There’s a lot of potential for a student to connect with people who have similar interests, but who are different from them as well. I think that’s what I like about it. The program is dynamic that way. Students tell us they like living with people who might be thinking about majoring in something similar because they’re in the same theme. But we look at the composition of themes and know that people are different racially, ethnically and have different socio-economic status and so there are diverse students living here and they have a common interest. Students really like that aspect."

— Ryan T. Blystone