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GEAR UP gives middle-schoolers a taste of college life

Local seventh-graders got a taste of the college life during a daylong visit to Whitman.

MARIA P. GONZALEZ

WALLA WALLA UNION-BULLETIN

WALLA WALLA -- As their biology lesson ended, a group of middle-schoolers made their way out of the laboratory, but not before Mary Burt sent them off with a quick reminder.

"Don't forget your slime and your worms, guys," Burt called out as the youth continued their day of exploration at Whitman College. Burt is the college's Howard Hughes Medical Institute science coordinator, and was running the biology lessons for the day.

Within minutes, several stations in the lab were set up with plastic plates, cups, measuring devices and the secret ingredients of the morning's project: polymers.

The stations were soon ready for the morning's next group of students, seventh-graders from Sager Middle School in College Place, who settled in the class.

The Sager students were among close to 320 seventh-graders -- from Walla Walla, College Place, Prescott and Touchet -- who spent Tuesday exploring Whitman College as part of a GEAR UP program.

GEAR UP is a federal program administered locally by Washington State University. The program strives to instill hopes for higher education among students in the middle school years.

The daylong visit to Whitman included tours of the campus, information on planning for college, and visits with current students. The seventh-graders also got to take part in a variety of activities, from academic to extra-curricular, to show that higher education is exciting and fun.

Those activities included workshops on theater, music and studio art at the college level; workshops with the college's Writing House and the Blue Moon literary magazine; cultural activities with Club Latino and La Casa Hispana; and environmental education and team building with the Youth Adventure Program.

Along with mingling and getting in a general college state-of-mind, there were also some academic explorations.

In the college's hall of sciences, the young students got a feel for lab work in biology, chemistry and physics through quick exercises. Many also got to try out the college's new scanning electron microscope.

For the biology lesson, the students got to make "slime" and "gummy worms," both produced with the use of polymers, water, dyes and some other key ingredients.

The "worms" were strings of gooey substance that formed when sodium alginate, a hydrocolloid, came in contact with water. The "slime" formed when polyvinyl alcohol, a polymer, and diluted borax were mixed together. Both projects got the otherwise quiet students laughing and commenting during their time in the lab.

Lab partners Alexis Cooper, 12, and Brenda Andrade, 13, each added green food coloring and glitter hearts to their individual blobs.

"It's pretty cool. "It's all gelatinous-like," said Nick Cowden, 12, who shaped his red-dyed slime into a fake tongue, a moustache, and a bracelet before moving on to the worm project.

Diana Carrasco, 12, formed her yellow slime with glitter stars into the shape of a man that she held in her hand. Her lab partner, Maria Diaz, laughed in approval.

When five Whitman students who helped in the class took some time to talk about college and take questions, the Sager students were mainly quiet again.

Perhaps the underlying lesson -- that science exploration can be fun -- was the one not lost on any of the students.

"This is awesome," said Diaz, 13. "It's very entertaining and fun."

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Joe Tierney

Gear Up-- Ricky Bonifer and Derik Forss seventh graders from Sager middle school are making "slime" during the Gear Up program at Whitman College. 5/4/10