Students monitor DWI cases

Anthony T. Hall
Staff Writer

LAFAYETTE — Take Gerald Thompson’s Drugs and Society class on chemical and substance abuse and you will end up in court.

Thompson, a health specialist at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, requires the mostly sophomore and junior students in his class to spend at least one 30-minute session in 15th Judicial District Court monitoring DWI cases. Students receive 50 points for the first visit to court and extra credit for subsequent trips.

The court monitoring is a part of a joint project with Louisiana Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

UL Lafayette’s involvement with MADD began about a year ago when Pat Taylor, president of the Acadiana MADD chapter, was invited to speak to Thompson’s class. Taylor mentioned a need for court monitors since the 9-to-5 jobs most MADD volunteers work prohibit them from spending time in the courtroom. The students, however, have more flexible schedules.

“We kind of sat on the idea for awhile, and I called (Taylor) last fall to say we need to set it up,” Thompson said.

Students monitor the cases and fill out a form produced by MADD to collect data on all aspects of the case, including the names of the judge and prosecutor, breathalyzer test results and the defendant’s prior convictions. They also write a summary of their experience as a witness to the proceedings.

MADD is planning to compile the students’ information to determine if there are trends in sentencing.

“With this program, we’re finding out what happened to (drunken drivers). It’s helpful when looking at what different sentences are being handed down,” said Cathy Childers, state executive director of MADD. “It’s also good because we’re getting young people in the courtrooms.”

For several of the students attending the court sessions, it’s the first time they have ever been in court. Still, students who have been in court before are also surprised at what they saw.

Adrienne Ervin, a 24-year-old junior, said attending the DWI session was nothing like when she went to court for a traffic ticket.

“There wasn’t the animosity between the sides,” Ervin said. “(The defendants) knew they were wrong anyway. They seemed like they were sorry.”

Connie Karas, 19 and a sophomore, said she was surprised at the number of defendants who pleaded guilty to charges.

“It’d take about two minutes to get a sentence,” she said. “It seemed to be routine. The judge knew what to say and everyone agreed.”

Another of Thompson’s students is specifically reviewing data collected from January to August of 1998 to evaluate cases in which a plea bargain resulted in a lighter sentence.

“We want to look at the percentage of people found guilty as first charged,” he said. “That’s a successful conviction, when a defendant is found guilty as charged.”

Thompson said he is hoping to present the data at national conferences.

Childers said she foresees interns expanding the project by creating a database to track cases from arrest to prosecution.

“As of right now, there’s no tracking system in the state, no agency with this information available to pull cases,” Childers said. “This seemed like an easy solution and it gets the students involved.”