Students Go Beyond the Curriculum to Create
Authentic Learning Experiences in an AC Course

The inner-city students enrolled in an Advanced Career (AC) course at **South High School** in Columbus, Ohio, are "jazzed" to find that community leaders will listen to their ideas and give them positive feedback on the topics that they have been researching. "It builds confidence and gets them excited about moving on to the next project," said instructor **Terri Slaughter**.

These students went from wearing "fat suits" while studying obesity to visiting a community organization that gives fruit and vegetables to needy diabetes patients who complete a healthy food preparation class. "Our students are familiar with government programs and are not interested in learning more about them," Slaughter said. "They are fascinated by the church ministries and community programs within walking distance of the school."

Six seniors and one junior are taking the Health Informatics I: Data and Use foundational course being field-tested at South HS in 2013-14. "More students were interested in the course, but scheduling prevented them from taking it," Slaughter said. Health Informatics is the rigorous curriculum developed by SREB and the Ohio Association of Career-Technical Superintendents to prepare high school students for college and careers.

South High School is an urban, comprehensive high school with 865 students. All of the AC students (four blacks and three whites, six females and one male) are in the top 10 percent of their classes and are college-bound. Three students are interested in traditional health careers, while two others enrolled in AC to increase their technology skills.

More Than Doctors and Nurses

"Health Informatics isn't just about becoming doctors and nurses," Slaughter said. "This course can help students become administrators, entrepreneurs, engineers, data specialists, webpage designers and many other positions in the rapidly expanding health field."

Slaughter, who has taught high school for 14 years, is a technology teacher who is well-equipped to guide AC students in the use of data sheets and PowerPoint presentations for their projects. She involves other teachers as needed for the English, mathematics and science aspects of the AC course. "The school nurse showed students how to check and record blood pressures, and one teacher who is a former paramedic provided assistance with another project," Slaughter said.

What about those "fat suits?" The AC students loaded their backpacks with 30 pounds of books and jogged up and down the stairs to get an idea of how added pounds increase heart rate and blood pressure as part of the Public Health Data Mining hands-on project in Health Informatics I. They recorded their blood pressure and heart rate after climbing the stairs with and without the suits and created Excel spreadsheets and double bar charts with the results.

When it was time to study the relationship between obesity and diabetes, they visited church and community-operated food pantries, including a facility where dentists and physicians from a local hospital volunteer their services. "Some of our students became interested in working at such a facility to complete the community service that the school requires for graduation," Slaughter said.

Obesity in the Neighborhood

In researching the prevalence of obesity in America, students were shocked to find from their Internet searches that the numbers balloon on the south side of Columbus, where the school is located. They incorporated this

information into their project and presented it to a representative of the local health department who, as a member of their 'authentic audience', came to hear their presentation.

"The final presentation contained recommendations about obesity and diabetes, obesity and heart disease, dietary habits and community programs," Slaughter said. "A few students took it one step further and observed that the corner store in their neighborhood does not offer healthy foods for the children and adults who shop there." – contributing to the disparity of urban and rural fresh food offerings.

One unique idea arose from students in the course's Disaster Preparedness Planning project after returning from a field trip to the American Red Cross. In order to partner with the Red Cross, each school year the Health Informatics class will schedule three blood donation drives at the school, the AC students created a unique way for students to become involved in collecting blood for potential catastrophes. The group voted on a tag line—a powerful, concise phrase that summed up their message: "**Save a Life. Earn a Cord**." Any student volunteering with OR giving blood six times during their high school career would receive a red honors cord to wear on their gown at graduation.

"The students were excited about the idea," Slaughter said. "It made the project more personal to them." This *Project Based Learning* project involved students developing and implementing a plan that will be beneficial to the school and the Red Cross school partnership program for years to come.

When they pitched the plan to the school principal, they received his full support. "The principal thought the idea was amazing," Slaughter said. "He congratulated the AC class for getting involved in this type of authentic learning experience that incorporated so many 21st century skills. Mr. Baker commented that "This type of project brings the outside world into the classroom and will benefit students no matter what they choose to do in life."

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