

## Panel addresses school-to-prison pipeline

A panel discussed and analyzed the national trend of criminalizing children instead of educating them, referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline, Wednesday morning in the Wildcat Theater.

The four panelists were Emily Chiang, a professor of law of the University of Utah; Forrest Crawford, a professor at Weber State University; Brenda Valles, a professor at the U of U, and John Mejia, legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah. Leah Murray, an associate professor at WSU, moderated the panel.

As the discussion was about to begin, Murray introduced each panelist and gave a broad definition of why they were all there.

“The school-to-prison pipeline is one of the most important civil rights challenges facing our nation today,” Murray said. “Basically, it refers to the national trend of criminalizing rather than educating our nation’s children.”

Murray guided the discussion with three baseline questions for the panel to address. The first question was for each of the panelists to express their definition of the school-to-prison pipeline.

“I looked at factors like zero-tolerance policies and school discipline policies,” said Valles, as she was discussing her research dissertation. “For example, suspensions and expulsions and how the schools carried these out.”

Mejia added how he looked at the school-to-prison pipeline after Valles.

“I look more at on-the-ground instances of different treatment of generally students of color,” Mejia said. “The school-to-prison pipeline is concerned that we’re criminalizing all students, but unfortunately, a lot of the cases that I look at involve students of color.”

After discussing their own definitions of the school-to-prison pipeline, the panel moved on to the second question: Why is the school-to-prison pipeline a concern for Utah?

“The reason I chose to do my research here in Utah was because of its fastest-growing

population: the Hispanic/Latino population,” Valles said. “Their access to college and to professional fields is not increasing with the population. The graduation rates are also not increasing either.”

Chiang recommended that everyone in the audience look at Utah’s individual data on its K-12 schools.

“The office of civil rights and regulation of the federal government maintain a website where you can search for your state school district and down to individual schools,” Chiang said. “I encourage you, if you’re curious about what’s happening in your hometown or backyard, to see whether or not this is a phenomenon or if it’s taking place all around you.”

Nearing the end of the discussion, the panel answered the last question, which was about the long-term effects of the school-to-prison pipeline.

“I think we should challenge our leaders, our authorities and our teachers,” Crawford said. “One of the long-term impacts that this pipeline can have is essentially viewing the criminal justice system as the new Jim Crow-ism.”

Crawford also shared his personal story of growing up in a segregated community. He said he faced challenges in high school and that he was one of few students who actually graduated from his class.

“The pipeline isn’t something new; it’s been around for a long time,” Crawford said.

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*By [Trae Chappell](#) April 4, 2013.*