Higher education field academy

Leading the way to higher achievement, AimHigher Suffolk has been getting students involved in a ground-breaking participative 3-day programme, the Higher Education Field Academy, led by the University of Cambridge archaeology department.

These Academies, devised and led by Carenza Lewis (well known from Channel 4’s Time Team) are intended to encourage youngsters from Year 9 - 13 to develop new skills, increase their confidence and raise aspirations with regards to higher education.

Carenza, who grew up on the Norfolk/Suffolk border and attended school near Bungay before going to university at Cambridge, developed the Field Academies in response to her desire to create an inspiring and worthwhile challenge for young people which would not only enthuse and inform them about higher education, but also give them the chance to substantially improve their chances of success there by developing the skills, experience and confidence they will need.

This year, around 150 Year 10 students from a number of Suffolk schools have spent two days digging up residents’ gardens in the Suffolk villages of Coddenham, Chediston and Hessett. The main archaeological aim is to find out how the rural settlements that many of us live in today developed over the last couple of thousand years”, said Carenza. By digging small test pits and recording the dates of pottery we find in each one, we can start to show when and where people were living and farming centuries before the first maps were drawn. Students have been amazed to find artefacts such as Victorian pottery and glass, medieval and Anglo-Saxon pottery and animal bones and teeth. James Folker, a student from Stoke High School said “I’ve enjoyed all the discoveries I’ve made. I didn’t expect to find something over 1,000 years old”. Sarah English, also from Stoke High School, confirmed this opinion saying “What we have found has surprised me, I wasn’t expecting this much”.

One of the unique appeals of the Field Academy programme is that students are doing real original research for the university. In order to produce useful results, they have to carefully follow a standardised procedure to excavate, record, analyse and write up their test pit - and in doing this they have to use skills from many parts of the curriculum and develop a diverse range of new, transferable skills, all linked to
success in higher education. Following an initial instruction session, students are divided into mixed-school teams of three or four, allocated an adult supervisor (usually a member of school staff or a student ambassador from a local HEI), and taken to the site they'll be digging. Using the Field Academy instruction book, they then measure out a 1m square, record it's exact location, neatly remove any turf, and then dig to a maximum depth of 1.2m in a series of 10cm layers. Everything they take out of the pit is sieved for finds. These are identified promptly by the pottery expert, who is on site for both days and visits every test pit regularly, as do other Field Academy archaeologists (and many visitors such as Aimhigher staff - several of whom have actually taken on the test pit supervisor role, with great satisfaction!). Once each test pit is completed, the students draw sections, take soil samples for chemical analysis, then backfill and replace the removed turf to restore the site to a (near) pristine state. It's essentially the same process used to excavate professionally, but the small size of the test pits means that the students get to see work on 'their' test pit through from beginning to end in just two days. Carenza said ‘There is a real sense of ownership and team work. The students work in teams of four but are also part of a larger team as the results from each test pit need to be combined like pieces of a jigsaw’. She added that ‘They have to concentrate to succeed and they get to see every stage of the project’. Jake Calver, from Chantry High School corroborated this saying ‘I like the idea that it's something we started from scratch’.

Once the digging is finished, the results are copied to the students so they can write up their own reports on their test pits, which are submitted to Carenza on the final day of the Field Academy. This takes place at the University of Cambridge, and allows the students to present and analyse their work to the rest of the group and give them the opportunity to talk over any remaining project issues with the HEFA tutors.

The highlight of the day for many is a visit of one of the colleges of the University, during which students get a personal tour of the college, usually by an undergraduate, and a complimentary lunch in Hall. It's intended to give them a real feel for what life at university could be like, and so includes not just the 'touristy' glories of the college but also student accommodation - including some not-always-terribly-tidy undergraduate bedrooms! One student was overheard by Carenza to comment enthusiastically on her return 'We saw a room - with this guy's boxers on the floor! It was just so cool!' Carenza said 'I didn’t inquire quite why this appealed so much, but the student had clearly got the message that higher education is something that people d like can and do proceed to, which has got to be a good thing'. Finally, pupils are given a short presentation about university, which introduces such topics as the benefits of higher education and student life.

A few weeks hence, the Suffolk students will receive their test-pit write-ups back, with a formal written assessment from the University of Cambridge to help them in future work, and a certificate to mark their successful completion of the Field Academy. Participating students will be tracked in the future to monitor their progress into higher education.

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The 2006 Higher Education Field Academy programme certainly seems to have had a positive effect on the students, with many now thinking more seriously and positively about further and higher education. Lewis Sharman from Sir John Leman School said 'It showed me that if you want to do something then you can do it', while Natalia Madnick from Stoke High School, commented 'I've really enjoyed getting right into it and would like to study history at A Level. I find ancient history particularly interesting and I'm going to think about going to University'. Alex Mutton, from Chantry High School, said 'It's into my maths and ICT and I would like to go on to further education' while Shannon Carter, from Sir John Leman School said firmly 'I will definitely go to university now'.