



New program puts students in the field to learn about prairie ecology

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Students from across Nebraska and one from Colorado were able to learn more about the ecology of the Nebraska prairie at a first-ever academy this week.

Matt Fong, associate vice president for external relations at Hastings College, said 12 students attended the Crane Trust Academy, which is a partnership between the Crane Trust and Hastings College, through Thursday to gain experience in conservation, wildlife management and outdoor sciences.

"It is a great opportunity for us to showcase what we have here in central Nebraska," Fong said. "None of the students are from here in the Tri-Cities. It is a great opportunity to engage with them and bring them to central Nebraska. For the Crane Trust, they have a passion and really want to showcase and highlight conservation and wildlife management. They have an interest in trying to develop and cultivate the next generation of students, scientists and conservationists."

He said Hastings College advertised the Crane Trust Academy through high school science teachers who recommended the

program to students they thought would be interested and would "be a fit for the program."

The students filled out a survey about their current interests, their future interests and how they felt the academy would benefit them.

Megan Snow, an incoming senior at Skutt Catholic High School, said she volunteers at the Henry Doorly Zoo and is part of the environmental club at her school.

A teacher told her about the academy, and after consulting with the people she volunteers with at the zoo, she decided to participate. "They said I needed to do this," Snow said. "I have always loved nature and being outside, so this has been amazing for me."

She said that after high school, she plans to attend college and major in environmental science or conservation biology.

Joseph Meihak, an incoming senior at Swallows Charter Academy in Pueblo West, Colorado, is another of the 12 students. He received an email from Hastings College asking if he wanted to participate in the academy, and he said yes.

"It sounded right up my alley, and I thought I would be interested in it," he said. "So I signed up for it, came out here and I did it."

During the Crane Trust Academy, he said, he and his fellow students have followed biologists around to see what they do in their day-to-day work. This included identifying birds and making pit-fall traps.

"I am just learning how these biologists do their work and how they participate in cooperating with each other in the different groups," Meihak said. "The best part of the Crane Trust Academy is just working with all these different people and kids in the group out in the field and being able to do all the activities."

He said he plans to pursue a major in wildlife biology in college.

"Fundamentally, I hope the Crane Trust Academy is a great opportunity for students to experience something they may not have experienced before," Fong said.

"Hopefully, that sparks something in them that they can take through their high school career and pique their interest to study in college."

He said the hope is to make the Crane Trust Academy an annual program.