

Student projects examine diversity on campus

by Kristen Manders - Monday, November 22, 2010

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/7097/student-projects-examine-diversity-on-campus/>

New projects at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh are providing black students from different backgrounds a chance to share their stories.

Students have started sharing their experiences at “Art Jam!,” a meeting place where faculty and staff encourage students to talk about what is meaningful in life and create various forms of art that reflect those experiences.

“Art Jam!” projects will be displayed in an exhibit called “Dialogues on Diversity: The African American Experience.” The exhibit is scheduled to run from Nov. 29 to Dec. 10 in the Gail Floether Steinhilber Art Gallery in Reeve Memorial Union, located at 748 Algoma Blvd.

UW Oshkosh’s sociology club has hosted discussion sessions and done preliminary research that will apply to photovoice — a project the Sociology Club will use to explore diversity on campus. Black students will be asked to submit photos of meaningful things in their lives and the sociology club will help the students explore why those things have meaning.

If the Sociology Club project receives results before the “Dialogues” exhibit opens, they hope to include the work they do with students as well.

Both projects were refined after the UW Oshkosh Diversity Committee for the College of Letters and Science recommitted to focusing on and improving the understanding of diversity in the University’s community.

Pamela Lassiter, director of equity and affirmative action at UW Oshkosh, said the work being done with these projects fits in with the Inclusive Excellence program on campus.

“Inclusive Excellence is about expanding everyone’s learning,” Lassiter said. “It’s about retention, graduation, and the student enjoying his or her experience here. We want every student to graduate.”

The University’s plan is to acknowledge that every student comes from different experiences. Some students are first generation students whose parents cannot answer questions about how to decide which major to choose. Inclusive Excellence will create a supportive environment for those students and allow them to take charge of their own learning.

Art Jam!

Black students are invited to join “Art Jam!” sessions, where students have been meeting to discuss their experiences at home and on campus. Meetings are held from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. in Reeve, and students are welcome to come and go as they please.

Emmet Sandberg, art gallery coordinator for Reeve Memorial Union and assistant professor for the art department, started the program to give students a way to talk about their stories and express their ideas.

“Art Jam!” is really about cultivating relationships and telling stories,” Sandberg said.

The first activity students participated in was similar to Pictionary, where students drew pictures resembling something that was important to them and the others guessed what those pictures represented. Students started a project called “100 Word Memoir,” where they used 100 words to talk about themselves.

Memoirs were turning out well and students wanted to share them with others. They organized an open mic night and performed the 100-word memoirs in front of many students at Titan Underground on Nov. 4.

Currently students are collecting childhood photographs and pictures of friends to put in their sketchbooks. The group is thinking about handing out extra sketchbooks with questions in them so more students can exchange stories.

“Diversity is valuable within our community and classrooms, but is often a difficult concept to explore and discuss,” Sandberg said. “What I’d like to see after these projects is a more sophisticated idea of what diversity is.”

Oshkosh Minority Student Experience Project

Last Spring, Paul Van Auken, Sociology Club adviser and sociology professor at UW Oshkosh, suggested that the club focus on a topic relevant to campus in addition to planning the guest speakers and socials they would host.

“We decided to focus on diversity on campus and try to make our project about research and action at the same time,” Van Auken said.

Work began with a brown bag session to share statistics of the student body and retention rates of students. Two more sessions have been held since then, giving students and faculty a place to discuss various aspects of diversity.

Now the group is approaching students to participate in the photovoice project.

“Students will be asked to take a photo that captures what their first impressions of the campus were and what they are now, after students have been here some time,” Van Auken said. “Or to take a photo where they feel comfortable on campus and where they feel uncomfortable.”

Based on their research, the sociology club developed 15 categories they want students to photograph. The project will focus on the black student body first.

Although the club did not initially intend to focus on one group, they thought they would follow what the University was focusing on.

“The College of Letters and Science Diversity Committee’s activities are geared around learning more and trying to do more specifically for African Americans and that is what we are focusing on too,” Van Auken said.

The club is looking for people to participate in the program that want to discover the reasons behind some trends in diversity on the campus. They hope that students will be more compelled to take action and educate people about diversity.

Both Van Auken and Sandberg encourage students to participate for a chance to learn something new about themselves and the role diversity plays on campus.

“The value for the participant is he will get to give himself a voice,” Lassiter said. “Sometimes you feel invisible and now you get to give yourself a voice.”

Students that wish to take part in the Oshkosh Minority Student Experience Project can contact Paul Van Auken at vanaukep@uwosh.edu.

“Art Jam!” meetings are held in Reeve Memorial Union, room 207, from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.

For more information about Inclusive Excellence at UW Oshkosh, visit www.uwosh.edu/stuaff/inclusive-excellence-1.