

Class probes controversial topics through hands-on learning

By Lauren Caruba | December 24, 2017 | Updated: December 24, 2017 2:05pm

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Sophomore Starine R
study in energy policy

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AUSTIN — The high school students filed into an enormous warehouse at the Bureau of Economic Geology’s Core Research Center that stores hundreds of thousands of rock cores from oil wells drilled in Texas and across the globe.

As a representative of the bureau explained how the University of Texas at Austin research unit had accumulated 600,000 boxes of rocks, students trained their cameras on the towering shelves and tables laden with samples.

“I like it here,” one girl said to a classmate.

“Me too,” the other said.

The students from the International School of the Americas, a North East Independent School District magnet school, were on the field trip last month as part of “Oil-land,” a humanities class that examines different sides of energy policy through project-based and experiential learning.

The students have sat through a wide range of presentations. They’ve heard a representative of the Society of Native Nations speak about his tribe’s spiritual relationship with the land and his experiences protesting pipeline construction in West Texas and elsewhere. They’ve listened to an architecture professor from the University of Texas at San Antonio talk about design solutions for the boom-and-bust economic cycles in oil towns. They’ve questioned NEISD’s energy management coordinator on how overseeing school energy use saves the district money.

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“It seems that kids really need to know how to have civil discourse,” Sprott said.

During their Austin visit, the students attended a series of presentations by scientists on how oil drilling might affect the frequency of earthquakes, the relationship between water and energy production, and the pros and cons of carbon capture. They listened as researchers explained how X-ray fluorescence technology helped them analyze the composition of rock samples extracted from drilling. They visited Exxon Mobil archives housed at the Briscoe Center for American History at UT.

In a previous iteration of the class called “Borderland,” students absorbed the importance of borders and their intersection with immigration policy, interviewing the mayor of McAllen, agents of the Border Patrol and a refugee who had fled violence in Central America, among others.

Students earn a semester credit for the yearlong elective, to which they had to apply and take during their lunch periods. The class is taught in collaboration with Jason Reed, an associate professor of photography at Texas State University. Sprott and Reed have known each other for years and worked together on the **Borderland Collective**, an educational art project housed at Texas State, long before Sprott joined the ISA faculty. The students’ work will appear on the project’s website.

Throughout the year, students jot down notes on what they learn in field journals and photograph their learning experiences, materials that provide fodder for end-of-year projects. During the Borderland class, students created a poster and a newspaper filled with photography, essays and artwork. In the spring, the Oil-land students will present their work to the public at an exhibit in Southtown.

If fundraising is sufficient, Sprott will take the class on a three-day trip to the Permian Basin in West Texas in February to visit a wind farm, fracking operations and Texon, an abandoned oil town.

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back the development of other energy sources. She learned how integral the industry is to the economy and of its support for the exploration of alternative energy sources.

“This class really wants you to step outside your educational boundaries and see the world in a different way,” Fortuno said.

Classmate Aidan Cruz entered the course with similar sentiments. Cruz, also a junior, said he’s realized that fossil fuels aren’t the enemy and that renewable resources have limitations. Getting out of the classroom and meeting experts in the field makes him more excited about learning.

“There’s a middle ground I don’t think is explored enough,” Cruz said.

lcaruba@express-news.net / Twitter: @LaurenCaruba



Lauren Caruba

Education Reporter, San Antonio Express-News

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2
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