



# THE Explorer

## Honor Students Make Dell Competition Semifinals

One of Dr Hill's tasks for the class "Environmental Design 101: The Design Process" is to train innovative teams to submit proposals to national competitions. A team led by honor students James Herrington and Kenni Callahan has reached the semifinals of the Dell's Social Innovation Competition.

They shared with us on their proposal: "It is about helping chronic hunger situations. There are places in South East Asia where over 40% of the people live in this type of situation. It is about sending unused seeds in a special kit with other elements such as fertilizer and instructions that will be translated to that language. These seeds can be cultivated using containers. We would distribute to individual communities. It is about helping them help themselves."

James told us that over 360 teams submitted proposals and 49 have passed to the semifinals. These include teams from MIT, Harvard College, Duke University as well as many foreign universities from Colombia, India, Congo, Nepal and Pakistan among others.



From left to right it is: Tengku Faisal Fuad Basha, Tariq Almubarak, James Herrington, Kenni Callahan, Samantha Ketcham, and Carolyn Ledlow, Emily Colbert (absent)

The team is currently preparing for the next step. This includes preparing a video about the implementation of the project, that is, how they would use the \$ 50,000 award given to the winner.

When asked about the experience James and Kenni had a lot say about the team creative process. James pointed out that you need to put a lot of work into it. "For instance, how do we get the seeds? Do we place vegetable seeds recycling bins or pay the farmers for the seeds they give us?" and added that he had learnt "that working in a group you cannot put somebody else's ideas down. You need to consider

them without giving any criticism or praise. We also come from different majors such as English, Biology, Biomedical Science and everybody has a part to play" and the need to share the load: "we have the person who would take notes, the computer savvy, the speaker, the motivator". Kenni agreed as she was looking into the detail of cost/benefit: "putting all the elements together (approx \$ 15) how much will the user get out of it?"

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# Why Should You Take Honors Courses

**D**r. Rodney Hill has been around for a while. In fact, he found out at his TAMU Honors Teacher/Research Award in 2007 that he had taught more honors students than anybody else in campus.

When asked about what makes honors courses special he said that honors students tend to challenge the normal teaching paradigm: "You are with people who really care about learning. They are highly motivated people who feed each other, and help each other out. The Honors students are more inquisitive and ask excellent questions."

He also talked about the effects of challenging students: "You start challenging them and you can see them accomplish during their freshman year what seniors are just learning to do. For instance, five years ago one student from the Valley taught himself in 2 weeks the content of a one semester AutoCAD course".

The type of teaching interaction also changes as he mentions that "my TA and myself will meet them at night for individual teaching. Each person can discover and learn as much as they want. Instead of only focusing on things required at this level, you look for

ways to enable them to learn at their individual speed. You become then a facilitator and a coach of learning".



**Dr. Rodney Hill**

He emphasized the need to offer the students the possibility to become knowledge creators. For instance, they invite patent experts and entrepreneurs to speak and encourage the students to think about starting businesses. The point is to help them become knowledge creators in the Innovation Age.



**Dr. Sue Geller**

We had the opportunity to chat with Dr. Sue Geller, a professor and the Director of the Honors Programs in the

Department of Mathematics, about Honors courses.

## What is so good about the honors courses?

There are a number of reasons to take honors courses. They stretch students so they do not get bored but go through something more intensive. They have better teachers and learn surrounded by people with higher interest and motivation. It is also a smaller class size of 40 students instead

of a 100 students. It will also make your resume pop out for any job application, for graduate studies or for professional schools. It shows that you are not afraid of challenges, that you do your best rather than the do the minimum required and that you are successful.

## How have you seen students change throughout honors?

Honors encourage students to become more adventurous and better risk-takers. They are challenged to dig out answers for themselves. It also matures them.

## What about group work?

You know what they say about mathematicians and extroverts? An extrovert mathematician is

one who looks at you at the foot. Some people like group work and some people don't. We do not force them but when students hear by experience about the benefits of group work they end up joining in. It makes it more fun, they arrive at more answers, and maybe they also learn from each other.

Honors courses also give you more depth of knowledge and skills. For instance, in my 'How to prove course' the shakiest student will come out with better proving skills than students in regular courses. At honors courses the expectation is that everybody will succeed. We do problem solving and make it work for the student. The 'fail and forget it' philosophy does not happen in my class.