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## Gerard, Riverland give students taste of college

By Heather Rule, Austin Post Bulletin

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Taking a small bite of a new food might be way for you to decide that you like it. Just getting a little taste before diving in with a heaping spoonful. That's what Gerard Academy and Riverland Community College are trying to do by pairing up to give Gerard's high school age students a chance to experience college life with a weekly course.

"Education at Riverland isn't just about college students," said Peggy Young, training and development representative, and extended learning project specialist at Riverland. It's for students at all levels and ages. Giving Gerard students an opportunity to experience the college atmosphere is just one more thing they can do. "Our mission for being here is to provide excellence and teaching and learning," Young said. "It's a community effort. We believe education changes lives."

The classes are held at Riverland from 3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. Mondays, lasting six to seven weeks. Capacity for each session is 10 to 15 students, allowing for more one-on-one contact with the instructor. Students are chosen through a screening process where their therapists give input on who would be a good candidate to participate and also who has an interest in the class being offered.

Although the classes aren't for credit, it's more about the experience for students. And the work isn't just during class time. Students have homework that they are expected to complete outside of class, just like any other college student.

"They're loving it," said clinical director Pam Retterath. "They're excited to do their homework."

Currently, the program is funded through Gerard. Instructors for the courses are paid a very small stipend, Young said. Most of the cost right now is for the necessary supplies and materials. Talk about getting these career exploration opportunities began last fall. It's really all about giving Gerard students an opportunity to spend time on a college campus so they can get a taste of what attending college would be like and also explore what careers they might be interested in pursuing.

They're hoping that bringing them to the campus for these classes will be that push. These courses were put into place with the idea that students can have a chance to see that they are capable of completing the work for a college-level course, and that it doesn't have to be scary.

"A lot of our kids honestly, they don't think they'll ever make it to college," Retterath said. "Some of our kids think... that they'll never achieve a goal like that."

Right now, six different programs have been planned, but Young said it would be nice to see this program continue on as well. The next module, a carpentry course, starts in June after the conclusion of the videography course. The student population of Gerard is always changing and just because students participate in one course, it does not mean they cannot take another. It is, of course, up to the discretion of the therapists during the selection process to officially decide who will be able to attend.

The students had their third videography class May 2, and so far, the feedback has been positive. "So far the students are having a great time," Young said. "We're just excited to have them here."#