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Summer Enrichment Program

June 24, 2010

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – For most college students, summer is an opportunity to relax, forget about school and spend time with friends and family. Barbeques, pool parties and excursions to the beach dot the schedules of formerly stressed-out students. However, this summer nine Illinois Wesleyan University students have opted for a slightly different course, participating in the Summer Enrichment Program (SEP).

The rigorous 10-week program, open to all IWU minority students, focuses on three major areas; professional, academic and personal growth of the participants. As a part of the program, the students will receive formal professional training, learn from diversity workshops, have an internship and participate in volunteer activities, including a final social service project.

“Our aim this summer is to make the students into cultural mavens,” said Roshaunda Ross, director of the SEP and multicultural affairs, who chose the 2010 theme of ‘mavens in the making.’ A maven, as defined by author Malcolm Gladwell is “a trusted expert in a particular field who seeks to pass knowledge onto others.”

Last spring, Ross, along with committee members Laurie Diekhoff, assistant director/internship coordinator at the Hart Career Center; Jo Porter, director of development/foundation relations and sponsored programs; Darcy Greder, associate dean of student affairs/co-curricular programming; Matthew Damschroder, director of residential life and Deborah Halperin, Action Research Center coordinator, selected the participants.

Both Porter and Greder have worked with the program since its inception more than 20 years ago when it was called Room at the Top. The main purpose of the program then was to create leadership opportunities for women. Since that time the participants have changed from women, to African-Americans and now to the current program which includes all minorities.

“The change in the program over the years has coincided with a direction that was established in our University’s Strategic Plan,” said Porter. “The goal is to diversify our campus in all aspects – in the faculty, staff and students.”

The participants this year include:

Sophomores

- Shavanhna Hardin, Lynwood, Ill., economics major
- Zahra Lalani, Chicago, accounting and economics double major
- Charlene Ifseno-Okpala, Lagos, Nigeria, theatre arts major

Juniors

- Jazmyn Becker, Bloomington, Minn., business administration and marketing double major

- Steven Kirk, Chicago, biology and Japanese studies double major
- Kamaya Thompson, Dalton, Ill., theatre arts and English double major

Seniors

- Kalyn Mosley, Dolton, Ill., biology major
- Uchenna Nwaizu, Desoto, Texas, history major
- Ade Olayinka, St. Paul, Minn., economics and international studies double major

While each participant has different reasons for applying to the program, many cite the opportunity to have an internship in their field of interest. The students selected their internships after working with Ross.

For Lalani, vice president of SEP 2010, the decision was easy. “This was an opportunity I couldn’t pass up,” said Lalani who interns at the Community Cancer Center. “I could have an internship in accounting and economics after my first year of college, which is rare. It’s a great opportunity to see if I’m interested in working in that field.”

This year internships include working at Country Financial, Community Cancer Center, Community Players Theatre, Illinois State University Biochemistry & Molecular Biology Program, OSF St. Joseph Healthcare, David Davis Mansion, McLean County Arts Center and Simple Elegance Event and Wedding Design in Bloomington-Normal and Phenom Features in Springfield.

“We’re very committed to the quality placements of our students,” said Greder. “We want our students to have an opportunity to stretch and develop and at the end of the experience know they have contributed.”

Senior Olayinka has two internships this summer, one with the McClean County Arts Center, a not-for-profit organization, and the other at Simple Elegance Event and Wedding Planning. “I feel that I will learn a lot this summer about doing big things with little money and manpower, both important lessons for my future,” said Olayinka.

SEP President Mosley, who interns at OSF St. Joseph Medical Center, describes her internship as the opportunity of a lifetime. “I have witnessed an operation, am participating in two research projects and observing doctors and nurses. This internship has definitely broadened my definition of healthcare and has increased my interest in medical school after graduation.”

When they are not working, participants maintain a busy schedule, spending 10-14 hours together on Fridays completing assigned projects, programs and workshops. They also have the option to take a summer class at ISU or Heartland Community College.

The SEP program is more than exploring the workforce and establishing skills, but also expanding horizons to ensure success. As part of the program, the participants are required to give weekly debates in front of their peers and the SEP committee. To help prepare them for the task, recently the students received a debate workshop from Donald Peter, the head of the debate program at ISU.

New this year, Ross has added a cultural dining component to the program. She believes it is essential the students become exposed to other cultures. Each dinner will feature a different cuisine, which will include Indian, Irish, Korean, German, Japanese, African American and Mexican. As a compliment to the dining selection, each student must give a 10-minute presentation about the culture they are assigned before the meal.

The students will also spend two weekends in St. Louis and Chicago participating in cultural programs and visiting a variety of culturally relevant sites.

Back at IWU participants will receive workshops on a variety of topics that will focus on self-image, financial literacy, leadership, positivity and presentation skills.

SEP members will also work with four social service groups in town: 'Mission of Mercy,' which helps provide dental care to low-income families in the Bloomington-Normal area; Summer Camp Service through the West Bloomington Revitalization Project; the UNITY Summer Enrichment Program and the Back-to-School Project Event at ISU.

For their final project the students will work with Blank Canvas, a collaboration between the Action Research Center at IWU and the College of Fine Arts at ISU. The aim of Blank Canvas is to close the gap in higher education and promote college to potential first-generation college attendees. The SEP students will help with summer camps and children's groups and lead programs to endorse college. On August 6, the students will discuss their work with Blank Canvas in Beckman Auditorium of The Ames Library.

Overall, the goal of SEP is to prepare students for success and open doors for them. Once the students complete the program, they will receive a loan-based scholarship to use for any academic purpose. For students who participate, the work is worth sacrificing the lazy days of summer. According to Lalani, "This program is a win-win no matter what angle you look at it from."

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