Diversity Conference Focuses on Religion

As our campus newsletter, Diversity Works, begins its fourth year of publication, we look forward to an exciting 2004-05 academic year. Members of the planning committee are preparing for Weber State University’s sixth annual Diversity Conference. Mark your calendars for October 7-8, when we will highlight the theme of religious diversity. Students, faculty and staff, along with community members, will explore the value of religion in our lives, as well as some of the difficulties with discussing religion in our society—or, as commonly quipped in planning meetings, the tendency to “ignore the elephant in the living room.”

WSU is fortunate to have as part of its campus community numerous belief systems, ideologies and practices that have significantly shaped our culture, government and institutional structures. These values, when combined, make for a richer learning experience for us all. The relationship between religious identity and intellectual development is a well-known dimension of how many students come to understand themselves and the world they engage.

Another note of excitement this year is the opportunity for the campus to become acquainted with Dr. Wangari Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa, who will serve as interim assistant to the president for diversity during my sabbatical. Rest assured that our campus diversity initiative is in good hands.

- Forrest Crawford, assistant to the president for institutional diversity

Familiar Face, New Place

Diversity is what I live,” says French professor Wangari Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa, who on July 1 began her interim term as assistant to the president for diversity on campus. Born in Kenya, she earned her bachelor’s degree in France before coming to Utah.

A professor in the French department, she also has taught classes on literature, European culture and Swahili since joining WSU in 1990. Her mission, she says, is to “build bridges,” and her multicultural background equips her well for the task.

Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa’s philosophy reflects John Donne’s sentiment that “any man’s death diminishes me.” And not only physical death: “Every time we choose to exclude, to treat others or their contributions to culture and human civilization as nonexistent or not worthy of our attention, we are choosing to live as diminished beings, to kill a part of our own potential,” she says.

During her interim appointment, Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa will teach half-time in WSU’s department of foreign languages, where she has developed and taught courses on literature by traditionally excluded French speakers such as Canadians, Belgians, Africans and Caribbeans.

She also has made it a point to recognize the work of women writers. “Always — since I was eight years old — I knew that women needed more notice,” she says. “In college (Universite de Dijon) and even in graduate school (University of Utah), I studied few women writers.”

Her students can never say that. Building bridges with other faculty, Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa co-developed and team taught several courses in Women’s Studies and Honors, including “Ethnic and Women’s Literature” and “Communicating Across Cultural Boundaries in the Workplace.” She and political science associate professor Nancy Haanstad also initiated the internationalization of “Introduction to Women’s Studies.”

On campus, Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa has been interim director of the Bachelor of Integrated Studies (BIS) program and served on the curriculum committee and faculty senate. In Ogden, she founded Teens of Ogden United for Community Harmony (T.O.U.C.H.) She has served on the Utah Arts Council, the boards of Utah Humanities Council and the Utah-Ouellesebegou (Utah’s “sister state” in Mali, West Africa) Alliance. She frequently lectures at schools, libraries and organizations.

As Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa spends this academic year in the diversity office, she says she looks forward to more involvement with international students as well as with the many kinds of Americans on campus.

-Jennifer Phillon, University Communications
Diversity Events
FALL 2004

The Diversity Center presents several monthly events. Call or e-mail Keith Wilder (626-6379, kwilder@weber.edu) for dates and more information on the following:

COMMON GROUND:
Enjoy an atmosphere of inclusion during this forum focusing on resources for education and information about diversity. Snacks are served, and feedback is encouraged.

TASTE FOR DIVERSITY:
Expose yourself to a diverse world of food, dance and art.

SESSIONS@UB240:
Share your music, art, poetry and history during your lunch hour in a coffeehouse-like setting. Snacks, beverages and interesting discussions provided.

RELIGION AND ETHICS:
Explore religious diversity on WSU’s campus, in the nation and around the world.

STOP THE HATE:
Participate in this national program to spread information about eliminating hate and hate crimes, and furthering zero-tolerance initiatives.

INTERFAITH READING GROUPS:
Learn about diverse religious books during bi-weekly meetings open to students, faculty, staff and community members.

JUMP START:
Mentor inner-city students in this after-school program.

Weber State University Sixth Annual Diversity Conference

Spirituality and Religion in a Pluralistic Community: Living with Our Deepest Differences ... Exploring Common Ground

Thursday and Friday,
October 7-8, 2004
WSU Ogden Campus

Keynote speakers include:
Diana Eck, one of the country’s foremost scholars of comparative religions. A professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies in the faculty of Arts and Sciences, and member of the faculty of Divinity at Harvard University, she is an eloquent voice in the struggle for religious tolerance and understanding in America and around the globe.

Chieko Okazaki, who served as a counselor in the General Relief Society Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from 1990 to 1997 and is currently an educator, author and lecturer. Okazaki also is the president and founder of the Utah Children’s Reading Foundation and a member of Governor Olene Walker’s new Commission on Literacy.

The Right Rev. Carolyn Tanner Irish, 10th Bishop of Utah’s Episcopal Church. When she became a bishop in 1996, Irish was one of only four women elected to head a diocese in the Episcopal Church USA, and she is among only 12 female bishops in the worldwide Anglican Communion. Irish chairs the Board of Directors of O.C. Tanner Co. in Salt Lake City and serves on a number of church and community boards.

Keynote addresses and concurrent sessions will give attendees a chance to choose from a wide variety of topics related to religious diversity, such as religion in the workplace, a student panel on the role of religion in the lives of WSU students, religion and politics, religion and sexual ethics, and ministering during the SLC Olympics.

Check the comprehensive program at weber.edu/diversityoffice.xml for scheduling details.

WEB ADDRESSES
The Diversity Center:
www.weber.edu/Diversity
Services for Students with Disabilities:
www.weber.edu/ssid
Services for International Students:
www.weber.edu/sis
Services for Multicultural Students:
www.weber.edu/sms
Nontraditional Student Center:
www.weber.edu/nontrad
Services for Women Students:
www.weber.edu/sws

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Send submissions and comments to mailcode 4025; e-mail jphilion@weber.edu, or call ext. 6347.

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Balancing Act
Navajo Student Negotiates a Path Between Culture and Career Goals

For many people, the word "religion" brings to mind organizations, congregations and buildings of worship. But that's not what it means to some WSU students, such as junior Alyssa Yellowman. "A lot of people associate Native American religions with Christian religions," says the Navajo from Blanding, Utah. "But in my religion, there's no set creed you follow. It's not organized. It's belief within yourself: to think and trust and know who you love, and who loves you. To follow what you know is good."

Yellowman, the current Miss Indian Weber State, points out that it is impossible for one person to speak about all the different spiritual beliefs Native Americans hold. After all, there are more than 500 federally recognized tribal entities in the U.S. But she speaks about her own beliefs as an example to help people realize that religion and spirituality include ideas and traditions that may be very different from their own.

Spiritually, it is important to the Navajo to live in a sacred relationship with the land. "We have respect and are thankful for nature," Yellowman says. "We're thankful for the air that helps us breathe, the sky, the sun that brings warmth and light, and the animals that bring us food."

"I still hold a lot of the old traditions within me and follow some of those, but if I want to excel at my school work and reach my goals, I have to put some of my beliefs and traditions second."

As a premedicine student, Yellowman tries to balance traditional Navajo beliefs and her desires to become a cardiologist. "I don't completely follow the old ways," she says. "I have a scientific and analytical mind, so I move with advancement. I still hold a lot of the old traditions within me and follow some of those, but if I want to excel at my school work and reach my goals, I have to put some of my beliefs and traditions second."

It can be difficult to find middle ground, she admits: "My course of study and my career goal conflicts with traditional beliefs. In the Navajo religion, the old teachings are, when someone passes on, you let them rest. To perform surgery is seen as unnatural — that's where the conflict arises.

"But we've got to move on. I see it as: I'm doing it to help someone. I could possibly save a life, where a person can continue to be with their loved ones rather than dying and the family just having memories."

Yellowman's family is more traditional than she is. "If anything, my siblings are becoming more in touch with the traditions," she says. "I am the child that is heading out on my own. And it was hard for me to say, 'Family, back off. I'm going to medical school.'"

Although she's choosing a path that leads away from some Navajo conventions and customs, "I still have all the respect for everything around me, the earth and nature," she says. "To maintain my spirituality, I still offer my prayers the way I was taught to do."

It's very important to Yellowman to keep this contact with her heritage. "I wouldn't be excelling if I weren't grateful for being who I am, for having people back home push me to be here and offer their good feelings and prayers to me," she says. "If you lose your heritage, you lose a part of yourself, and you forget who you are. It's important to keep that connection, even if it's difficult sometimes."

Alyssa Yellowman was crowned Miss Indian Weber State University for 2003-04.

- Jennifer Phillion, University Communications

Religion in WSU Courses

Anthro DV3900. Magic, Shamanism and Religion (3)
A comparative study of the origins, development, and social functions of magic, shamanism, and religion within cultural systems around the world.

Engl 3740. The Literature of the Sacred
A study of one or more spiritual, religious, or ethical books of world-wide fame. Texts such as the Bible, the Koran, and the Bhagavad-Gita will be considered as works of literature. It may be taken more than once with different designations.

Hist 3110. American Ideas and Culture (3)
This course will look at key transformations in American cultural and intellectual history. Subjects will include the history of religion, the changing nature of political ideology, and transformations in who creates and controls entertainment, leisure and literature in American society. The course will use novels, essays, movies, museums, paintings, and music as tools for understanding American cultural life.

Hist 4310. History of Russia to 1917 (3)
Russia's political, economic, social and cultural institutions from pre-history to 1917, emphasizing dynastic leaders, expansion, religion and other significant forces of change. Includes an analysis of both foreign and domestic policies that led to world war and revolution.

Honors 2920/4920. Contemporary Issues in Religion and Ethics

Music CA1063. Music in Religion (3)
An introduction to music in world religions and how it has shaped the history of man. Specific religious works and specific composers from numerous world denominations will be discussed.

Philo 3500. Philosophy of Western Religion (3)
Problems and types of religious philosophy among Jews, Christians, and Moslems.

Philo DV3550. Philosophy of Eastern Religion (3)
An examination of classic philosophical issues as they arise in Eastern religious thought, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism.

PolSci DV3630. Political Behavior (3)
Explores the nature of mass political behavior and its role in the political process and examines the interaction between and among diverse social groups, the media, and policy makers. The course emphasizes the effect of sociodemographic differences (race, gender, age, income, religion, education, etc.) in the political psychology of public opinion formation and political decision.
Touchy Subject: Discussing Religion in the Classroom

There are few topics as complex as religion. "It's part of a tapestry it interrelates with history, literature, music, anthropology, sociology, any part of a culture," says WSU business professor Brian Davis, who leads a campus Religion & Ethics Forum that meets each week to discuss current issues.

Religion also can be an extremely divisive subject, which prevents many people from discussing it openly. But according to Sandra Powell, associate business professor and chair of the Diversity Conference Planning Committee, it needs to be discussed. The goal of WSU's Diversity Conference in October is just that. "I hope we can begin a dialogue, and people will realize the diversity that exists," says Powell. "As long as you're courteous and respectful, it's good to get people talking."

Because religion is related to many other subjects, and it is so diverse and culturally important, it's a natural area for study in the classroom. But because religious viewpoints are often very personal and strongly held, it can be challenging to hold an objective, educational discussion in class. With the correct approach, though, it can be done.

Barry Gomberg, director of Equal Employment Opportunity/Affirmative Action for WSU, teaches faculty and staff about civil rights. He's used to discussing sensitive issues. "An instructor wouldn't want to venture into such a topic unless it is relevant to the class," he says. "You should clarify that it's a legitimate part of the course, and give notice to students that it will be a topic of discussion."

Davis, Powell and Gomberg all agree that it's a good idea to set some ground rules before a class discussion on religion. "That's a good idea in any class where a discussion can turn controversial," Davis says. "Faculty members should make it clear to the class that everyone is expected to have respect for other points of view. You want to make sure you're in an environment where people feel safe to share their thoughts and feelings."

"We can let students know that we're not all alike, and we may not have the same beliefs, but this will be a safe place to discuss them," says Powell. "Make it clear that people won't be dismissed or insulted, and encourage students to be respectful of each other."

Once ground rules are established, the professor should make sure they're followed and keep the discussion focused.

"If you're discussing 'rights' and 'wrongs,' you can be right or wrong in stating that a person holds a particular belief," says Powell. "But whether the belief itself is right or wrong — that's irrelevant; it's not what the discussion is about."

Davis agrees. "Don't challenge the person, challenge their position," he says. "One thing I've done in class when students are faced with a statement that some of them might automatically dismiss is to ask, 'In what way might that be true?' We can use the question to move into deeper layers of discussion."

"For example, one person may mention reincarnation, and others who don't believe in it would dismiss the idea. But I can say, 'Wait a minute. Reincarnation is a belief that has been around for a long time, and a lot of people subscribe to it. Why is that?' We're not going to decide the ultimate truth in this class, but it is good to explore these ideas."

While a professor is leading this discussion, he is keeping the focus on issues and making sure students feel comfortable stating their views or he should keep in mind some things not to do, Gomberg says:

"Instructors should never require students to disclose information they don't want to share. Also, don't expect any particular student to be the spokesperson for an entire religion, and don't allow anyone to be singled out or embarrassed," he says.

"The instructors should also be careful to be balanced and fair; regardless of whether their own sympathies lie or what they believe, the course should not be proselytizing. Especially at a state institution such as WSU, you have to avoid blending church and state."

Davis, who has spent years studying different religions, knows it can be a difficult topic to tackle, but says it's worth it. "If we can discuss religion in the classroom, the skills we learn there can carry over into real life, where we might have a boss or neighbors whose beliefs are different from yours," he says. "It can be an uncomfortable process at times, but it's the nature of our world that we have different religions and beliefs, and we should be able to talk about them."

Davis directs the Utah Pluralism Project, which maps religious diversity in the state. He suggests the project's Web site, utahfaiths.org, as a beginning resource for professors who may want to discuss religion in their classes.

Also, the Religion & Ethics Forum meets Tuesdays at 1 p.m. in Room 218 of the Watt Building.

-Jennifer Phillion, University Communication

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PolSci 4030. American Constitutional Law II: Civil Liberties and Civil Rights (3)
An introduction to many of the basic doctrines of American Constitutional Law relating to civil rights and civil liberties including: the process of selective incorporation - why and how the Bill of Rights applies to the states; property rights in the United States, those rights afforded to criminals, defendants; First Amendment liberties - freedom of speech, press, and freedom of religion; the rights and liberties that have emerged from the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment; and, finally, the controversial and evolving "right of privacy."

Soci 3110. Sociology of Family (3)
Analyzes family arrangements and structure, changes in such arrangements over time, and contemporary issues facing families in our ever-changing world. Emphasis is placed on variations in family experiences with regard to race, gender, social class, and sexual orientation. Family as it relates to other social institutions such as politics, religion, and the economy, is also explored.

Soci 3410. Sociology of Religion (3)
Examination of religion and religious activities globally from the theoretical perspectives of Sociology.