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Emily J. Schubert
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Campus Welcomes Historically Black Sorority Zeta Phi Beta

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Students at Illinois Wesleyan University now have the opportunity to join one of the oldest historically Black Greek sororities with the introduction of Zeta Phi Beta to campus this fall.

Zeta Phi Beta Sorority will serve as the first historically Black sorority on campus in 40 years, strengthening the university's connection with the National Pan-Hellenic Council of Black Fraternities and Sororities (NPHC).

As a member of Beta Iota Zeta, the Bloomington-Normal chapter of Zeta Phi Beta,

Assistant Professor of Theatre Michelle Cowin Gibbs sought an opportunity to reestablish the NPHC presence at Illinois Wesleyan University. Following the sorority mission of "raising people's consciousness, encouraging the highest standards of scholastic achievement and fostering a greater sense of unity among our Black communities," Gibbs formed an immersion team through a partnership with the IWU Office of Student Involvement to bring Zeta Phi Beta to campus.



Members of the Bloomington-Normal chapter of Zeta Phi Beta shared information with students about the sorority new to IWU during a recent RSO fair.

"We believe that Zeta Phi Beta will inspire and encourage generations of IWU women to make service and scholarship the center of their lives," said Gibbs, who serves as third vice president for the local chapter. Nationally founded in 1920, "Zeta Phi Beta began with five undergraduate students who were strong, courageous and intelligent Black women. Our Five Pearls [the founding women] envisioned an organization that would directly affect positive change, and chart a course of action for the 1920s and beyond. Our goal for establishing a chapter at IWU is to foster that same energy of strength, unity and goodness that our communities need today."

Gibbs noted that a common misconception about NPHC organizations is that only Black members can join.

"This is completely untrue," she said. "Our groups are historically Black. We are committed to diversity and inclusion. We have women of all races and ethnic backgrounds who desire to be part of our collective mission to support initiatives and community programs for the greater good of all communities. We are strengthened by our diversity and commitment to fostering support and upholding the communities that we serve."

Striving to build upon a rich past of Illinois Wesleyan Greek life including Iota Zeta of Delta Sigma Theta (1972-1983) and the University's first Black Greek organization Lambda Phi Omega (1968-1970), the immersion team is seeking to enhance the Greek experience for students. Director of Student Involvement Tyler Manning said the inclusion of NPHC organizations at IWU lifts up important cultural and historical perspectives while "enriching the campus diversity and promoting unity among students."

"Our partnership with Dr. Gibbs holds particular significance because she is not only a dedicated faculty member but also an active member of the Bloomington-Normal chapter of Zeta Phi Beta. This unique combination of roles allows for a seamless connection between the University, the local graduate chapter, and the international organization, which is pivotal for the success of any NPHC organization on campus," said Manning.

Since 2021, the Office of Student Involvement has partnered with the Black Student Union to host an annual NPHC 101 event to celebrate the culture of NPHC organizations by partnering with local chapters. Manning said students who join Zeta Phi Beta will find a supportive community of like-minded individuals committed to personal and collective growth.

Gibbs said the presence of Black Greek letter organizations is vital to the cultural and social character of a campus.

"We provide community and inspire Black unity in campus life. We also provide mentorship and strong examples of service and leadership for undergraduate students. We recognize the need and desire to model for our undergraduates what it means to do good and uplift the communities that we have the honor and privilege to serve," she said.

The immersion committee is identifying meeting spaces and other resources for the organization's needs as it gets off the ground, said Manning. Students interested in membership can contact mgibbs@iwu.edu or visit the [Zeta Phi Beta website](#) to learn more about the organization.

"My advice to those interested in joining the sorority is to think about the ways you want to give back and how you want to be nourished," said Gibbs. "Zeta Phi Beta is a foundation built on service and education and it is a beautiful collective."

The National Pan-Hellenic Council of Historically Black Fraternities and Sororities of Bloomington-Normal is sponsoring a scholarship competition for underrepresented college students attending Illinois State University, Illinois Wesleyan University or Heartland Community College. [Students can apply here](#). Applications are due on Oct. 15, 2023, by 11:59 p.m.

Upcoming events with Zeta Phi Beta include the [ISU Black Alumni Tailgate Party](#) for all NPHC organizations in the Bloomington-Normal community from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 14 at Duffy Bass Field Parking Lot on the corner of Gregory and Adelaide streets in Normal; a group attendance of the IWU School of Theatre Arts production of [Carrie: The Musical](#) at 7:30 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 14 at the Jerome Mirza Theatre; a community service activity in November and an end of the semester gathering in December.

By Emily J. Schubert '27