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April Bonds (left) watches as her daughter, Apree' ce Bonds, explains some of the work the girls completed in the GO-GIRL program while Illinois Wesleyan student Betsy Mraz '08 looks on.

IWU Students Give Junior High Girls a Green Light in Math, Science

April 26, 2006

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — This spring, nine Illinois Wesleyan University psychology majors helped give local junior high school girls a jump start in advanced math and science skills by serving as mentors for the GO-GIRL (Gaining Options: Girls Exploring Real Life) program, which encourages girls to remain involved in math and science classes throughout high school and college.

Kira Hudson Banks, associate professor of psychology, coordinated IWU's first GO-GIRL program this spring. According to Banks, in the early teen years, there is no difference between the academic performances of male and female students in math and science classes. However, in junior high, their attitudes start to differ and girls often become less interested—and less successful—in these fields. GO-GIRL attempts to counteract this split by actively encouraging girls to engage in math and science exploration and application.

Innovative in its emphasis on social sciences, rather than the hard sciences such as biology or chemistry, GO-GIRL provides girls with a background in statistical analysis and the scientific method in order to interpret the results of surveys about stress, bullying, studying—the issues that directly affect their day-to-day experiences.

"We hope that they can see that in their everyday lives, there are questions to be answered using math and science, and that they have the tools to answer them," Banks said of the program participants.

GO-GIRL is funded by a National Science Foundation grant originally awarded in 2000 to Pamela Reid, who was then a professor at the University of Michigan and now teaches at Roosevelt University in Chicago. The program is one of six nationwide.

The mentors met with the junior high students twice a week at the program's headquarters, the Bloomington-Normal Urban League (510 E. Washington St., Bloomington). The Urban League, IWU's partner in the GO-GIRL program, is a satellite of the larger Peoria tri-county branch. The organization is dedicated to improving educational, social and economic opportunities for individuals in Peoria, Tazewell, Woodford and McLean counties at minimal or no cost to the participants.

Banks was adamant about the importance of collaborating with the Urban League, in order to show community support, not just university interest, for the academic development of the junior high girls.

Individual encouragement for each participant was vital to the success of the GO-GIRL program. Although the program's primary goal was to connect girls with math and science, the mentors were much more than just math tutors. By answering the girls' questions, helping them work together, reviewing skills one-on-one and listening to them talk about their schools, friends and families, the IWU students affirmed the independence and self-worth of each program participant. This confidence translated into increased participation and success at school.

The program was no small commitment for the IWU students this semester. In addition to five hours a week at the Urban League, they also earned credit in the classroom for a 300-level psychology course on the social and academic development of middle school-aged girls. The course required them to design career exploration activities to be conducted at the Urban League and to teach the techniques of statistical data interpretation, which are often challenging even for college students, to the younger girls.

IWU senior Rebecca Skupien said that her mentee's mother noticed significant progress in her daughter's academic development. "On the last day of class, Ivory's mom looked so proud, telling me that because of her involvement in the GO-GIRL program, Ivory had made the honor roll the last quarter," Skupien said. Her mentee, Ivory Vaughn, was a 7th grader at Kingsley Junior High School in Normal.

The future of the GO-GIRL program is not yet set in stone, but one thing is certain: the junior high students have a new awareness of the options available to them in the future. "I want to be a pediatrician, but the test told me I could also be a lawyer or an architect," said Mahin Khader, a sixth grader at Normal's Parkside Junior High School, referring to the Myers Briggs aptitude test that the students took as part of a career exploration activity.

As for the IWU mentors? "I would love it if there could be a follow-up program to check on the girls," said junior Laura Curtis. "To help them down the road finding summer jobs, learning more about colleges and possible careers."

The Illinois Wesleyan student mentors were: junior Laura Curtis of Dolton, Ill.; senior Heather Kwoka of Lansing, Ill.; senior Christine Lassandrello of Hinsdale, Ill.; sophomore Elizabeth Mraz of Apple Valley, Minn.; sophomore Jennifer Nichols of Normal; junior Lisa Schaumburg of Bloomington; junior Melissa Serritella of St. Charles, Ill.; senior Kavita Shah of Hoffman Estates, Ill.; and senior Rebecca Skupien of Hickory Hills, Ill.