FIELD COURSES STILL HAVE EDUCATIONAL MERIT

By
Lloyd E. Story, Jr., Ph.D.
Maysville Community College, Maysville, Kentucky

In the late spring and early summer a group of land-locked Northern Kentucky undergraduate science students from the University of Kentucky-Maysville Community College leave the standard college classroom behind and head south for around ten days of intensive on-site marine and environmental instruction. The course is an introduction to the marine environment and exposes these students to every aspect of this new environment that time will allow.

The course is planned for January when the class is opened for enrollment and for February when the orientation begins at the local college setting. The first orientation session is to explain the physical mechanics of the course. This will include travel arrangements, cost, tentative itinerary, and syllabus and safety instruction. The next session on the local campus will be a more in-depth treatment of the academic expectations for the course.

Once the day for departure arrives, students will be assigned to a particular van and the two vans will leave the local campus around 6:30 a.m. for a day and one-half through the southern countryside. Stops will be made periodically as the vegetation changes so that each student will have an opportunity to observe new organisms and new landforms. On arriving in Long Beach, Mississippi the students will check in dormitory rooms at the Gulf Coast Branch Campus of the University of Southern Mississippi. This will serve as the center for instruction.

Monday morning breakfast is served at 7:00 a.m. and the official class is off and running. First on the agenda is an on-site orientation to the campus and the region as a whole. The rest of this day will include a field trip and lecture at the Gulf Port International Harbor. This will be followed by a trip and lecture at the new Gulf Coast Marine Education Center. Behind the scene treatment of some of the largest aquariums will be explained as well as the twenty-four hour care of the animals. All of the animals housed in the Marine Education Center are endemic to the area thus this tour provides an excellent introduction to organisms that may be observed during the next few days. At this site oyster research is being done as well as other studies on marine populations and larva growth patterns.

In the late afternoon just before the dinner meal, the instructor of the course will take the students to the beach and demonstrate techniques of seining and screen dipping to examine the fauna in the shallow waters close to the shore line. Following the afternoon activities, the group will eat dinner together and then return to the lab for a short lecture to tie the events of the day together and make preparations for the coming day. The day will end around 10:00 p.m. and the students will be free to swim, play tennis, walk on the beach or rest for the coming day. Each day is filled with new activities and excitement keeps the adrenelin flowing in each student for the entire time. They become a close knit group of individuals just like a large family group.

Another very important aspect of this course work is that the students live with the two faculty members for this time period and they have an opportunity to observe their faculty as real people in a real world. This is not always the case in professor/student relationships.

From the time the students leave the home campus until the time they arrive back they must keep a journal of the events of the days. This is kept
in the form of a field logbook and is carried with them every place they go. At night they are asked to bring the logbook up to date before they retire for the evening. When the participating students return to the main campus they will be given one month to formulate an official paper covering all aspects of the field experience and turn in to the instructor of the course. At the same time they are required to turn in the logbook in its rough form.

Other activities that the students will be involved in during the time spent on the coast will include: one day on one of the Barrier Islands, a shrimping experience in which they will be able to assist in lowering the nets and sorting the catch, a visit to a coastal terrestrial site that is adjacent to a bayou, observations of swamps and wetlands, observations of insectivorous plants of the region, an on-site lecture and tour of Ingalis Shipyards in Pascagoula, Mississippi, and many chances to experience fishing cast-net style, cranking, and flounder- ing.

Terrestrial communities of several kinds will be visited and the participants will make comparisons among them. Environmental factors will be assayed to highlight the importance of factors such as salinity and dissolved oxygen on the presence or absence of organisms in a community. Lecture periods will concentrate on the interaction of man and the coastal biological communities. Importance of the marine environment to the nation as a whole will be discussed and consideration will be given to the interior of the continent and its affect on the coastal region.

While on the beach students will have an opportunity to see many animals and plants that they will have only seen in textbooks. Many specimens will be brought back to the lab so that classification can be conducted and life cycles studied. Being a beachcomber will be a favorite activity. This is a natural instinct and is excellent for the instructor because all of these collected items serve well as the classification activities unfold. Each student ends the class with a collected and identified shell collection to take back home as a souvenir.

Evaluations from students on this course have been overwhelmingly positive. We hear such things as "I have learned more in this class in this short time period than in any other class that I have taken." The course is physically very rigorous and students have to be on constant guard for sunburn. The class is so popular at our school that the course is never published in the schedule because it is already full from year to year.

The faculty are now working on evaluation materials to determine if a measurement of the learning that takes place on such a field course can be determined. Pre- and post-tests are being developed to access the degree of marine awareness before and after exposure to this type of instruction.