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UConn's Urban Semester marks 50th year

By Grace Burns · News

In 1968, the University of Connecticut's former president, Homer Babbidge, enacted the Urban Semester program. This now 15 credit program, comprised of both internship and academic experience, rings in its 50th anniversary with high hopes of continued success.

Seventh-semester urban studies major Samantha Staffin is a staff member of the Urban Semester program and was a participant in the fall of 2017.

"[It's] rewarding... [to] see...people who have come through [the program] and where these people are now," Staffin said.

The benchmark comes with great significance, said program director Edith Bartlett.

"It means we lasted. Through good times... through rougher times. We are one of, if not the oldest program like this... students go directly into their own community and make change," Bartlett said.

The program has come a long way. "When the program began, cities across the country were burning down. There were struggling racial relations and economic hard times," Barrett said.

Since 1968, Urban Semester has continued to address problems like these in the city of Hartford, whether it be through eliminating economic disparity, developing rehabilitation or fostering youth through mentorship.

The 50th Anniversary weekend in Hartford hosted over 80 participants of Urban Semester dating back to the first member to join in 1968. Attendees discussed the development of Hartford over the last 50 years while volunteering at a community garden for Hartford Food Systems and attending a dinner reception the following evening, said Barrett.

Staffin said her internship at Our Piece of the Pie, a Hartford nonprofit dedicated to facilitating the success of at-risk youth, was “life-changing.”

The program is advantageous for sophomores and juniors exploring future career paths, such as Staffin, who completed the program as a junior. It is also popular with seniors set on specific occupations, said Staffin.

“[Seniors] are hoping to get an internship that might end up as a job...to wrap up their undergraduate career,” Staffin said.

Past internships include working in the Social Security office, Hartford Public Charter Schools and the Capitol Building.

Barrett said Urban Semester is open to any student with sophomore standing on any campus.

All students gain the experience of living together in Temple Street Townhouses in downtown Hartford, an immersion into city life less than an hour away from the rural campus of UConn Storrs, Barrett said.

When asked why a student would want to study in Hartford, Staffin said, “Why wouldn’t you want to study abroad in Hartford? It’s a place where so many problems... we’re seeing in urban areas all over the country...people aren’t getting the access to resources they need.”

Barrett reinforced this responsibility to the community, saying, “We need to do something to give back.”

The program itself is not a study abroad program, but rather an “internship experience,” both Staffin and Barrett said. It is different from traditional study abroad programs in each participant’s ability to complete both an internship at a government agency or non-profit as well as two courses.

“Hartford is a melting pot of immigrants. It is not a foreign experience, it is an American experience,” Barrett said. “You experience an immersion of many cultures.”

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