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Pilot Program Promotes Leadership

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — A pilot program at Illinois Wesleyan University aims to help students develop leadership skills by exploring personal values, ideas and strengths.

The Titan Leadership Program, which is run through the Division of Student Affairs, is considered the next step in helping students hone leadership skills, according to Dean of Students Kathy Cavins-Tull. “Through students and alumni surveys, we were hearing that students get a lot of content and knowledge in the classroom, but not enough experiences putting that into action,” said Cavins-Tull, who taught classes on leadership through the business administration and sociology departments from 2006 to 2009.



IWU students Erin Howes (left) and Jarrod Hill are two of the participants in the inaugural class of the Titan Leadership Program.

The semester-long program, which enlists 15 sophomores and juniors from campus, combines group discussions, one-on-one meetings, speakers and networking – all with the goal of developing leadership abilities. The inaugural class of the Titan Leadership Program will celebrate graduation on Friday, April 15 at 6 p.m. in the Turfler Room of the Memorial Center (104 E. University St., Bloomington).

“Leadership has usually been a self-guided process for students,” explained Interim Director of Student Activities and Leadership Programs Sara Schaller, who oversees the program. “A student might become president of an organization and only be able to look at what the last president did for guidance. That can be a stressful process. Students let us know they wanted something more in depth.”

With the help of gifts from alumni, the division was able to create the program, which works to build an individual’s strengths and explores ways to bring those strengths to an organization. Sophomore Jarrod Hill said discovering new ways to communicate as a leader attracted him to the program. “The leadership program does a good job of saying that there are different ways to lead, and giving people the tools to discern when to use different skills,” said Hill, an economic major from Springfield, Ill., and one of the 15 students in the pilot program. “I was looking for a way to bring people together who might disagree on how to get things done. Maybe find a way to help people disagree agreeably.”

Throughout the spring semester, participants took part in one-on-one discussions with Schaller, as well as monthly gatherings that ranged from meeting with campus mentors to attendance of an evening, campus-wide etiquette dinner. The program also offered the students the chance to take part in a leadership lunch series with people from the community.

“Listening to the speakers reinforced the idea that if you are going to live in a community – if you are going to have a purpose – then you need to do more than be a follower,” said Hill. “You need to find a good way to talk to people, to reach people of different personalities in different ways.” Hill said he is already taking the skills he developed back to campus organizations. He is a board member of the Black Student Association, and a member of the Illinois Wesleyan Wind Ensemble, the Illinois Wesleyan Symphonic Winds and the IWU Jazz Ensemble.

Like Hill, fellow participant junior Erin Howes is actively involved on campus. “You could say I’m overly involved,” said Howes with a smile. “It was a bit like a cascade into involvement. Once I started, I could not stop.” In order to find participants for the pilot program, the Division of Student Affairs requested student nominations from IWU faculty and staff,

then had those students fill out an application. Two people nominated Howes through her work with the Admissions Office, and her mentor roles with the Engaging Diversity Program. "I was already doing a lot of work volunteering in bilingual classrooms in town, and I thought, 'Not one more thing!'" said Howes, who is a Spanish and educational studies double major from Glen Ellen, Ill.

Howes changed her mind, however, after speaking with Schaller. "When Sara described the program, she said it will help you find out who you are," said Howes. "And at the time, I had been living in the IWU Hart Career Center, unsure what it was I wanted to do. I had a college midlife crisis." Howes said the program offered her direction, and opened up a world of networking. "I'm a first-generation college student. So I've always been active, but I never really understood the benefits of connecting with other active people. I love it," she said. "I love being able to find new paths to get the word out about activities, or just bouncing ideas off people who get why you are involved."

Schaller said she considers the program a success, and believes it will continue next spring. The foundation of leadership skills created for each of the students who participate will have long-term effects, she added. "The best part about the program is that it will never end," said Schaller. "These students are not going to finish the program and boom, automatically become leaders. This is a program that gives students the keys to the lifelong development of leadership skills. They are going to keep talking and keep evolving."

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