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Duck Tales

Flying high at the University of Oregon

BY KRISTIN BARTUS • ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAN PEGODA

SAILing to college

If you want to inspire a roomful of middle schoolers to go to college, giving them a deck of cards and a bunch of chocolate is a good start. That's exactly what University of Oregon economics professors Bruce Blonigen and Bill Harbaugh did when getting their Summer Academy to Inspire Learning (SAIL) off the ground.

In 2005, frustrated by what they saw as an ineffective campus diversity plan, the two economists put their heads together to see if they could figure out a more effective way to get underprivileged kids to attend college. Armed with their playing cards and candy, they went to Springfield Middle School and taught 8th graders about economics via a fun bargaining game, and then told them about their plans to hold a free weeklong economics camp on the UO campus that summer.

The professors asked the 8th graders' teachers for the names of students of low socioeconomic status who could likely succeed in college, but who probably weren't on the track to attend. That summer, Blonigen and Harbaugh hosted the first SAIL day camp

for 15 such students. "That turns out to be pretty powerful to the students," says Blonigen: "Just envisioning themselves there."

SAIL alum and current UO sophomore Noelle Jones agrees. "As soon as I attended the camp, I knew I'd go to college—the camp really opened the option for me," she says. "College just seemed like something attainable since I'd been there and there were people there to help me."

After the first summer, Blonigen and Harbaugh recruited faculty members from other departments to lead SAIL camps in their own subject areas, and they expanded their outreach to other area schools. Longtime UO donor Shirley Rippey liked the program so much that she donated \$50,000 in seed money, which was used to expand the number of camps. The university helps by paying for an executive director for SAIL. Now the SAIL program has grown to include 10 departments and 150 students each summer. The nearly 100 faculty members involved all volunteer their time.



The SAIL attendees are invited to sign up all four summers during high school and attend camps in different subject areas. “It’s very hands on—even though it’s very simple, it connects to real science,” explains SAIL volunteer and physics professor Raghuvveer Parthasarathy. “Probably our most popular activity is the physics of rock climbing.”

“It’s very interesting how excited they get about academic things, because it’s very novel to them,” says Harbaugh. “It’s very new and exciting that someone’s asking them questions, wanting them to think about something.”

The SAIL program appears to be making an impact. Research conducted in 2012 by some of Blonigen’s honors students indicates that, over the past three years, 68 percent of SAIL students went directly into post-secondary education after high school, compared with an estimated 25-30 percent of overall Springfield High School graduates. From an economist’s perspective, Harbaugh says, attending college is “going to make a huge difference in their lives.”

Up in the air

What happens when you combine high-flying gymnastics, athletes with Red Bull-ian energy levels, and a rockin’ soundtrack? Welcome to the sport of Acrobatics & Tumbling. The up-and-coming sport has roots in competitive cheerleading, in addition to gymnastics and acrobatics. But with the help of a 35-woman-strong UO team and a pioneer of a head coach in Felecia Mulkey, it’s quickly growing into a team event all its own.

“We kind of describe it in layman’s terms,” says Acrobatics & Tumbling senior Lauren Loos. “We just throw people in the air and stack them on top of people and move across the mat. It looks like fireworks. I promise you’ll like it. Just come.”

UO’s Acrobatics & Tumbling ladies just completed an undefeated regular season of tosses, pyramids, synchronized tumbles, and mind-blowing team routines. At a school known for world-class athletes, the members of the Acro team bring amazing athletic feats to another level. “It looks a little like Cirque du Soleil,” says Mulkey, except with all the fun and fans of any other major sporting event at Matt Knight Arena. They’re also three-time national champions in their sport.

Mulkey was a competitive-cheerleading coach at Kennesaw State University in 2008 when the University of Oregon announced it would be starting competitive cheerleading as a sport. Typically, cheerleading is only a club team at colleges. After Mulkey called UO to find out about their planned program, thanks to her years of experience and drive she ended up with the head coaching job. Upon arrival, she quickly encountered backlash from people who didn’t think cheerleading should be considered a sport.

The backlash inspired her to push for a number of changes, notably to the uniform (no skirts or bare midribs for these athletes) and to the name of the sport itself. Former UO athletic administrator Renee Baumgartner worked with others to establish the National Collegiate Acrobatics and Tumbling Association (NCATA) and Mulkey played a significant role in creating a meet format and scoring system. The sport is slated to become a discipline of USA Gymnastics this summer, which basically legitimizes Acrobatics & Tumbling as a college sport. And as the number of participating college teams grows, it is also en route to NCAA Emerging Sport status.

With tens of thousands of girls participating in gymnastics and cheerleading across the country, yet with so few spots at the collegiate level, says Mulkey, “that is still the passion behind the whole thing: simply offering another choice for a female athlete.” ■

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