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Amelia Benner '09

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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At Multicultural Center, diversity is a way of life

Story by AMELIA BENNER '09

To the casual observer passing by on Park Street, Illinois Wesleyan's Multicultural Center may not look like a catalyst for social change.

It is an unassuming little house with white siding and a front porch, the kind of house that almost seems to have been plucked from a Norman Rockwell painting. In the evenings, the windows glow with light and the soft murmur of voices and laughter can be heard.

But inside, a quiet revolution is taking place.

In the past few months, the interior of the century-old building has undergone a physical transformation: the rooms have a fresh coat of paint, the furniture has been rearranged, and new artwork adorns the walls. But the most significant change at the center is one that isn't immediately evident.

"In the past, the center didn't have a stated mission," explained Director of Multicultural Student Affairs Nicole Brown-Davis. "Most folks didn't even know that we had a center. The space was underutilized, there were no relevant resources for students, it wasn't very aesthetically pleasing — it was just a house on Park Street."

Brown-Davis's enthusiasm is infectious as she describes her vision for the Multicultural Center — a vision that is manifested in every detail of the center's appearance, right down to the plaque engraved with the new mission statement that hangs beside the front door.

That mission, according to the plaque, is to "provide relevant educational resources to the Illinois Wesleyan community that will promote cross-cultural dialogues among campus groups and foster respect, appreciation, and a sincere longing for diversity everywhere." In addition, the center "provides a safe place for under-represented populations to meet and interact, and encourages the development of healthy identities for all IWU community members."



Black Student Union members hosted a picnic at the Multicultural Center. Their guest was Wayne County 3rd Circuit Court Judge Wade Harper McCree (far right), who is a supporter of a scholarship program for minority students named after his father. In 1994, IWU became the first private college and the first campus outside of Michigan to join the program by pledging annually to fund three Detroit public high school graduates. Photo by Marc Featherly.

This commitment to cross-cultural respect is not restricted to the center. The University's newly-adopted Strategic Plan suggests several strategies for increasing campus diversity, including recruiting and retaining a diverse student body, faculty, and staff; developing and sustaining a welcoming campus climate; and involving diverse constituencies of alumni and community leaders in the lives of current students.

Brown-Davis feels that the Multicultural Center is especially crucial to the administration's efforts to retain racially-underrepresented students. "We cannot expect to retain students simply by recruiting them in large numbers," she said. "I want the Multicultural Center to be an anchor for these students and allow them to feel that their needs are being met."

The IWU student body has become increasingly diverse in the past few years. In August 2006, 88 ALANA students entered IWU as members of the first-year class (ALANA is the acronym used by the University to designate members of IWU's racially underrepresented populations, including African-American, Latino-American, Asian-American, and Native American students).

Brown-Davis's vision of cross-cultural understanding is shared by the six "student resources" who staff the center, including sophomore business major Brian Richardson. "One of the reasons I became a student resource is because of that vision," Richardson said. "I'm excited about what's happening here. I've got a lot of ideas to show the campus, and this is a place that allows me to do that."

In the past, the center wasn't staffed during the day, and was primarily used for group meetings and storage. Students who wanted to use the Multicultural Center had to obtain the key from the Memorial Center's Main Desk.

Now, the center is open Monday through Friday, as well as on weekend afternoons. Student resources are on hand during these hours to answer questions and ensure that students respect the center's guidelines. Many student groups still meet in the facility during the week, but students are also free to gather there on their own as long as their purpose for meeting aligns with the center's mission.

On Halloween night, Richardson and a group of fellow students met at the center to watch a documentary about the evolution of the hip-hop culture. As the other students settled down in the new lounge area to watch the film, Richardson explained why he feels the center is so important.

"This isn't just for minority populations," he said. "The center isn't something we need just because we're underrepresented. This is for everyone on campus to come through and learn about different cultures, and we need it for ourselves as well, to learn about where we come from."

Education is a central theme at the center. Up a narrow flight of stairs on the second floor is a door marked "Alfred O. Coffin Resource Library," an area named in honor of the first African-American graduate of Illinois Wesleyan University. At present, the library consists of a single

shelf of books, but Brown-Davis hopes to stock the center with plenty of DVDs, music, books, and other resources to help students investigate diverse cultures.

“It’s very important that we pique the curiosity of students and encourage them to explore cultures outside of what they’re familiar with,” Brown-Davis said.



Sandra Gonzalez '10 (above) accesses the center’s scholarly resources, which include the Alfred O. Coffin Library, named in honor of IWU’s first African-American graduate. Photo by Marc Featherly.

Hillel scheduling events alongside the Council for Latin American Student Enrichment and the Southeast Asian Student Association.

“During my time at IWU, (the center) was a place where African-American and Latino students would come together for meetings, projects, or just to have fun and interact with each other,” said Deon Hornsby, a co-chair of the Minority Alumni Network. However, Hornsby added, “The resources that are currently in place weren’t as abundant at the time I graduated in 1997. I truly see the transformation of it from being more of a social gathering space to a place where students can find resources to enrich their undergraduate and post-graduate experiences.”

Brown-Davis’s vision is only the latest in a series of transformations that have taken place at the center over the decades. In April 1970, in response to growing demand from African-American students for a place to gather, the University designated a house on East Street for the Black Student Union.

“When I attended IWU we had the ‘Black House,’ which was the predecessor to the Multicultural Center,” recalled 1973 graduate and current IWU trustee Phyllis Barker. “It was truly the hub for the African-American student community.”

In the early 1980s, the “Black House” moved to the house on Park Street currently occupied by the Multicultural Center. Over the next decade, as the University began to make a greater commitment to encouraging diversity, other student cultural groups began to make use of the building. Finally, in 1989, the name of the facility was changed to the Multicultural Center.

Today, the center’s mission extends beyond racial diversity, with organizations such as the IWU sexual-identity awareness group Pride Alliance and the Jewish student association

Nicole Dykas '00 said that in her experience, IWU was a “wonderful, safe place to explore diversity and the social economics. The University made an effort to listen to the concerns of the minority students and their recommendations to make things better.”

Alumni involvement is an important part of the center’s mission. Since its reopening, many ALANA graduates have dropped by to see the renovated facility and talk to current students.

“When we encourage minority students we ensure that you take advantage of one of America’s most priceless assets: a good education and the ability to think for yourself,” said Barker, who had lunch with students at the center this fall.

Brown-Davis, herself a 1999 alumna of Illinois Wesleyan, hopes to see the Multicultural Center become an increasingly positive presence in the lives of IWU students from many different backgrounds.

“I’d like to see students go through their experience at Illinois Wesleyan and view it in a positive way not because of what they were able to overcome, but because of how they were affirmed,” Brown-Davis said.