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New Dimensions for Learning: A Community Learning Center Takes Shape

The Gevirtz Research Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara has been awarded a \$600,000 grant from the Whittier Family Foundations to design, implement, and research two innovative informal education programs that focus on youth and early childhood education at a community learning center at Elings Park in Santa Barbara.

Called New Dimensions for Learning, the project involves the Elings Park Foundation, education researchers at UCSB, local teachers, museums, and numerous community agencies.

Together, they will develop programs that incorporate the abundant educational resources of the community and the natural resources of the park.

"The impact of learning in informal settings has been well documented as an effective method of enhancing critical thinking from an early age, thereby contributing to a child's overall academic success," said Vishna Herrity, executive director of the center in UCSB's Gevirtz Graduate School of Education.

The Youth Enrichment Adventure will advance the academic achievement of traditionally underrepresented students through engaging science, mathematics,

language arts, and technology activities, according to education professors Mary Elizabeth Brenner and Yukari Okamoto, principal investigators on the project.

The Early Childhood Collaborative, a committee of early care and education leaders, is conducting a community-based planning process that will lay the groundwork for designing and building new facilities at Elings Park to expand early care and education services.

Needs identified by the Children and Families Commission of Santa Barbara County will be addressed.

"The planning process will be researched and evaluated to identify the steps and strategies used throughout the year-long process, the effectiveness of the process, and the outcomes," said Hsiu-Zu Ho, associate professor of education who will also serve as a researcher on the project.

Based on the premise that students need support and learning opportunities beyond regular school hours, the Gevirtz Research Center has established a model for creating educational programs involving a variety of community organizations and institutions including museums, zoological parks, botanical gardens, and schools.

Researchers at the Gevirtz Research Center work together with their partners to test theory and conduct research on practical problems facing educators in a variety of settings.

The center connects practitioners and researchers with policy makers by disseminating its findings to effect systematic and lasting change.

The Center's clientele includes children from prenatal through age five and students in grades K through 12.

Note to Editors:

For additional information about the new programs, contact Vishna Herrity, executive director of the Gevirtz Research Center, at (805) 893-5350.

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