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Students Teaching Students: A New Senior Honors Project Option

Bridget Griffith

Faculty Sponsor: Kathleen Torrens, Communication Studies

The myriad lecture courses I have completed as a microbiology major have convinced me that lecturing does not create an optimal learning environment. Therefore, my Senior Honors Project is the initiation of a Students Teaching Students (STS) program in the URI Honors Program. The excitement of a student-run course option at URI became apparent to me early in my academic career. The STS model has been used at other universities for over 55 years, including at Tufts University, Oberlin College, and The Rubenstein College of the Environment at the University of Vermont. The program being put into place at URI most closely resembles the UVM program.

My interest in creating this program comes from a deep appreciation for education, and the recognition that reform within the university education system must occur. The STS program allows highly motivated and hand selected seniors to teach a course in a subject of their choice, directly to their peers. Using readings, films, and guest speakers, the student facilitators will guide the class participants through their learning experience. Student facilitators will have the support of content advisors, pedagogy advisors, and a senior honors project advisor.

The purpose of this program is to completely transform the way both students and educators think about the university classroom. By taking the emphasis off of lecturing, students will enjoy a more interactive learning experience. Furthermore, by allowing passionate students to assume the role of educator within their field, the program will challenge the conventional understanding of who or what makes a well-qualified educator. As I have seen with the two STS groups I have been working with for my project, when students are given the opportunity to be effective educators, lecturing is not their preferred teaching method.

Students in this program will not claim ultimate expertise in their field of study; rather, a STS program will provide the valuable opportunity for the mutual discovery of knowledge in a shared field of interest. The student-facilitators must demonstrate sufficient proficiency, of course, to adequately facilitate a course. With the abundant support of their peers, advisors, and guest facilitators, student-facilitators learn a new model of learning, as well as a new model of teaching.

I have done two full semesters of planning on this project. During the two semesters, I have designed the program to fit the specific needs of the URI Honors Program. The STS program has been designed around the preexisting senior honors project model. In addition, I have been mentoring the two groups of students preparing to teach the first STS courses. The fully developed program will include all instruction and necessary framework to make my current role as a mentor obsolete. The STS course for Fall 2011 will be on LGBTQ History, and the Spring 2012 course will be on Ocean Sustainability.