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ThinkBig communities connect students with faculty

By **Craig Tabita**, Online Editor

A new housing option called ThinkBig has allowed students with a common interest to live together and participate in themed faculty-led group activities. While the program aims to enhance the college experience for its participants, organizers hope as it grows it may eventually be the cure for faculty-student disconnect all over campus.

The ThinkBig program was introduced for this school year with six living-learning communities on topics ranging from “Technology and Outdoor Urban Adventures” to “Humor and Innovation”. The communities meet once a week, typically in a book club or coffee house type setting, and there are monthly outings that depending on the group can include hikes, seminars, movies or comedy shows. The program lasts for the fall and spring and students pay \$150 per semester to participate. There are no grades and all participation is voluntary.

About 200 students participate in the program currently, according to program organizer Dana Hartley, director of Undergraduate Academic Advising. She says she hopes that number will double next year and increase from there.

“It’ll depend on students deciding they want to participate, but [the eventual goal is] 1000--enough students participating on campus to impact the culture and improve faculty student interaction,” Hartley said.

The program’s benefits are apparent to Christa Caesar, fourth-year BME and a housing resident advisor participating in a group titled “Human Alteration: How Far is Too Far?”. She was also a resident advisor last year and sees a difference in her residents.

“[The students in the program] are so much more engaged and they know each other. They really feel part of something bigger outside of classes,” Caesar said.

“Human Alteration” is led by Steve DeWeerth, a BME and ECE professor, and the group discusses “the societal, intellectual, and ethical aspects of integration of human and machine,” according to its description. Its weekly meeting is a Tuesday night book club based on non-fiction works centered around human augmentation; they’re currently reading one called *Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond to the Redesigned Human of the Future*. They also went to see the film *Surrogates*, which is based on a future of isolated humans who interact through robot surrogates, and followed it with dinner and discussion.

A second community, “Humor and Innovation,” is exposing its participants to various forms of comedy and making connections between humor and technical pursuits. The program’s leader is Pete Ludovice, a CHBE professor who uses humor not only to make lectures more interesting; he is a stand-up comedian who performs regularly at comedy venues around Atlanta. The group’s activities so far have included attending a variety of stand-up comedy and improv shows.

Participant Jessica Arnold, second-year PSYC, enjoys being able to spend time with people who make her laugh and being able to make them laugh, but also hopes that developing her sense of humor will have professional applications. “I think [humor] helps me because in psychology you want people to be relaxed. If you can talk to them in a relaxed way and get them to laugh, that can be really good therapy,” she said.

Their Tuesday meeting was an improv workshop taught by Troy Halverson of the Relapse Theater. Guiding the students through a warmup, the exercises were intended to develop effective and believable interaction between improv performers. But they might as well have been a crash course in being an effective communicator in any environment: maintain eye contact while speaking to someone; react to your partner’s statements rather than repeatedly talking about yourself or changing the subject; being too guarded out of fear of saying the wrong thing inhibits engaging and fluid conversation; excessive hand gestures can distract from your message.

Another community is called “Technology and Urban Outdoor Adventure”. Led by ECE professor Robert Butera, he described its theme as “outdoor recreation activities that can take place in an urban environment (i.e. within 10 miles of campus) with a subtheme of an awareness of how nature and man, via our urban development, interact.” His group’s activities have included a hike from the Tech campus to the Tanyard Creek park following the basin of the Tanyard Creek, the underground storm drain for Midtown and Downtown Atlanta which passes under Tech.

The “LEGO Robotics and Outreach” community, led by ECE professor Jeff Davis, is working towards hosting a robotics competition for middle school students in January. In the competition, which will take place on a playing field the group has built, competitors will have to clear a variety of mines from the course while leaving decoys untouched.

ThinkBig also took in the existing International House and the Women, Science and Technology communities. The “I-House”, led by INTA professor Kirk Bowman, gives its participants an opportunity to experience international film, books, culture, and food. “Women, Science and Technology” (WST) is led by LCC professor Carol Colatrella and describes its focus as “personal and professional issues for women students entering scientific and technological fields”.

“[Becoming part of ThinkBig] has not been a dramatic change for the I-House,” Bowman said. “The ThinkBig directors indeed used the I-House as a model, and have been nothing but inclusive and supportive of the I-House.”

Living-learning communities are widespread at universities around the country. According to Hartley, Tech’s implementation has two major distinctions from others. One is that while other universities’ programs cater to freshmen, ThinkBig targets sophomores and above since Tech already has the Freshman Experience program. This may have a negative effect on signups.

“A lot of students [who are sophomores and up] already have friends they want to live with,” Hartley said. “Even though they might be interested in a community, living with their friends might come first. So how can

we intertwine people living with their friends and these communities?” She said one possible answer is dedicating a tower of North Avenue Apartments to ThinkBig.

Another difference between Tech’s implementation and that of other universities is that faculty, whose salary pays them nine months of the year, receive an additional month’s pay for participating in the program. Hartley said this is one reason Tech has a level of faculty participation that is rarely seen at other schools, where participation is often done on a volunteer basis.

“[The pay] is a stamp of ‘Yes, this matters to Georgia Tech’... We engage faculty at a level that other campuses can’t,” she said.

As a new program, the program is working on building awareness among students. Hartley said that last year more proposals from faculty came in than were able to be accommodated, and fewer students applied than she would have liked. But she cited the I-House and WST as living-learning communities that started small and now have to turn away applicants due to lack of space.

Signing up for ThinkBig is part of the spring housing registration process. It will not be known until spring which programs will be available, but Hartley has invited students to contact her with suggestions for faculty members who might make good community leaders.