

January 20, 2008

Earlier on in my life, diversity was always something I heard all too often and automatically assumed to be strictly a black/white issue. Today that seems like an entire lifetime ago and it's hard to believe I went from a 62-person high school class with a single black student and a busing program for students with disabilities (as our facilities were inaccessible) to a thriving 17,000-person campus bustling with students of all shapes, abilities, and shades. My time at Wright State has very often shown me something new about myself just from my interaction with others and this free exchange has made me want to help educate others as a result. Although we can't fix racism, inequality, or oppression overnight, we can plant the seeds of education to help ward off the ignorance that eventually festers into each of these things.

I made a strong commitment at the start of this school year that I was going to do as much as I could possible to help unite our campus. During the last several years I, with my peers, had seen a clear separation of the residents on our campus. Negative stereotypes, messages of hate, and feelings of discrimination were quickly beginning to grow out of hand and as a residential leader I felt an obligation to do something about it. I found out during the summer that it had been decided to close off a roadway that ran between several of the buildings in our largest residence hall community as a result of continuous loitering and noise violations. Many residents had begun to point fingers to others as a result of the problem. The issue began to take on the all too familiar black versus white stance that I have become accustomed to seeing in my leadership experience.

I felt that there had been a serious disconnect between the root of the problem and the nature of the perceived problem. Together with another colleague, we developed a campaign to re-energize pride and enthusiasm for WSU as well as build community by engaging residents in active dialogue and highlighting our diverse student body. We worked diligently throughout the summer to prepare our campaign prior to the return of the RA staff so that we could present our ideas during training. Marketing pieces were created to spread awareness of what we had now come to dub as “I am Wright State.” We decided to go with Live Strong-esque bands and as the yellow bands had brought together a global community in the name of cancer research, our green and gold (WSU’s colors) wristbands would bring together our campus as a family of responsible, open-minded citizens. We distributed t-shirts and buttons to every RA on campus with a unifying message of embracing our unique differences while remembering that despite these differences we always have one thing in common---we are Wright State.

The result of our programming efforts paid off well. We had a turn-out of over 300 students who came for food, friends, and a showing of *Not in Our Town*, a PBS documentary focusing on how several towns reacted to racial and social tensions that threatened to break up their communities with messages of hate and oppression. Further, we included our “I am WSU.” message during the annual Tunnel of Oppression, a collaboration between Counseling and Wellness Services and the Office of Residence Services. By utilizing simple Polaroid photographs with three distinguishing facts about each interviewee, we sought to once again show how each of our differences brings something unique and valuable to our campus. Students were prompted to react to the

question of how they wanted to change their campus and by the conclusion of the Tunnel experience over four hundred responses had been collected.

After instructing a first-year seminar this year I realized the real importance of initiatives such as the Tunnel of Oppression and “I am Wright State.” And although these examples were not my first attempts at educational outreach, taking my first-year students through these activities and facilitating a diversity discussion allowed me to see through their eyes how many of these students had perceptions similar to what I had held only years earlier. I also realized that you cannot make a mistake without first trying and I ended the quarter by encouraging each and every one of my students to meet someone new each day, to inquire, to explore, and learn. I told them that although education is indeed expensive, sometimes the best benefits and rewards cost nothing.

The higher education environment is a new beginning for many as it might be the first time they have ever left home or supported themselves fully. For some, it is also the first time they are exposed to people and ideas that perhaps they had never thought about or with which they held stereotypical beliefs and/or cultural misunderstandings. I’m excited by the prospects of becoming an emerging student affairs professional for so many reasons. But one of my largest goals which I will strive to express in whatever ways are necessary and wherever my personal and professional quests may take me will be to plant this seed of education in the minds of our engineers, CEOs, and Presidents of tomorrow.