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Penn puts a new spin on the freshman project

By Susan Snyder

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Incoming freshmen to the University of Pennsylvania, as at many schools across the country, typically start their college careers reading a common book and then discussing it - an orientation activity meant to unify the class.

This fall, the 19-year-old project takes a new twist at Penn: Students will study and discuss a painting, Thomas Eakins' *The Gross Clinic*.

Penn officials said they think they are the first to use a painting for the orientation project, and national officials knew of no other school.

The university is changing its approach as part of a new campaign it will officially launch next month, called "Arts & The City Year."

In addition to the orientation project, Penn plans "arts crawls" around the city, and an arts "passport" to art and cultural institutions with discounts and prizes for students. An "art in public health" series, arts seminars, and a variety of other programs also are planned to put students more in touch with the art venues on campus and around the region.

"We're focusing on the role of arts in building community," said Penn provost Vincent Price. "We just have an enormous array of institutions on campus and in our larger region. We want to build greater student awareness."

Penn officials also hope the focus on arts this year will forge stronger ties between arts institutions on campus and those in the community. Among the venues on campus are the Annenberg Center for Performing Arts, the Institute of Contemporary Art, the Arthur Ross Gallery, the Kelly Writers House, and the University Museum.

For the freshman project, Penn chose the 1875 painting that depicts the acclaimed Thomas Jefferson Hospital surgeon Samuel Gross operating before a group of students in the school's amphitheater. Gross is shown with a bloody scalpel in his hand. The portrait was chosen because it highlights historical issues, reflects academic medicine, and was done locally.

Students also will look at Eakins' *The Agnew Clinic*, another surgical scene, painted at Penn.

The painting project has its own Web site, complete with Penn-staff lectures on the works and how to analyze a painting, and a zoom feature that allows students to look at the work in detail.

The 2,500 freshmen are expected to study the site and be prepared to attend a presentation on the paintings on the Sunday before Labor Day, then break into small groups to discuss it with faculty members.

The project is mandatory, but not graded.

"This is a relaxed way for students and faculty to interact without the aspect of assessment," said David Fox, director of academic initiatives in the provost's office. "This gives us a nice intellectual cornerstone within orientation."

Staff had been thinking about using *The Gross Clinic* before it was taken out of circulation for restoration, Fox said. They decided to stick with the idea though it meant students wouldn't be able to see the painting until later this school year, if then.

Philadelphia Museum of Art officials said they were not sure when the painting's restoration would be completed, although they expected that the painting would be available to Penn students and the public some time before the end of the year.

Penn officials said the restoration fit in well with the project.

"Part of the purpose of the year is to talk about the importance of art in our lives - including the importance of care and cultivation of it," Fox said.

The painting, generally regarded as Eakins' best work, was in the news in 2006 after a controversy erupted over its possible sale to two out-of-state museums.

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Art Museum mounted a successful fund-raising campaign to retain it, bringing in about \$30 million.

The painting is jointly owned and shared by the two institutions.

"The fact that there was a concerted effort to keep it in Philadelphia was kind of a nice message," Fox said.

If students are able to view the painting in the spring, it "will cap an exciting year of talking about it," Fox added.

In the past, for the freshman project, students read books that typically highlighted a timely theme. For the last two years, Penn has sought to carry that theme through the school year.

Last year, freshmen read *Your Inner Fish*, which emphasized evolution.

Two years ago, it was the *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, carrying out the theme of food. In 2005, it was *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*.

Nationally, some schools use films for the orientation project. Others give students cameras and let them document about their start on campus.

Still others launch community projects.

Penn freshman Ali Derassouyan of Langhorne said that she liked the idea of a more visually analytical assignment and that it meant she could spend her summer reading time on books such as *U Chic: The College Girl's Guide to Everything*.

"I kind of wanted to read fun books over the summer instead of ones that I was required to read," said Derassouyan, a graduate of Nazareth Academy, a Catholic prep school in Northeast Philadelphia that typically required her to read many long books over the summer.

She said she had begun looking at the painting and watching the online lectures.

"It's really interesting for me," she said, "because I want to go into the medical field."

Jasmine Santos, 17, who graduated from Masterman High School, also is looking forward to studying the painting.

"I was actually curious about how much we could talk about with the painting," said Santos, who has begun looking at the site. "Apparently, there's a lot."

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