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BGX looks closer at values

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Posted: 9/1/03

Typical college classes focus on learning material about a subject, but one program at the University is trying a different approach.

BGeXperience, now in its second year, students aim not only to learn course material, but also talk about values and how they are incorporated into life as it pertains to each subject.

How it Got Started and what it is

In September 2000 a values committee was formed by President Sidney Ribeau to begin integrating values into college experience at the University.

"A good college education should give students the information they need to deal with ethical situations they will face later in life," Don Nieman, director of BGeXperience, said. "A first rate education helps students critically think about values and what to do when there are value conflicts."

About 125 students participated last year in BGeXperience and according to Nieman, students responded positively to the program. This year, the numbers have almost tripled to around 350 students.

The program offered to freshman includes a three-day orientation (which took place the week before school this year) and classes that focus on looking at different values and how they pertain to the course material discussed.

BGeXperience orientation allows students to get a chance to meet one another and the faculty within the program. They are also introduced to value vocabulary they will be using in class.

Each student involved is required to attend the orientation and take a course on critical thinking about values, 20 different sections of general education classes are offered to students but are not required.

The general education classes offer class sizes at an average of 25 students and complete requirements just as any other class section would. In each class there is a focused discussion on how values affect the class material.

"The best feature of BGeXperience in my opinion is that students have the opportunity to make connections prior to class," Bettina Shuford, student affairs chair of the program, said. "Because of this, there are richer conversations and students can get more involved in class."

What is this about values?

According to Shuford, values are something individual to each student. The program will not enforce any list of values, but instead encourage students to determine their values.

"The values are not the University's Core Values," Shuford said. "It's not about teaching a certain set of values, but instead looking at what they are and critically analyzing what they mean."

Who's who in BGeXperience

Many groups of people are involved in this program including freshman students, faculty and upperclassmen.

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The faculty consist of professors who were interested in the concept of BGeXperience-- new professors were not hired to fill the class sections.

Don McQuarie, teaches an American Culture Studies class for the program.

"This is an interesting idea and it is interesting to teach," McQuarie said. "Some of the students find values very interesting and although I am not sure it is for all students it can be very valuable."

McQuarie and the other faculty members work with an upperclassman who act as peer facilitators for each class section.

"The students who are peer facilitators have been successful here at the University and they convey information to students as to what the University will ask of them," Nieman said. "They are close in age and this is good for the new freshman."

One of the peer facilitators, Peter Kuebeck, a senior history major, said the relationships made through BGeXperience are invaluable.

"The students have a friend that can help them out," Kuebeck said. "Upperclassmen know things about campus the freshman need and want to know. I feel good knowing I can help them when it's needed."

And according to surveys that Nieman has reviewed, students agree.

"The orientation surveys show that so far things have been very successful this fall," he said.

Megan Johnson, a freshman participating in BGeXperience, decided to try out the program when her academic advisor suggested it during scheduling.

"I am from Pittsburgh, so I was worried about meeting people on campus before classes," Johnson said. "I thought it was a good idea."

Along with meeting people Johnson said she thinks values are important in college classrooms and beyond. "I have already had conflicts here at school and what I have learned has really helped. Values are something you are almost forced to look at and now I can use what I have learned from class and apply it in situations I face."

The next step

According to Nieman, the program is just getting started and plans on growing next year.

"The committee has envisioned this as something we can do for all incoming freshman," Nieman said. "But we needed to start small to see if it would work before we rolled it out for all 3,500 freshman students."

Getting half of the freshman class involved is the goal for next year, Nieman said.

When the freshman program is complete the committee plans on making a program for the upperclassmen as well.

"In my opinion everyone loses if we don't find ways to make a higher quality of education for students," Nieman said. "This program enhances the undergraduate experience."

Values Vocabulary

Value: an abstraction referring to our sense of what is good or right.

Value Conflict: a clash between values. This move from values to value conflicts is tremendously important. It undercuts the idea that some people have values, while others lack them.

As long as moral discourse is seen in that divided light, we can separate ourselves into the good and the bad, the noble and the evil, thereby making impossible the consideration of the basis for our conflicts and differences.

Once we accept the idea that acting on a value places us in tension with certain other values, we have entered the intricate space where reflection about values becomes so challenging.

Value Preference: a personal commitment to a particular value priority. Another way to say the same thing is that a value preference serves as a personal stance with respect to a value conflict.

For instance, one might want to say in an economics class: in this context I would prefer to rely on efficiency instead of social justice to justify my beliefs or behavior.

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