Senior Writing Project Focuses on Campus History [view all]

This group of seniors has taken on the challenge of documenting the history of UC Merced, which will be published as "The Fairy Shrimp Chronicles" next semester. The book will be given to all graduating seniors in May.

Starting a university from scratch is no easy task – not even for an institution as venerable as the University of California. That's what a group of UC Merced students have realized while undertaking one of the most exciting projects of their academic career: writing a book on the history of the UC system's 10th campus.

"The Fairy Shrimp Chronicles" will be published next semester and given as a gift to all graduating members of the Class of 2009.

When complete, "The Fairy Shrimp Chronicles" will address three facets of building UC Merced: The UC system and its decision to create a 10th campus, the community of Merced and the people who lobbied for that campus to be placed here, and the group of people – faculty, students and staff – who took on the challenge of building a research university from the ground up.

"It takes a special group of people to start something this big," said Jeff Wheeler, one of about a dozen students working on the project, which they all hope benefits future generations.

"Aside from just being something with our name on it, it will be a lasting legacy for our classmates," said Emily Wentworth, also in the class.

"The Fairy Shrimp Chronicles" is an oral history project taken on by history and writing students advised by founding faculty member Gregg Herken. Herken was a pioneering student at UC Santa Cruz when it was founded 40 years ago and has embraced the opportunity to be a founding professor here at UC Merced.

"I thought it would be interesting to experience the creation of a UC from the other side," Herken said of his decision to join UC Merced's faculty as a history professor in the School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts.

At the moment, Herken's students – a collection of seniors either majoring in history or minoring in writing – are conducting the final interviews for the book and organizing its structure. Aside from the deadline pressure of finishing their manuscript by January so it can go to press, the students agree that just the oral history portion of the project presents its own challenges.

"Sources don't always tell you what you want to hear," said Katie Hatfield, a history major. "When you're working on a project that has many sources still living, you find there are a lot of politics involved. People are very careful about what they'll say."

Despite working with cautious sources, the students are confident that the end result will be an accurate representation of what it took to create, build and develop UC Merced.

"There were issues and complaints in the beginning," Wheeler said. "But it seems that all were addressed quickly. When you look back, none of the founding faculty has left for reasons other than their spouses finding jobs elsewhere. I think that says a lot about this campus and its attraction."

Wentworth agrees, attributing it also to the special breed of people who joined UC Merced early on. "Not everyone is created to build a university," she said. "Many professors want to focus on research; it really takes a special person to create an academic program."

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Educational Collaboration Between Angels Camp Museum and UC Merced ~ by Victor Claveau

Literature Professor Gregg Camfield, along with 20 UC Merced students, met with Angels Camp Museum Administrator Bob Rogers to explore the feasibility of conducting a joint educational venture that will educate the UC students and benefit visitors to the museum for years to come. The idea is to incorporate the ideas, wit, wisdom and writings of Samuel Langhorne Clemens (Nov. 30, 1835 – Apr. 21, 1910), better known by the pen name Mark Twain, [into new] museum exhibits. There will be an exhibit about Twain as well as....

Museum Administrator Bob Rogers, Professor Gregg Camfield, and Angels Camp Mayor Jack Lynch.

possibly having a portrayal of him narrating a walking tour of the museum.
Camfield began brainstorming ideas with his students about the questions, relative to the time he spent in the Motherlode Country, that Twain might be asked if he were alive today. In addition, the idea is to develop and complete a project that would benefit area schools. They are in the process of deciding the specific goals of the project.

I asked Professor Camfield what he would like area residents to know about this project. He replied, "One thing I would like people to know is that physical objects stay; human resources disappear. Several of my students would like to interview older residents of the area to collect a living history. In that way, we might be able to incorporate oral history in our displays."
I asked him to be more specific in the type(s) of information that he is looking for. He replied, "Well, with our Mark Twain interest, we are very interested in oral story telling. People may have stories, anecdotes, and histories of traditions or myths. I'd be interested in the type of stories that were told around the camp fire, or on grandpa's knee.
"Museums not only collect things, they chronicle the history of the objects and then tell stories about it. We want to make sense of it all. In particular, while Mark Twain's time here was relatively short, his impact on creating the myth of the west was huge. It is also important to know that Angels Camp relates to the whole of the California mining economy, which was profoundly tied into the world's economy. So when we think of this just as local history we are really missing the fact that this was tied to something much larger. We are going to try to tell that larger story."

I asked how he was going to tell the story, and he said, "We are not exactly sure yet. We have some early ideas and one of the reasons we are here today is fact-finding. We need to know what is already here at the museum and what resources might be available to us. We have to apply for grants. We have to see if we can build the electronic infrastructure we could use to put the story together.

"We are probably going to build the Mark Twain exhibit around the five jumps of the frog story. Mark Twain wrote five drafts of the story and each draft presented a slightly different picture. In his final draft it becomes clear that he supported a Western vision of society, that is, that society should be more democratic, more vibrant, flexible, more willing to take risks. So that is part of the story that we want to tell.

"We will probably use different media types, from poster, text on a board; what I would like to have eventually is the use of computer monitors so that when a person develops a curiosity about some aspect of the exhibit they will be able to access additional material. The life of Mark Twain will be woven throughout the exhibits. "The goal of the exhibit is to tell the story of Mark Twain's life, and the history of the area, woven together."

A few of the students will continue with the project after the completion of the semester. Some are history majors and may use the project in other classes. Many of the Humanities faculties are coordinating their efforts towards the completion of this project, and the entire effort will be chronicled as a learning experience.

Professor Camfield may be contacted @ (209) 233-1072 and gcamfield@ucmerced.edu.

Written by Staff Writer, Victor Claveau

High School Student Helps UC Merced Professor Investigate Hippo "Sweat" [view all]

Creative research is like assembling a complex puzzle, according to Christopher Viney, a professor in UC Merced's School of Engineering. Multiple pieces must be brought into place: ideas, people, equipment and funding. Unlike many other researchers, though, Viney draws personnel from local high schools, and his unusual equipment list can include – of all things – a hippopotamus.

In summer 2004, Viney studied hippo "sweat" (a red secretion produced by the animal's skin) with help from Merced High School student Amber Zielinski. Viney originally hired Zielinski as a lab assistant, but he soon found the 15-year-old water polo player had a lot more to offer.

"Amber demonstrated a work ethic better than many older students," Viney said. "And she has extraordinary powers of anticipation." Together, they assembled a brand-new microscope, and Viney says Zielinski always seemed to know what part they would need next and where it went.

Viney and Zielinski traveled to the Chaffee Zoo in Fresno to collect sweat samples from Bulgy the hippo. With help from Bulgy's keeper, they developed a humane and efficient sweat collection technique.

They planned to look at how molecules in the sweat are arranged, hoping to determine why the secretion has sunscreen properties. They also observed that flies in Bulgy's habitat never landed on his sweat, indicating insect repellent potential. And by reading other researchers' observations, they realized that although hippos regularly sustain wounds in territorial battles, those wounds are rarely infected, in spite of markedly unsanitary surroundings. So the sweat may have antiseptic properties. It's water-resistant, too.

Using the microscope, Viney and Zielinski found that the sweat's molecular organization not only creates beneficial properties, it creates beautiful pictures resembling everything from swarms of insects to mountain ranges to rings of fire. Polarized light brought out different color schemes in the sweat, indicating different properties of its structure.

You won't find a bottled replica of hippo sweat at your drugstore quite yet. Viney plans two to three scientific papers based on the summer's research, and applying that knowledge to creating good products for people to use will take still more time and work. But learning how other species cope with natural obstacles to good health may ultimately benefit everyone under the sun.

UC Merced Students Headed to Denmark to Study Wind Power

July 18, 2008

MERCED - Engineering and business students from the University of California, Merced, have found a unique, interdisciplinary opportunity to study the implementation of alternative energy in Denmark through the first-ever LoCal RE Summer School program organized by UC Merced, UC Davis, UC Santa Cruz, and Roskilde University in Denmark.

Six UC Merced students are participating in the 20-student program. Uday Bali, Heather Poiry, Kevin Balkoski and Rich Inman will represent UC Merced from the School of Engineering. Kevin Rico and Sam Fong are attending as management majors from the School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts. (UC Merced's School of Management is in the planning stages).

They'll be learning about wind power in Lolland, a community that has become a world leader in developing and implementing wind energy. Next year, Danish students will visit California to learn about solar energy.

Before it implemented alternative energy on a large scale beginning in the late 1980s, Denmark had the second-highest per-capita carbon emissions in the world. The United States, then as now, occupied the top spot.

"We anticipate learning in ways we couldn't begin to learn inside a classroom," Poiry said, "Especially about social adaptation to changes in energy systems. Lifestyle changes are difficult to initiate, and it will be interesting to see how they handle that."

The fact that UC Merced is so well represented in spite of larger candidate pools from other participating institutions speaks to the cohesiveness and achievement brought about by personal mentoring. These UC Merced students have developed close relationships with one of the world's leading energy researchers, Professor Roland Winston, jointly appointed in UC Merced's schools of Natural Sciences and Engineering.

"He really makes room for us, always asking how he can help," said Rico.

All six participants have been involved in Winston's courses and research since they came to UC Merced. Balkoski and Bali transferred in at the opening of the university in 2005; both have now graduated and plan to pursue graduate degrees at UC Merced with Winston as their advisor. The remaining members of the group are still pursuing their bachelor's degrees. All agree that the LocalRE program is a unique opportunity.

"I am extremely proud of this first group of UC Merced energy students," said Roland Winston. "I expect them to become leaders in the new field of renewable energy."

"Because this is the first time this program is happening, we have the chance to help mold a good program," said Bali. "That's what we've prepared for since we came to UC Merced, as we helped start the campus." Bali is the immediate past president of the Associated Students of UC Merced, the campus' student government.

The students have also all participated in service learning projects through the Foster Family Center for Engineering Service Learning - A National Epics Site, a requirement for engineering majors at UC Merced.

"I strongly believe our work in Denmark will help put UC Merced on the map," Poiry said. "That's what we were made for - all the work we have done in research, working with real money in service learning, learning about real projects and money and even the cost of mistakes."

Their experiences also leave them well prepared for entrepreneurship - and the group is already exploring the idea of a startup solar energy company. Using their business and engineering expertise in synchronicity with current global concerns about financial and environmental costs of fossil fuels, they may be poised for immediate success.

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