

GEMS motivates middle, high school girls

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The Girls Empowered by Math and Science program is now accepting applications for its third year.

GEMS focuses on girls in grades 6-9, and works to promote accelerated academic achievement in the areas of math, science, technology and education.

GEMS consists of a two-part initiative, with academies available during the school year, as well as the summer.

The program follows a strategic and rigorous core curriculum developed by Winston-Salem State instructors, who specialize in the program's areas of focus. The curriculum coordinates with the NC middle and high school Standard Course of Study, and covers topics ranging from nursing to global economics.

"In the past, we have had sessions on nursing, biology, financial literacy and more," said Denise Johnson, program creator and director.

This month, participants will hear from a guest speaker from the Environmental Protection Agency, who will conduct activities on lung capacity, oil spill clean-up, and water quality testing.

"In November, a faculty member from physics will conduct a session and expose the participants to conceptual physics topics," Johnson said.

Plans to create an all-girl enrichment program began in 2008 when Johnson wrote a grant for sponsorship to the American Honda Association to support the project. Along with the help of Assistant Director Lynn Zubov, and a team of female WSSU faculty members, Johnson created the program with hopes of inspiring more young girls to enter careers of math, science,

technology, and education.

"This is my second year with the GEMS program, and I love it," said Rachel Hicks, an instructor with the program.

"Not only does it allow the girls to interact with each other both socially and academically, but it also gives them a chance to form a bond together."

Each year, Johnson and her staff have worked continuously to keep young women active in their program. GEMS accepts roughly 30 applicants for its school-year program and about 22 applicants each summer.

"GEMS brings in such a diverse group of girls, not only in age, but in background as well," Hicks said.

"The program has definitely left an encouraging impact on the girls, and it is evident by the number of returning girls we have each year."

Participants, also referred to as Gemmers, are given the opportunity to not only enhance themselves in the classroom, but also with hands-on activities as well.

Gemmers enrolled in the school year component meet one Saturday morning each month for an interactive, critical thinking session according to their level of academia. This portion of the program is free.

The two-week long summer program costs \$75, and consists of several workshops followed by a three-day educational field trip.

As a part of the program initiative, all Gemmers are given the opportunity to experience multiple college tours, informational presentations and exploratory projects with cutting edge technology.

Middle and high school counselors frequently visit the program participants to express the importance of staying successful in both academics and extra-curricular activities.

Both divisions of the program comply with the objectives of the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Education Coalition, and require students to complete STEM-based coursework.

GEMS strongly promotes parent involvement by hosting a parental involvement session once every semester.

"Involving parents in the learning process is an essential component of the program," Johnson said.

"In December, GEMS will showcase career mentoring activities for family members to attend, and in the spring we will host a STEM Career Day, also open to parents and family."

With several projects already completed, GEMS has much more planned for its participants. The program plans to host a plethora of speakers this year, ranging from doctors to judges and a financial planner. In addition, it will continue to host its monthly sessions.

"We are hoping to collaborate with the Chemistry and Exercise Science departments in the near future," Johnson said.

Applications and more information on Girls Empowered by Math and Science can be found online at the GEMS home page.

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— RACHEL HICKS

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