Camp teaches economics using games

Two UO professors run a free summer camp to teach economic principles to low-income youth

BY RYAN KNITZSON
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Twelve-year-old Michael's blue eyes gleamed below his short blond hair as he playfully flashed an eight of spades to his friend standing beside him.

Gleefully, Michael and his friend dashed to the center of the room to join 16 other 7th and 8th grade students participating in a card game meant to reflect the economic principles of supply and demand.

Economics may not sound like the usual fantasy camp for middle school students, but University of Oregon economics professors Bill Harbaugh and Bruce Blonigen are using economics games, gift certificates and the lure of University life to get these youngsters excited about economics and — above all — going to college.

While working together in the honors class of Community Economics, Harbaugh and Blonigen coalesced to create the free Economies Summer Camp with the aim of recruiting children who are less likely to follow through with their dreams of college because of their socioeconomic status. Hopefully, Harbaugh and Blonigen said, after coming to this camp these children will become more excited about coming to college.

"I think there are really two goals to what we're doing. One is to get them a sense of what they can do with their math skills, which is economics as an applied mathematics social science," Blonigen said. "The second thing is to get them realistic expectations about going to college. We want to get across more than just the, 'I want to go, but it that it takes discipline.'"

Michael and his friends said they were too bored this summer and decided to attend the free camp for something to do. Now, after learning "how to make money," as one 13 year old put it, they said they are even more excited about attending college — specifically the University of Oregon — than they were during their previous visits to campus during sporting events.

"Also the tour was really interesting to learn about the campus we'll be coming to later," 13-year-old Anthony said.

"It's awesome," Michael and his friends said after their first day of camp ended. Monday the campers played games, watched clips from popular teen movies featuring economics, toured campus and ate at Carson Dining Hall.

Today, they will play more economics games and get to see a human brain, which is owned by the Psychology Department.

The camp, which Harbaugh and Blonigen said is not a revolutionary idea, is also linked to Harbaugh's alternative diversity plan to increase diversity at the University by inspiring low income 7th and 8th grade students to want to attend college and perhaps later become professors.

The students for this year's camp were recruited from Springfield Middle School, where 75 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, according to 2003-04 National Center for Education Statistics. The median household income for Springfield residents is $37,233, roughly $9,000 less than the state average, according to Sperling's Best Places data.

"We don't want to have labels, all these kids are bright they've got lots of hope right now," Blonigen said. "But at the same time at least we're pulling from a population that wouldn't necessarily go to college, and that is a point of why we're doing this."

The University's Office of Multicultural Affairs offers a similar, "visitation day" program, which draws more than 150 middle school students of color to participate in activities geared toward making the younger excited for college. Other summer camps at the University not geared toward low-income youth cost anywhere from $50 to $800 to attend.

In the future, Harbaugh and Blonigen said they hope corporate sponsors will invest in the camp to support the youth who could someday be working for their companies.

"If everyone collectively behaves as we all do better," economics professor Van Kolpin said to the students during a game called "Prisoner's Dilemma" that teaches the children about the economic tension between doing what's best for the individual as opposed to the whole group, which leads to the need for some government regulation.

And they get it, Harbaugh said.

"When you think about children, that's what they do, they're professional game players," Harbaugh said.

"That comes really naturally to children, to figure out what the rules are ... figuring out how to do the best they can."

"They're catching on better than the average 201 student," Blonigen said, chuckling.

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