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Students Seek to 'Engage Diversity' in Record Numbers

Aug. 13, 2015

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Associate Professor of Sociology Meghan Burke believes there may be a correlation between the ongoing protests and unrest stemming from events in Ferguson and Baltimore, and the record number of entering students who are enrolled in the Engaging Diversity program she directs.

Engaging Diversity is a program for white, incoming first-year students at Illinois Wesleyan, set for Aug. 15-17. This year the program welcomed 35 students, the largest number enrolled since the program began five years ago.

In reading the students' applications for the program, Burke said many mentioned recent incidents with racial overtones. "They are impacted by the events in Ferguson, they are curious about the racial-identity questions surrounding Rachel Dolezal, and as white students, they want to understand racism," said Burke.

The program seeks to build both confidence and competency around issues of diversity, Burke said. "White students play an important role in creating a diverse campus climate. Our goal is to help white students understand the challenges that domestic students of color and international students face on a predominantly white campus. Ultimately, we want to help first-year students become leaders and partners in campus diversity efforts."

Burke said pushing past the notion that the U.S. is now a color-blind society is a part of the three-day program's curriculum. "We do a lot of myth-busting about affirmative action, for example," said Burke. "Even though they come in excited about diversity, we shake their worlds, gently, to help them see their own biases. When they become aware of those, they can work with them more capably."

A participant last year, Tyler Casebolt '18 (Wauconda, Ill.) said a key aspect of the program was the trust the participants placed in the program and each other. "We could be comfortable saying a lot of things that we weren't sure about, that we weren't sure how they would come across," he said in a video explaining the program to incoming students. "If I had to use one phrase [to describe Engaging Diversity], I would say eye-opening, incredibly eye-opening. It gives.... an incredible amount of knowledge about the differences we have and how to embrace those."

Students involved in Engaging Diversity also join with incoming students participating in **International Student** and **MALANA** (Multiracial, African-American, Latino-Hispanic, Asian-American and Native American) pre-orientation programs. These programs are designed to assist new students in their transition to Illinois Wesleyan and help students to establish networks among peers and gain familiarity with support on campus. Each program has separate events, but several joint activities – from luncheons to games to discussions about diversity – help students build bonds of friendship early in their journey as Titans.

A study by Josi Banales '14 evaluating the long-term impact of the program indicated students who participated developed a more complex understanding of race, endorsed fewer color-blind racial attitudes than they did before they completed the program, and showed a more critical awareness of race. In her study, Banales interviewed several students who said the Engaging Diversity program inspired them to participate in activities that allowed them to continue their discussions and learning on racial issues.

Burke said anecdotal evidence also indicates Engaging Diversity participants go on to become leaders on campus. Several have become very active in registered student organizations; others show leadership by taking their interest in racial justice into their major coursework. Other alumni started a registered student organization called PRISM (People Reflecting Ideal Social Mindsets).



Research shows students who participate in the Engaging Diversity program developed a more critical awareness of race.

Burke points out that the Engaging Diversity program is just one among many facets of an ongoing effort to develop and sustain a dynamic and diverse campus climate – a major goal of the University’s most recent Strategic Plan. “We help white students understand that diversity isn’t just something students of color or international students bring to campus,” she said. “Every one of us plays an important role in genuinely creating a diverse campus climate, and this program is a first step in helping students be appreciative of that diversity and truly become partners in those efforts.”