

UF students brainstorm fresh solutions for St. Augustine's sea-level rise challenges

BY SAMANTHA LEON
Contributor

St. Augustine continues to face sea-level rise challenges, and University of Florida graduate students from multiple disciplines worked with city officials to create innovative solutions.

Before the beginning of the spring semester, St. Augustine city officials collaborated with Carolyn Cox, coordinator of the Florida Climate Institute, and a team of interdisciplinary UF faculty members on a course that prepared students to generate ideas for sea-level rise challenges in the city. "There's nothing like this that could give those students this experience working so closely with city staff on a real-life problem," Cox said.

Globally, sea level is rising an average of 3 centimeters per year, said Kati Lawson, a 30-year-old graduate student from the UF College of Agricultural and Life Sciences who worked on the project. She said, "It doesn't seem like a lot, but ... you're talking billions of gallons of water."

Several factors cause sea-level rise. Climate change is only one factor, said Lawson. Population growth and harmful chemicals entering the air also contribute to sea-level rise. "It's just happening too fast now, and that's what we need to handle," said Maanvi Chawla, a 29-year-old graduate student from the UF College of Design, Construction and Planning who enrolled in the course.

St. Augustine city officials were excited to work with students to develop new solutions, said Jessica Beach, a professional engineer with the city's Public Works Department.

"We're not debating the whys. ... What we're looking at is how to deal with what is happening," she said.

The 15 UF graduate students enrolled in the sea-level rise course were split into three teams, each assigned to a study site they would focus on over spring break in St. Augustine. For the first eight weeks of classes, the students attended lectures taught by professors from the UF College of Design, Construction and Planning, UF College of Engineering, UF College of Law and UF College of Journalism.

"They were providing us the different tools for our toolbox, but we still had to use our craftsmanship to kind of help with the general solution. So, we were still expected to act as experts in our field," Lawson said.

Over spring break, the students stayed in dorm rooms at the Whitney Laboratory for Marine Bioscience in St. Augustine. For those five days, they worked with city officials on sea-level rise challenges faced by the city's residents. "I would say 80 percent of the experience happened in St. Augustine. We were with each other every waking moment," Lawson said, referring to the time she spent with her classmates. In addition to working with city officials, students interviewed residents and local business owners to gain insight.

The students prepared final presentations and written proposals after they returned from St. Augustine Beach and other city officials watched the students' presentations at UF at the end of the spring semester, but they have not reviewed the students' papers, yet. "It was a very unique opportunity. ... It was intense, but I think they got a lot out of it," Beach said.



PHOTOS BY TUCKER BERARDI

University of Florida professor emeritus Herschel Shepard takes the UF graduate students on a tour of the downtown historic quarter.

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