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Doctoral student receives Cross Award for commitment to equity, community engagement

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By Bridgett Dillenburger '23

University of Dayton doctoral student Ashley Wright earned the 2023 K. Patricia Cross Future Leaders Award for her commitment to academic innovation in the areas of equity, community engagement and teaching.

Wright was one of nine recipients recognized at the 2023 American Association of Colleges and Universities annual meeting Jan. 18-20 in San Francisco. She was one of nearly 100 nominees for the Cross Award, which recognizes graduate students who show exemplary promise as future leaders of higher education.

“It is really humbling and I am so beyond honored,” said Wright, director of educational equity programs in the UD Fitz Center for Leadership in Community and a doctoral student in higher education leadership. “Part of the nomination process includes writing a purpose

statement and after sitting with that for a while, it became very clear to me that my personal values have always led me to the work that I do.”

The Fitz Center's educational equity and volunteer programs provide UD students opportunities to collaborate with community schools and education-based organizations on student learning and development, connecting with families and engaging with the community.

“The mission of this program is for every UD student who goes into a community school, nonprofit organization or government agency to go in as equity advocates, equipped with listening and self-awareness skills,” Wright said. “You have to listen to your community partners and their needs.”

Wright began her position as program director in July 2022. Currently, students are tutoring in neighborhood school centers, and volunteering with the Montgomery County Juvenile Courts natural helpers program and Girl Scouts of Western Ohio. A grant from the Ohio Department of Education allows the educational equity program and school of education to provide tutoring to Dayton Public Schools students.

Wright said she prepares students to go into communities and understand their identity within society from a humanistic standpoint. Her work is guided by the question: “How does my identity inform the way that I show up in different communities?”

“My commitment to educational equity is that UD students have an understanding that the people in the communities they work with have a story to share and it is not up for us to assume their narrative,” Wright said. “I want my students to know the people of the Dayton community as knowers in their own right and that we are there as co-creators with them, ready to listen.”

Wright said UD's Catholic, Marianist values align perfectly with her's.

“Being at an institution that prioritizes community engagement, I don't feel out of place when it comes to my own research interests,” she said. “I am able to get the feedback that I need because there are other people who are invested in the same work that I am doing.”

Wright was honored to receive support from her colleagues Fitz Center Executive Director Nancy McHugh, professor of philosophy, and Mary Ziskin, associate professor of education.

“It means a lot when people in those academic spaces recognize you, because that means you're doing meaningful work and you have the potential to really change things,” Wright said. “It is truly a game changer to have the support of such respected individuals in their own regard.”

McHugh said she is grateful to have Wright as a colleague and a mentee, and Wright stands out in many ways through her director role.

“When I saw the call for nominations for the award, I knew immediately that I would nominate Ashley,” McHugh said. “Ashley without a doubt is innovative in her approach to equity and community engagement. She is profoundly deserving of the K. Patricia Cross Future Leaders Award.”

McHugh said the professional development Wright will receive from the award will have a significant impact on her career.

As a Cross Award recipient, Wright also was inducted into the association's Future Leaders Society, an exclusive community designed to support ongoing engagement, collaboration and support. The association is a global membership organization dedicated to advancing the democratic purposes of higher education by promoting equity, innovation and excellence in liberal education.

“I feel extremely fortunate to be able to have a network of people that I can relate to and share ideas with to refine my work,” Wright said. “It is also amazing to see how many people care about the same equity work that I do.”

Wright, a Cleveland native, holds a master’s degree from Wright State University in English language and literature, and a bachelor’s degree in secondary education and teaching from Central State University. She taught for more than six years in the Dayton Public School district.

Wright values the opportunity to share her scholarship with people outside her research interests. She said these groups can bridge the gap between academy and community.

“I really believe education is my calling and this recognition validated how I saw myself as a change agent doing what I can with the tools that I have available to me,” she said. “It was confirmation that I am on the right path.”

[For more information about the Fitz Center for Leadership in Community, visit the website.](#)

Photo: Ashley Wright is third from left in the photo from the 2023 American Association of Colleges and Universities annual meeting.