

San Marcos Baptist Academy makes major changes this year_90604

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Cren Naivar
(right) helps
student Eric
Quintanilla
prepare
"Scooter" for a
show as part of
the animal
husbandry
program at San
Marcos Baptist
Academy.Ferrell
Foster

San Marcos Baptist Academy makes major changes this year

By Ferrell Foster

Texas Baptist Communications

SAN MARCOS-Students and faculty alike describe San Marcos Baptist

Academy as a family-nurturing, supportive, caring and helpful.

Despite the warm feelings, enrollment at the residential secondary school has declined in recent years. So the academy called in an outside consultant to evaluate its program.

As a result, the 97-year-old school made changes this semester.

- ◆ The military program is no longer mandatory for boys.
- ◆ A program to help students with “learning differences” has been expanded.
- ◆ The academy's advisory program has been enlarged to include all full-time employees working with assigned students on an almost daily basis.

San Marcos Baptist Academy has 206 students in grades six through 12-three-fourths living in campus dormitories and the rest being "day students." The school is supported through the Baptist General Convention of Texas' Cooperative Program.

For years, many people viewed the academy as a military school, said Vic Schmidt, president since 2001.

“We didn't see ourselves as a military school,” but others perceived it that way, he said.

“I've seen it always as a Christian school” with three programs-academic, military and athletic, said Byron Robinson, who has taught 37 years at the academy.

With this year's changes, the academy still has a Junior ROTC military program. Boys must be in the program at least one semester, but girls are not required to be involved.

One of the visible changes on campus is how the students dress. Military-style uniforms have given way to polo shirts with khaki pants or plaid skirts.

A less visible change related to the military is seen in the boys' dorm. It no longer functions as a military residence hall with ranking upperclassmen having special duties. The boys' housing is organized by halls with dorm directors and resident assistants, just like the girls' dorm.

The change in approach regarding the military has been difficult to swallow for some alumni and long-time supporters, Schmidt said.

He hopes they will understand the change was not based on a “whim” but on information derived from the independent study and on the need to increase enrollment.

Leadership training, a major component of Junior ROTC, will continue to be stressed with all students, Schmidt said.

The corps of cadets at the school numbers about 80, he added.

Kameron Allison, a junior day student from San Marcos, said he likes the Junior ROTC change, because the new uniforms “feel more casual.”

Garrett Day, a senior resident student from Sugar Land and a Junior ROTC battalion commander, preferred the old military approach but said the new way “benefits others,” so he understands the need for the change.

While San Marcos Academy turns away from some its past identity, it has its sights set firmly on becoming known for something else—its learning skills program.

Children learn in different ways, said Margo McClintock, director of the program.

The academy helps students determine their preferred learning styles and then fashions programs that help them learn.

For instance, analytic learners do best with details and sequential information, while global learners want “the big picture” and react quickly. Traditional classroom teaching favors analytic learners, McClintock said.

That's just one example of different learning styles.

The academy's learning skills program seeks to help students who struggle with the limitations of traditional teaching.

It already had been a part of the academy's academic approach, but this year the school added two more staff members, Tom and Keri Rhodes, to work with McClintock.

The academy also provided extra training on learning styles for all its teachers prior to the start of classes, Schmidt said.

McClintock said students will give an “amazingly different kind of response” to testing when learning styles are understood and appropriate help is given.

Thirty-two of the academy's 206 students are in the learning skills program this fall, including honor students.

Jojetta Steptoe, a senior from Houston, is one student who benefited from the precursor to the learning skills program when she came to the academy two years ago.

“My grades are a lot better, and I got more help than I was getting in other schools,” she said.

Another new effort, the school's advisory program, is one of special interest to President Schmidt. Every full-time employee is involved, he said.

“Student advising is just as important as the primary job” of an employee.

Advising involves being with students during devotional times and chapel services, visiting them in their dorm and contacting parents to keep them informed of their child's progress or needs.

The connection between students and adults showed up in comments from several students.

“Everybody cares about you a lot,” said Adelita Ayala, a junior resident student from Tabasco, Mexico. The teachers “all know who you are and what kind of person you are.”

Eighth grader Rachel Blewett, from Kingsbury, boiled everything down to its simplest. The academy is “really cool,” she said. “The teachers are really nice, everybody's nice. ... It's really fun.”

While the academy has gone through some tough times, including running “deficits the past few years,” it still is debt-free, Schmidt said.

“We are working for a zero-loss budget,” he said.

The academy needs about 20 more students this year to reach that level, and enrollment remains open and more students are expected.

The need to grow enrollment motivated this school year's changes, but there are deeper motivations, as well.

The academy is a ministry, Schmidt said. “We're helping a lot of kids, both Christian and non-Christian. ... You don't have to be here long” before the ministry aspect becomes apparent.

Schmidt remembered the words of a long-time academy employee, the late Katherine Schultz. The president quoted her, saying: “When you first come to the academy, it can sometimes get under your skin. But if you stay here

for any length of time, it will get embedded in your heart.”

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