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## State Farm® Youth Advisory Board Grant to Fund New Initiative with ARC

February 22, 2010

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – A new joint initiative from Illinois Wesleyan University's Action Research Center (ARC) has received a nearly \$100,000 grant from the State Farm® Youth Advisory Board (YAB). The grant was announced Monday in Hansen Student Center on campus.

The Blank Canvas Program, an effort of ARC and Illinois State University's College of Fine Arts (ISU), aims to cultivate the creativity of low-income, minority youth in Bloomington-Normal to help communicate the challenges they face in thinking about college, said co-creator of the program Deborah Halperin. "This project put the question to the very people targeted, 'What would you do if you were in charge?'" said Halperin.

The grant is part of the \$1 million the YAB is giving away this year nationally aimed toward closing the achievement gap in higher education. Over the past two years, the board has granted \$12 million to service-learning projects across the United States and Canada, but this is the first to be awarded in McLean County.

Illinois Wesleyan University sophomore Karin Unruh is a member of YAB, which is comprised of only 30 students, ages 17 to 20, from across the nation. "It will be exciting and rewarding to personally experience the results this grant will have on our local community," said Unruh, an elementary education and sociology double major from Algonquin, Ill.

Blank Canvas is the brainchild of Halperin and Dick Folse, an Illinois Wesleyan graduate who works for ISU's College of Fine Arts. "The idea is to show the value of college and the college experience and expose young people to the arts," he said. The grant provides four new computers with state-of-the-art design software, digital cameras and color printers to three community partners: the Jesus House, Western Avenue Community Center and UNITY Community Center.

Under the direction of Folse, teams comprised of ISU's Fine Arts students will mentor with area junior high and high school students in producing marketing campaigns and materials to promote college enrollment. The students will also participate in a seminar with ARC students at Illinois Wesleyan and ISU students, which allow them to ask questions of college students, work on-on-one with first-time college students, and tour classrooms and campuses.

At Hansen, program coordinators gathered with members of the community organizations and area youth who will be the first to participate in Blank Canvas. "Working with Western Avenue Community Center, I learned that if you want to do something, you do it, and surround yourself with people who can help you," said Allante Bennett, an 18-year-old Bloomington High School student who will work with the Blank Canvas project. Bennett told the crowd he believes a campaign generated from youth will inspire other young people to consider college. "We listen to each other more than we would to adults," he said.

State Farm agent and Illinois Wesleyan alumnus Tom Brokaw presented the grant check for \$98,490 to Blank Canvas coordinators and students. “My wife and I have close ties to both Illinois Wesleyan and State Farm,” said Brokaw. Four generations of his family have graduated from Illinois Wesleyan, and he has been an agent with State Farm for 30 years. “We have always been encouraged to give back to the community,” he said of both institutions, “and it gives me great pride to be here.”

Rep. Dan Brady [R-88th District] congratulated the students and the organizers of Blank Canvas for bringing the program to the community. “This is great way to focus on the importance of education and pursuing those dreams,” he said.

Blank Canvas will be more than a way to introduce young people to college, believes Halperin. It is a way to empower youth. “This is our message to youth: We trust you and your leadership to make this project a success,” she said.

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