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News Archive

RWU's University College to Recognize Saint Raphael Academy as a STEAM Academy

Catholic school in Pawtucket becomes first high school in R.I. to complete training through RWU's Center for Workforce & Professional Development



April 4, 2019 | By Edward Fitzpatrick

PROVIDENCE, R.I. – After studying Shakespeare's "Romeo & Juliet," Saint Raphael Academy students recreated the masquerade ball, listening to Elizabethan music and learning Elizabethan dance.

After researching Mexican culture, they used 3D printers to create fantastical creatures, called *alebrijes*, seen in the movie "Coco."

And after reading Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein," they delved into moral and ethical questions raised by scientific advancements, creating political cartoons and mixed-media collages to explore those ideas.

For those reasons and others, University College at Roger Williams University will recognize Saint Raphael Academy as a STEAM Academy during a ceremony on May 6.

Saint Raphael Academy, a Roman Catholic school in Pawtucket, is the first high school and just the third school in Rhode Island to be recognized as a STEAM Academy based on training completed through RWU's Center for Workforce & Professional Development. The first two schools to receive that recognition were St. Thomas Regional School, in Providence, and All Saints Academy, in Middletown.

STEAM is an initiative that incorporates the arts (the "A" in STEAM) into STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) curriculum, instruction and assessment. The STEAM concept has gained momentum in recent years in an effort to boost student achievement in the STEM subjects through greater use of creative and higher-order thinking activities.

"In reality, STEAM is so much more than science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics – it incorporates all other content areas such as language arts, reading, social studies and foreign languages," said Tom Pilecki, the University College instructor who co-authored a book titled "From STEM to STEAM: Using Brain-Compatible Strategies to Integrate the Arts."

Pilecki, dubbed the "STEAM Guru" at Saint Raphael Academy, said, "The key to all of this is rooted in teacher collaboration and free sharing of creativity and great instructional ideas. Participation in this STEAM program actually changes the instructional culture of schools, building individual teacher's capacity to deliver content in imaginative

and fun ways. It takes hard work – for teachers who are already overloaded – to learn or even create new ways to teach, and the St. Ray's teachers and administrators brilliantly executed that hard work with amazing energy, creating a wonderfully successful partnership with RWU."

Saint Raphael Academy embarked on the STEAM Academy process three years ago, aiming to incorporate 21st century learning skill into its curriculum and instruction, said Judy Baxter, Vice Principal of Academics at Saint Raphael Academy. The school cultivated a learning community, providing many hours of professional development that included blended-learning teach strategies, she said. Teachers were encouraged to take risks to imbed aspects of science, technology, engineering and math exploration with the arts, and all of the school's teachers were involved in the endeavor, she said.

"When I first brought it up, a lot of people were hesitant because they thought it would be additional work to what they were already doing," said Sara Costanzo, Saint Raphael Academy's science department chair and a STEAM coordinator. "I already knew how creative some of our faculty was, and I knew they were already doing projects that were almost STEAM and could easily become STEAM. Then when they started seeing examples and watching other people do it, I think it became infectious. They now love doing STEAM projects because even though they can be a lot of work, what the kids get out of them is incredible, and they're so much fun."

"In a lot of cases, [teachers] have been doing [STEAM], too – they just didn't realize it," said Barbara Larned, Saint Raphael Academy's fine arts chair and a STEAM coordinator. "They are also trying to connect with other disciplines, and they are trying to do more project-based [learning] at times to really bring the kids into the learning more. We've consistently gotten away from just the kids seated in rows in the classroom, and everything is more collaborative – not just between the students but with the teachers, also."

Pilecki said University College has begun working on STEAM standards and training with other schools in Rhode Island. Any interested schools may contact Dawne Pezzuco, director of RWU's Center for Workforce & Professional Development, at dpezzuco@rwu.edu.

The May 6 ceremony will begin at 10 a.m. in the Joseph and Blanche Coutu Theater at Saint Raphael Academy, 123 Walcott St., Pawtucket, R.I. For more information, contact Saint Raphael Academy Communication Director Nancy Cifune at ncifune@saintrays.org.

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