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[CAMPUS PRACTICE]

Creating Change: Arts, Activism, and the Academy

■ **MIGUEL MARTINEZ-SAENZ**, assistant provost for the First-Year Experience and associate professor of philosophy at Wittenberg University

In 1940, Richard Wright challenged readers to confront how racial discrimination “touches the destiny of an entire nation.” Since that time, American colleges and universities have expanded funding, programs, and access with an eye to diversity, opening their doors and

explored how to design and implement programs that bridge these gaps. In connection with Wittenberg’s new first-year experience program, faculty, staff, and community leaders invited Bryonn Bain—spoken-word poet, prison activist, and educator—to deliver a series of

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deepening their significance in American democracy and culture. While promising, these inroads still stop short of their ultimate destination. We educators must continue to address issues of access, retention, success, and campus climate. But we must also make transparent how cross-cultural engagement coupled with hands-on experience implies and precipitates excellence. When, one might ask, do we allow the presence of diversity to speak to us, to change us, to educate us? When, more importantly, do we explore how our communities are linked together in a common fate?

To help students examine this notion of connectedness, educators will need to transcend the silo-minded thinking that sees student development activities as isolated from academic concerns, academic concerns as isolated from community engagement, and college campuses as isolated from local communities. Wittenberg University and the Springfield, Ohio, community recently

performance-based programs that cut across campus and community. In fall 2008, Bain demonstrated how bridging the divide between the arts, activism, and the academy can shift consciousness and catalyze social change.

Bryonn Bain’s Visit

Wrongfully imprisoned in a case of mistaken identity after attending the same elite schools as President Obama (Columbia University and Harvard Law), Bain responded to his experience by creating a groundbreaking one-man show that confronts America’s unresolved conflicts regarding race. Wittenberg’s planning committee felt that a visit from Bain might help accomplish several goals: to bring students in contact with a successful adult from a group that isn’t well represented on campus (Bain is African American with Trinidadian roots), to help students see the connections between the arts and social engagement, and to position our first-

year experience as a locus for discussions about difference. Bain’s visit challenged us all—faculty, staff, students, and community members alike—to rethink our views on education, the prison crisis, and even the election of Barack Obama.

In the Community: Bain’s first community workshop was with a group of “at-risk” youth at Forging Responsible Youth, an after-school and summer mentoring program for at-risk students in Clark County, Ohio. Inviting students to articulate their aspirations, Bain facilitated a series of hip-hop-based interactive exercises with fifteen teenagers. The next evening, Bain led a community workshop with the anti-poverty Circles Campaign. Joined by more than fifty adults from a range of socioeconomic and ethnic groups, Bain performed poetry and facilitated a series of theater games inspired by Brazilian director Augusto Boal. These exercises served as an entry to discussion of the role of identity and difference.

In Concert: Interweaving his unforgettable tale of wrongful imprisonment with dozens of other voices, Bain’s one-man hip-hop theater show, “Lyrics from Lockdown,” led an audience of students, faculty, staff and community members, including high school students, on a journey through spoken word and song. Bain prompted the audience to reflect on how the racial demographics of prisons (where black and Hispanic males are between 55 and 60 percent of inmates) reveal underlying inequities, even in a nation that just elected its first black commander in chief (West and Sabol 2008).

In the Classroom: Bain lectured to a joint session of two first-year seminars: Making Coffee: Culture, Capitalism, and Consumption and Race, Gender, Class, and the Media. He traced the evolution of the prison industrial complex from its origins on the plantation before leading students in a writing activity on a controversy

surrounding an arts-based literacy project Bain created at a California juvenile probation center. In the afternoon, Bain led a second joint session of first-year seminars titled *Moral of the Story and Ways of Seeing, Ways of Being*. Here he examined how the working-class youth culture of hip-hop has evolved into a multibillion-dollar global movement. Interrogating stereotypes of hip-hop artists as thugs and gangsters, Bain led students to consider hip-hop as a social movement that can be a catalyst for change.

Program Outcomes and Outlook

To say Bain's visit exceeded expectations would be to understate his impact. On a campus with few faculty of color, Bain connected with and energized young African American students. His involvement in the first-year experience demonstrated to all students that the institution is doing its part to enact a diverse learning environment. His impact in the classroom was felt deeply. Faculty member Fitz Smith said, "[Bain] had students talking, and even rhyming...the same students who had not said a word over the entire semester." Bain's impact

on the community might have been the most profound. Liz Hale, Forging Responsible Youth's executive director, relates that months later, her students continue to talk about Bain's visit and reflect openly about the importance of giving voice to their dreams.

Following Bain's visit, Wittenberg University decided to establish an "Artist-in-Residence" program linking its First-Year Experience Office, the Community Service Office, the Center for Civic and Urban Engagement, and Student Development. This community-wide partnership will include joint programming with local groups such as Project Jericho, Infusion Campus, Forging Responsible Youth, and the local Circles Campaign. During fall 2009, Bain will return to Springfield to inaugurate the residency by helping develop a module for "arts-



Bryonn Bain engages in conversation with members of the student group Concerned Black Students.

based activism and engagement." In adopting this program, Wittenberg will demonstrate its continued commitment to increasing engagement with local communities as part of a comprehensive educational initiative. ☐

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Questions to Ask When Considering a Visiting Artist-Activist Program

- 1. How can the institution move beyond the "silos" method in planning the event?** Charge a broad-ranging committee (including representatives from academic and student affairs, as well as faculty and students) with developing and implementing the program. This group must have access to a university-supported budget, preferably with money allocated specifically for this type of event.
- 2. What challenges can the artist help the institution address?** The goals will vary by institution but should be well defined. For example, the committee may want to bring an artist from a

group that isn't well represented on campus. The right artist can reinforce connections between the arts and social engagement. The artist can also help make the first-year experience a locus for discussions about difference, demonstrating the institution's commitment to a diverse learning environment.

- 3. How can faculty incorporate the artist in the classroom?** While some courses (such as theater, art, and literature) have obvious connections to the arts, first-year courses can provide the foundation for an artist's involvement. Begin by working with faculty members who are sympathetic

to the program's goals. Provide enough notice for faculty to modify courses so the artist's visit doesn't appear forced or ad hoc.

- 4. Are university-community partnerships sufficiently robust to support community involvement?** Institutions must constantly cultivate relationships with local nonprofit organizations and communicate over what types of experiences might be of value to students and to the community. These partnerships are instrumental in identifying "arts-activism" programs that can be implemented seamlessly.

—Miguel Martinez-Saenz