FIU PROGRAM

Team-building course tests the limits

The Team Ropes Adventure Challenge at FIU uses ropes, beams and a "sky walk" to help students learn to work together.

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More college students are finding themselves climbing 40-foot poles and walking across a narrow platform several stories above the ground while wearing a blindfold.

It’s all part of Florida International University’s experiential education program called TRAC, which stands for Team Ropes Adventure Challenge.

The idea is to get students to trust and support each other while taking risks. Hosted at FIU’s Biscayne Bay campus, the TRAC course looks like a jungle gym for a giant. There’s a network of ropes, beams, cables, swings and pulleys — with one eye-catchingly narrow platform in the center. It’s called the "sky walk" (which is accessible for the physically challenged). That’s where you wear a blindfold and depend on your teammates’ advice to help guide you across.

Another part of the course requires your team to get over a 12-foot wall without the use of ropes — just each other.

Some of FIU’s professors in the College of Business Administration and the School of Hospitality Management are requiring students to attend a TRAC course. But they’re not the only ones testing their limits. Other South Florida colleges, Girl Scout troops, churches and Fortune 500 companies are among the groups that have tried it out.

Greg Affleck, the course facilitator, takes groups of people from 8 years old and older on the course year-round. He says there’s a noticeable change after people work together to get through the activities and obstacles on the course.

"They’re looking at this like It’s Fear Factor, and at the end of the day, it’s all group hugs," says Affleck, who helped build the course in 1996. "When they see that if they slow down and plan their steps, that can be very effective. It’s the dynamics that they struggle with every day.

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Monique Jacob, 21, a stu- dent peer advisor who has gone through the TRAC course twice, says the experience has taught her to trust people more, and it has shown her how people can overcome their biggest fears.

"You start to understand things about each other that you did not know," Jacob says, pointing to fellow peer advisor Aleksa Oguljane. "At one time we were here, she was horrified and scared to climb to the top, but she was deter- mined — and she did it," Jacob says.

"That’s bravery. Even when you’re nervous, you learn how much you can trust your team and how far you can push yourself!"

Oguljane says the support Jacob and others gave her by holding her on from the ground gave her a boost of confidence that helped her reach the top of the course’s incline log, about 40 feet in the air.

"I’m scared of heights, and I was shaking," she says. "I knew I could trust them, but I was more of me doing it myself!"

Before the participants hit the course, they go to "trust

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Course teaches students to trust each other

ropes from 22

school." The idea is to get the group to work together in some problem-solving exer- cises — learning commands they will use on the high ele- ments. One activity, called "Willow in the Wind," involves one person keeping his eyes closed, standing with his arms crossed on his chest. The person is surrounded by the rest of the group and asks, "Team Ready?!" All the mem- bers of the group respond boldly. The person in the mid- dle asks, "Permission to fail?!" And the group responds, "Fall away."

From that point on, there is no talking. The group mem- bers keep their hands on the person’s shoulders at all times — making sure he doesn’t fall as they push him in a gentle spiral. As they perform the exercise, they learn that the closer they are to each other, the stronger the circle. "It feels nice," says Rogelio Levars, 18, who volunteered to wear the blindfold. "It’s a new experience — and I’m inclined to trust others more."

Valerie Morgan, who is the associate director for under- graduate studies at FIU’s Biscayne Bay campus, works part-time as a facilitator on the TRAC courses. She says the team-building activities in the morning and the personal challenge of being on the course in the afternoon make for a powerful lesson.

"It’s one of the best experi- ences they can have," says Morgan, who took a similar ropes course while in high school in Massachusetts. "It’s an opportunity to experience growth. Some of the skills they will learn will affect their personal life, their academic life. A lot of times people are afraid of heights, but it’s not about that. It’s about building up trust. You could choose not to climb and still have a successful time. The chal- lenge is by choice."

APPLAUSE AROUND: Jenia Kapaeva, 25, head of the peer advisors in FIU’s Team Ropes program, gets a hand.