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IWU Engages Diversity

August 24, 2010

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. –The class of 2014 at Illinois Wesleyan University is one of the largest classes in recent years for the University. The class, comprised of 620 students, has 24 transfer students, 17 international students, 95 African-American, Latino-American, Asian-American and Native-American (ALANA) students and 76 out-of-state students. While it's easy to divide the class into subgroups, the IWU Engaging Diversity Program attempted to do just the opposite.

Associate Professor of Psychology Kira Hudson Banks and Assistant Professor of Sociology Meghan Burke co-directed this program, which brought 14 randomly selected first-year Caucasian students to campus three days early to participate in meetings and activities about diversity.

Participants included Kelsey Brattin, Overland Park, Kan., Katelyn McDonald, Minooka, Ill., Sydney White, Lombard, Ill., Kaitlin Dunn, Bloomington, Ill., Alyssa Payleitner, St. Charles, Ill., Liz Liubicich, Glen Ellyn, Ill., Ryan Winter, Wheaton, Ill., Brad May, Sugar Grove, Ill., Christopher Grills, Joplin, Mo., Ben Mulgrew, Dubuque, Iowa, Andrew Hoyle, New Berlin, Ill., Christine Gawron, Chicago, Elaina Henderson, Lexington, Ky. and Gracie Nafziger, Louisville, Ky.

“We wanted to give the students a safe space to come together and be able to ask tough questions about diversity and how they as white students can play an active role in the campus climate,” said Burke.

The students spent their weekend discussing the definitions and history of diversity, affirmative action and college admissions, white privilege and racial identity and open communication and dialogue. They also met with the ALANA students, international students and IWU faculty and staff who supported their decision to participate in the program.

“We focused a lot on racism but also talked about the intersectionality of our identity affiliations,” said Banks. “Some of the students came in thinking we should all be color blind and not see race. But then they were able to see how our society is constructed around race, and they realized being color blind is not the answer. They realized that seeing race is part of seeing who people are.”

The program ended Monday, Aug. 16 with a group session discussing ways to share the program's message with the IWU community. The participants plan to re-invigorate the group white students interested in self-growth and eradicating racism (WISER), which was created in 2005. The first WISER meeting will be Sept. 12 at 5 p.m. On a related note, the University Council for Diversity will hold Turfler Talks in the Turfler Room in the Memorial Center (104 E. University St., Bloomington). The talks are open to the public and will begin Tuesday, Aug. 31 at noon.

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