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WKU students find home in Intercultural Academy

AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com Aug 19, 2019 Updated 9 min ago



Many times in her life, Jazzlin Hamilton has felt out of place.

While chasing her dreams in acting or dance, she'd look around and see too few people of color like her. She's felt it while competing in pageants, vying to become the next Miss Kentucky, and that feeling followed her to Western Kentucky University as a black student from Louisville attending a predominantly white institution.

That changed when Hamilton, now a junior, found a home in the university's Intercultural Student Engagement Center Academy.

The program supports students of color, first-generation college students or those who are Pell eligible or in need of assistance with their college experience.

Through the academy, students get peer mentoring and an opportunity to be part of a community of students living and taking classes together, with the goal of helping them persist to graduation.

For Hamilton, it's a space where she's immediately understood.

“I just love the feeling of being with people who look just like me who are striving for excellence,” Hamilton said.

On Sunday, Hamilton was among the academy’s students who gathered for a meal and games at Mount Zion Baptist Church for a back to school bash. It capped off a day given over to helping students move into their residence halls and bring parents and students up to speed with orientation sessions.



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For Martha Sales, executive director of the Cynthia and George Nichols III Intercultural Student Engagement Center, it was an opportunity to welcome the academy’s third class and introduce this year’s focus: philanthropy and community service.

“We want our students to learn how to give back within different communities in Bowling Green, not just to be served, but learn how to serve,” Sales said. “We partnered with Mount Zion because they are exhibiting the true meaning of service today.”

The academy has also partnered with the Boys and Girls Clubs and the Housing Authority of Bowling Green for community service projects.

“We’ve also added a philanthropy piece because we want to teach students how to give back, not only with their time, but also financially,” Sales said.

Mount Zion Pastor John Lee said that although the church normally hosts K-12 back-to-school events, Sunday’s event marked the first time that it has worked with college students.

“This gives us an opportunity to minister to them on a level, on a practical level, where we’re not just ministering to their souls, but we’re actually meeting their needs,” he said, recalling an experience he had in college when he struggled to find a safety pin. “It’s the little things.”



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Along with hosting the meal, the church donated laundry baskets filled with essentials to the students.

“We want to become an extended family to them. We want to become that family away from home,” Lee said, referring in particular to freshmen students away from home for the first time. “They need to know they have that support system.”

For Sales, the program is already showing promise just three years in. Most of the students who started with the academy in fall 2017 as freshmen have persisted to become juniors.

“We’ve had a success rate with those students of 68 percent,” she said. “Our last cohort, from fall to fall, they have a 72 percent matriculation rate.”

Jay York, a junior from Covington, said joining the academy helped him branch out on campus.

“Once I got in ISEC Academy, it enabled me to network all across campus, all across Bowling Green,” and even with some people in northern Kentucky, York said. “ISEC is the reason I’m still at Western Kentucky.”

Jaden Adams, a freshman from Louisville, said she was drawn to the academy by what she heard from people back home.



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“This program really sheltered them,” she said. “I just knew that I wanted to be a part of that.”

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