

Blackburn College Student Bee Program Builds Observation Hive

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CARLINVILLE - The Blackburn College Bee Program continues to expand its environmental impact on the sprawling 80-acre Carlinville campus while incorporating a significant educational component along the way. During the summer, the group completed its goal to successfully design and install an observation beehive in the Olin Science Building.

Initially developed during the 2020-2021 academic year by current Bee Program student Dade Bradley, class of 2021 graduate Caleb Rieger, and Illinois Department of Agriculture Apiary Inspector Arvin Pierce, the primary purpose of this hive is to increase the visibility of the program on campus since most of the current beehives are located behind the science buildings and not easily accessible.

“We recognized that we may not be able to bring everyone out to the bees, so we figured it would be a great idea to instead bring the bees closer to campus,” Bradley, a senior environmental biology major from Braidwood, IL, explained. “Not only does the observation hive provide a 24/7 view inside of a beehive, but it is also located in a great place for presentations where people have the opportunity to watch as we work bees behind the safety of glass.”

He continued, “We also hope the hive will become a useful teaching tool within the biology department, offering a unique insight into a honeybee colony. It will also be a great opportunity for presentations and demonstrations hosted by the Beekeeping Program, as well as an entertaining attraction for prospective students or visitors to campus. Most importantly, however, we hope that the observation hive piques the curiosity of anyone who walks past - gaining a newfound appreciation for honeybees.”

Despite looking much different than the typical hive on campus, the observation beehive fulfills the same duties, including harvesting honey and swarm control. A Langstroth hive, the model for all other beehives on campus, is a series of vertically stacked boxes to easily accommodate a colony’s growth. During the planning process, they altered the observation hive design to fit the same amount of bees within several non-traditional frames.

The honeybees inhabiting the observation hive came from an overwintered colony that swarmed into a tree behind Mahan in late April. Bradley and Ullrich saved the colony and transferred it to the observation hive in May during a campus tour for commencement speaker Tom Gayner and his wife, Susan. There was also a special session during Blackburn’s Homecoming celebration in September dedicated to the Bee Program on campus.

“One of the greatest benefits that the observation hive has is bringing greater visibility to the Beekeeping Program at Blackburn College. To us beekeepers, the Beekeeping Program is one of the greatest things happening on campus that very few know about. We hope that the observation hive will change this and get the campus community to think more like beekeepers when it comes to pollinator conservation,” Bradley adds.

While Blackburn's commitment to pollinators dates back to the late 1800s, this version of Blackburn's Beekeeping Program launched in 2016. The group - which currently includes Bradley, Logan Ullrich a junior from Coal City, Illinois, and Lexi Mosby a sophomore from Carlinville, Illinois - maintains hives on campus, nine hives at a private nature preserve in Illinois, and two period-correct hives at Lincoln's Home National Historic Site in Springfield. Pierce oversees the program, and all were involved in formulating, constructing and installing the new observation hive.

About Blackburn College

Founded in 1837, Blackburn College is a four-year, Presbyterian-related, co-educational liberal arts college located in Carlinville, IL. One of only ten federally-recognized Work Colleges, Blackburn has the only program in the nation fully managed by students. Balancing academic rigor and experiential learning, each student at Blackburn gains substantial experience and develops critical skills by contributing to their community, all while building a resume and earning their degree. U.S. News & World Report has recognized Blackburn College as one of the best colleges in the midwest region for 2023. Blackburn has also been named a Top Performer for Social Mobility in their Best Colleges guide for 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023. The Washington Monthly ranked Blackburn first in Illinois for performance by students receiving Pell Grants in 2023 and twice previously named Blackburn as the best baccalaureate college in Illinois.