

—Up front—

# UNITAS: a blending of cultures

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Wouldn't it be nice to have a class in a dorm lounge where the professors sit on the floor among the students who determine their own course syllabus, study topics important to them and have two papers as a course requirement? UNITAS students are not only enrolled in such a class, but they also participate in a 24-hour living and learning experience.



Discussions in the UNITAS lounge attract Jay DeSilva and Leah Kim

With the promotion of multi-cultural understanding as their goal, UNC student government developed the UNITAS living experience in a wing of suites in Carmichael Residence Hall. The program is similar to the health-science, French-Spanish and German programs; but, UNITAS students do not share a common language or have similar career interests.

Instead they represent several ethnic, religious and cultural back-

grounds. The 47 UNITAS students include 24 female and 23 male participants who are of an ethnic heritage, foreign descent or have an interest in cultural awareness. Although the group is predominantly white, the program includes students of black, Indian, Vietnamese and Sri Lankan descent, committee chairwoman Eileen Carlton said.

"It is a multi-cultural program designed to promote cultural understanding among various ethnic groups on campus," Carlton said. "It is a new experience. There's not been a program close to UNITAS focusing on minority relations."

The UNITAS idea originated in 1984 under student body president Paul Parker who established a committee to explore the idea of an inter-racial living experience. The committee originally focused on black/white racial relations.

The name "UNITAS" was chosen for the program under the Parker administration because it was thought to mean "equality" in Latin. But, UNITAS does not have a Latin etymology and is actually the name of a Wesley Foundation Preacher.

The original purpose of UNITAS was to ease tension in black/white relations, but as the program evolved, the committee recognized that prejudices exist inter-culturally. "The focus is not just on racism but on cultural understanding. To reduce racism is the objective of the program, but not the only one..." Carlton said. "As the committee planned, minority cultures became the focus with racism in the agenda. If we hit on cultural understanding, we focused on racism as well."

Each person in the program acts as an ambassador from his or her culture or country. Dr. Trudier Harris, professor of English studies and academic sponsor, said. Students can reduce their prejudices by learning about other cultures and sharing. Students will carry what they learn within UNITAS outside the program and will duplicate their actions in other groups to reduce prejudice, Harris said.

"If I am a black and I share with Indians, next time I am in a group, I will not have the pre-conceptions about Indians I might have had," Harris explained.

At the Monday UNITAS class, the topic was race relations. UNITAS students agree that in order to reduce prejudice on a campus-wide scale that prejudice must be resolved within themselves.

"We have to abandon the goal to be free from prejudice — we have to admit that we have prejudice," Professor Craig Calhoun said to the UNITAS students. "We need to

develop skills and continue to work through life reducing our prejudice — work to confront it in ourselves." Calhoun compared prejudice to the Biblical parable about sin — nobody is without sin, nobody is without prejudice.

Calhoun, along with Harris, sponsor the program academically. They play dual roles as counseling faculty and as professors for the course. Carlton said: "We want the relationship between faculty members and students to be less professional than in most classes. They (the professors) do feel close to the students and they fit in."

As faculty, Harris and Calhoun are responsible for selecting the reading materials suggested by students, working with students with the research papers, grading the papers, giving journal and reading assignments and leading the commentary, Harris said.

Participants read and discuss novels, keep a journal and write two major papers. Students receive 3-hour pass/fail credit for the class.

UNITAS classes are informal, relaxed and comfortable. Students meet in the fifth floor Carmichael lounge to discuss multi-cultural topics on Monday afternoons from 3:00 to 5:30 p.m. Unlike the typical classroom situation of nearly 50 students, Calhoun and Harris know students names and encourage participation. "We want student involvement. It is not a lecture course," Harris said.

Occasionally, the faculty will invite guest lecturers or have panel discussions. After presentations, which will last 40 to 50 minutes, UNITAS students have discussions to comment or answer any questions.

Harris encourages participation outside the class room — on Tuesday afternoon she continued Monday's discussion with students over pizza.

In preparation for the course, Calhoun and Harris planned a tentative syllabus over the summer. But, after last weekend's retreat and Monday's class, the students changed the syllabus to include topics in which they are interested. In general, the topics include religion, prejudice, economic-cultural differences, migration, the struggles with migration, sexism, indigenous peoples and the "hyphenated American" people. Students will also study multi-cultural relations in places such as Latin America, Asia, Africa, United States, Middle East and Europe.

Although the class may not fit in with graduation requirements and involves 24-hour participation in the program, students are eager to participate. Carlton said students are enthusiastic, open-minded, ready to

learn and to experience.

Participants are enthusiastic about the class and the social events. At the weekend retreat, they elected student co-coordinators Barbara Ross and Sedic Brown to plan social events to do as an UNITAS group.

Although the coordinators have not met together to plan any events, Ross and Brown have suggested ideas. Brown wants the students to attend various events such as speakers, step shows and Indian festival events. Ross suggests weekly presentations by UNITAS participants including cooking food and showing slides.

But social activities are not always planned. According to the participants; they have experienced many "late-night" talks. "I really enjoy the program. The students are nice, open and willing to talk," Julie Edwards, a junior business administration major, said. "I've already had late-night conversations."

Why did students become involved in the program? What do they think of it so far?

"I think it's great. I would like to see this program work. I am very interested in learning about people from countries-labeled third world," Fitzgerald Edwards, one of the two freshmen participants, said.

Laurie Winkler, a sophomore from New Jersey, joined UNITAS for two reasons — because she is Catholic and is interested in multi-cultural relations. "It bothered me the way the campus is segregated while people say Chapel Hill is so liberated," she said.

Junior psychology major Terry McCall from Marion, N.C. is interested in the program to deal with prejudice. "There is a lot of prejudice in my hometown, and I grew up with it. I want to learn about other cultures and talk to others about what I have learned in order to change perceptions," he said.

UNC student government committee which includes Carlton, senior Robin Kimmelman, sophomore Tonya Blanks, junior Kim Chen, junior Laurie Martin and junior Theresa Sebik, are planning next year's UNITAS program working on publicity and campaigning, Carlton said.

Carlton said the program is succeeding. "I see UNITAS as becoming an essential part of campus — a new Carolina tradition," she said.

Photos by  
Julie Stovall



Priti Shah shows Lisa Williams a "one-size-fits-all" Indi