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Institution: Clarke County School District (CCSD) and the University of Georgia (UGA) Office of Service-Learning

Briefly tell your story and include who was involved and the focus of the initiative: Experience UGA is a partnership between the Clarke County School District (CCSD) and the University of Georgia (UGA) Office of Service-Learning, which aims to bring every Clarke County student (PreK-12) to UGA's campus every year. Through a variety of on-campus visits, CCSD students participate in hands-on, curricular-based learning activities. Each year, Experience UGA partners with over 40 UGA colleges and units to offer over 100 on-campus visits serving more than 10,000 students annually and involving more than 1,200 UGA student volunteers. The program is vital to the development and sustainability of the positive relationship between UGA and the Athens-Clarke County (ACC) community. Experience UGA ensures that the K-12 students who live in UGA's backyard are afforded opportunities to broaden their knowledge of higher education and awaken new possibilities for their futures. In addition, the program is offered at no cost to the school district or participating students.

BACKGROUND AND NEED FOR PARTNERSHIP

Athens-Clarke County (ACC), home of UGA, has one of the highest rates of poverty for a county of its size in the country (37%), with 1 in 3 children living in poverty. All 22 schools in the Clarke County School District (CCSD) are Title I schools with over 80% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Exploring career and college opportunities is critical for students and families in ACC, but there are a host of barriers to student educational attainment and economic mobility. From 2010-12, Experience UGA was developed through a community-driven planning process led by Family Connection-Communities and Schools of Athens, a local non-profit dedicated to improving outcomes for children.

During this community planning process, local leaders, classroom teachers, and university faculty and staff dreamed of an equitable and accessible program that would provide academic and career-related opportunities for CCSD students at every grade level. A shared town-gown vision was developed to create a field trip program that would work to bring every student in every grade level to UGA's campus every year. Before Experience UGA, field trips to campus were mostly dependent on classroom teachers who had a relationship with someone at UGA and were constrained by limited funding available for field trips. The idea of developing a program that made an annual commitment to providing a free visit to campus for every child in the district, every year from Pre-K to graduation was—and still is—groundbreaking. “We were extraordinarily grateful that our partners at UGA – with leadership of the Office of Service Learning, support from the College of Education and other schools, and support of the UGA President –stepped up and moved forward with the initiative.” says Tim Johnson, executive director of Family Connection-Communities in

Schools of Athens. “We talk often about the ‘three Rs for student success – Rigor, Relevance, and Relationship.’ Experience UGA strengthens all three for thousands of CCSD students every single year.”

IMPACT

Experience UGA represents a significant, ongoing commitment to educational access by UGA to children in the local school district. Over a decade later, a child who attends school in CCSD from Pre-K to graduation is guaranteed 13 opportunities to visit all corners of UGA’s campus through trips hosted by 40 campus partners. Through these experiences, students explore many academic and career opportunities available through post-secondary education.

Why does a field trip program matter? Most of us take for granted the power of field trips and immersive experiences to shape our ideas and futures. The need for this program was best described by Dr. Xernona Thomas who in 2012 was the principal of J.J. Harris Elementary School, but who went on to serve as superintendent of CCSD until her retirement in 2022. J.J. Harris Elementary is only 6 miles from UGA’s campus, but for many families and children in the attendance zone it feels out of reach. During the planning process in 2010-12, Dr. Harris told a poignant story about the impact of taking a group of students on a field trip to UGA’s annual MLK Freedom Breakfast. Many of these students had not only never stepped foot on UGA’s campus, but they had also never been farther than a few miles from home. For some, the ride in the elevator at the UGA student center was the first time they had ever been on an elevator. As Dr. Thomas explained, “How can you expect children who have never been on an elevator to navigate the college admissions process?” This lack of fundamental experiences limits the choices and opportunities of so many young people in our local community. Experience UGA is a vital program that serves as a bridge between UGA and the families of Athens-Clarke County, playing a critical role in the health and well-being of our community and our university and opening the university and its resources to thousands of students each year.

Dr. Robbie Hooker, CCSD Superintendent emphasizes the importance of the program by saying, “We are very pleased to continue supporting the innovative partnership between Clarke County School District and the University of Georgia through Experience UGA, which offers our students a look at the educational opportunities available in their own backyard. As our students – from PreK through 12th grade – visit UGA each year, it helps them understand the career and educational opportunities available to them as they prepare for life beyond high school and demonstrates UGA’s understanding that the success of each CCSD student is critical to the success of our entire community.”

Experience UGA trips also provide opportunities for thousands of UGA students from different colleges to volunteer during these trips and showcase knowledge from their own academic areas. Additionally, a select group of 40 students are "Experience UGA Ambassadors" who serve as representatives and hosts for the field trips and UGA. They meet regularly as a group for in-depth professional development training in

communication, leadership, and the deeper examination of issues surrounding K-12 and higher education in the local community. Ambassadors also create initiatives that promote positive perceptions of higher education for CCSD students through service, educational programming, and social media, and they gain the tools to become education advocates, regardless of their majors. Shania Green, a UGA student from Atlanta, Georgia said, "I became an Experience UGA Ambassador because I enjoy working with children. I think it is important to expose young students to higher education and show them that it is attainable regardless of their background." This program has been so successful, that we now have teachers in CCSD who once served as Experience UGA Ambassadors and former CCSD students who grew up going on Experience UGA trips also serving as Ambassadors.

Summarize the current status of the project or initiative: Since 2013, Experience UGA has provided field trips for over 87,000 CCSD students. Experience UGA is the largest university-community program of its kind in the nation dedicated to providing learning opportunities for every student in the local school district to visit, learn, and experience a college learning environment.

In a typical year, the UGA Office of Service-Learning coordinates over 100 field trips across the university, exploring unique topics and careers at every grade level from PreK to 12th grade. Examples of some of these trip topics include STEM (9th grade), forestry and pharmacy careers (1st grade), theater and film (3rd grade), financial management and healthy relationships (12th grade), gardening and sustainability (7th grade), and more at every grade level. All trips connect CCSD students with hands-on experiences that directly support the Georgia learning standards.

If you see a yellow school bus on the UGA campus, it is most likely students on an Experience UGA trip. The program started from a big idea generated by our community and has grown into a reality that has been sustained for over a decade, weathering leadership changes in the district and a pandemic that required Experience UGA to go virtual. This sustained commitment by our campus and community unites us in a simple but ambitious shared vision: Every Student. Every Grade. Every Year.

Supporting Documents – Experience UGA ITGA President’s Award Nomination

A UGA community partnership making unforgettable experiences

March 23, 2023

<https://servicelearning.uga.edu/a-uga-community-partnership-making-unforgettable-experiences/>

CED hosts experience UGA tenth grade field trips

January 10, 2023

https://ced.uga.edu/news_and_events/CED-Hosts-Experience-UGA-2022%20%20/

Experience UGA goes virtual during the pandemic

May 21, 2021

<https://servicelearning.uga.edu/experience-uga-goes-virtual-during-the-pandemic/>

Elementary students are able to take field trips again

May 20, 2022

<https://servicelearning.uga.edu/elementary-students-are-able-to-take-field-trips-again/>

Inaugural cohort of Experience UGA ambassadors selected

February 15, 2017

<https://outreach.uga.edu/inaugural-cohort-experience-uga-ambassadors-selected/>

Clarke County Public Schools and UGA Launch “Experience UGA”

October 28, 2013

<https://outreach.uga.edu/clarke-county-public-schools-and-uga-launch-experience-uga/>

Instagram Posts

Highlights from 3rd grade trips

https://www.instagram.com/reel/C0jgf0FNnyf/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

Introduction to third and fourth year 2024 Experience UGA Ambassadors

https://www.instagram.com/reel/C5YaXK0rqv4/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

Experience UGA trip hype video

https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cwz7sSHr48/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

Experience UGA 7th grad trip

https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cj-vHS3j-6n/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

Experience UGA Pre-K and First Grade Trips