Course re-ignites teachers’ fire

By Karen O'Hara
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Sunnymertime. The last place you'd expect to see a teacher is in the classroom.
Yet, here they are, seated around a table at UCSB, scribbling in their notebooks, looking through their well-thumbed texts, engaging in thought-provoking debate.

Their hometowns are as varied as their interests. They come from New Jersey and New York, Pittsburgh and Pierre, Houston and Tucson. One is from Carpinteria, another from Denmark, a third from Poland.

But a common bond has brought them together. This is their idea of a holiday — a way to recharge their intellectual batteries before returning to the classroom in the fall.

For nearly six weeks, they have been dipping into a well of knowledge called "Democracy in America," a book written in the 19th Century by Alexis de Tocqueville, a French social philosopher.

De Tocqueville’s work, based on his observations during a visit to America, is widely accepted as a global interpretation of the meaning of American civilization. He believed political democracy and social equality would eventually replace Europe’s aristocratic institutions.

"Because the author touched on so many topics of current interest, (from race relations to the power of the presidency) our discussions have ranged between interpreting his original intention and finding applications for his insights and proposals in American life today," said Walter Capps, a UCSB religious studies professor who is leading the seminar.

For the teachers, studying "Democracy in America" is like drinking from a refreshing spring. Their say their perceptions are expanding, and they are getting something rich to

See HISTORY, Page B4
History

Continued from Page 33

History

Several of the participants said they believe the seminar's focus on human aspirations and the need for enlightenment has helped them come to grips with a concern shared by teachers, parents and spiritual leaders.

"Teachers across the country have the same question," said Dianne Wilson of Houston, Texas, one of the participants.

The seminar is one of 50 summer programs for teachers sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. UCSB was selected as one of two programs for the Humanities by the National Endowment for the Humanities. UCSB was selected as one of two programs for the Humanities by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

"The object of focusing on a single text is to make it teachable," Capps said, "not pedagogical instruction or curricular planning, although these turn out to be inevitable byproducts.

"This is a highly competitive program. In my view, these folks are the cream of the crop.

The 15 teachers in Capps' seminar didn't know each other when they met six weeks ago. Today, they feel like old friends. As part of the seminar, they have not only studied together, they have traveled together on field trips and lived together under the same roof, the Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority house in Ithaca.

"It's inspirational to think these people are all teachers. It's reassuring and stimulating," said Dianne Wilson, who teaches American literature at an inner-city junior high school, said she also feels she has gained a clearer understanding of the role of religion in America.

"A lot of students I work with come from immigrant families," she said. "They bring with them other values. I try to help them broaden their values so they can work within their (American) community."

Marques is encouraged to see that literature is being used in public schools to impart values to students, and that children are finding out what it means to get along through the use of cooperative learning techniques.

"I think these seminars, because of the diversity of the students, should be "on display in America today." He said he is impressed by the diversity of American society, and curious about its influence.

"The seminar has given me a better understanding of the dilemmas in American civilization and American policy," he said. "On one hand, it's my impression that Americans firmly believe the United States has a certain task on the world scene. It's not just words when Americans talk about fighting for democracy. It's part of their heritage and their fundamental belief.

"I also understand this is a dilemma because you can't decide in a democratic way what is the truth. You have to make a choice. It's the dilemma of a diversified and pluralized society."