

'You cannot afford not to graduate'

By Steve Hinnefeld
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BLOOMINGTON — Janice Wiggins frowned and paced at the front of a Ballantine Hall classroom, fanning herself with a sheet of paper in the July heat.

"No sleeping," she told more than 50 young men seated in front of her. "No head nodding. What I have to say and what you're going to do is truly important."

Wiggins is director of the Groups Student Support Services program at Indiana University, and her students were spending a Saturday in class for the program's first professional conference. After lunch, Wiggins called a meeting of African-American and Hispanic males. She was the only woman in the room.

"Last year, Mrs. Wiggins was very, very depressed. Very. And I need your help," she said, as the men grew quiet. She was depressed, she said, because one-third of the black and Hispanic men who started with Groups in 2005 didn't make it through the summer while earning the C average required to return in the fall.

"We know about the statistics," she said. "We know what is happening in our communities. You cannot afford not to graduate."

The racial achievement gap in American education is well documented, and the statistics for Indiana are as bleak as any state. Barely 40 percent of the state's black and Hispanic males graduate from high school in four years, according to Diplomas Count, a report by Editorial Projects in Education. That's below the national rate, the report said.

At IU Bloomington, 44 percent of black men and 50 percent of Hispanic men who started college in 1998 earned degrees in six years, according to IU figures. That compares with a 70 percent rate for all students.

Using stern lectures, high expectations and a lot of support, the Groups program tries to help students overcome long odds.

While some people at IU think of Groups as an affirmative-action program targeted to minorities, it serves first-generation Indiana college students regardless of race. About one-fourth of the students in this year's Groups summer program were white; many were from rural counties.

But Groups doesn't shy away from issues of race. Some students take an elective course called "Conversations on Race," and there's an emphasis on getting to know people from different backgrounds and cultures.

An outside review of Groups 10 years ago said students perceived that the university didn't provide a "warm environment" for minority and low-income students. And some students still talk about encountering the "silent racism" of stereotypes and low expectations on campus.

"Some people don't expect much out of black or Latino males. That's true," said Rebeca Hernandez, a sophomore Groups student.



Janice Wiggins, right, hugs Catherine Hanson, who was given a math leadership award during an Aug. 2 luncheon to conclude the 2006 summer Groups program. Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times
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In the Groups summer program, black students are in the majority. They know that, when classes start this week, the situation will be reversed. Only 4.4 percent of IU Bloomington students are black and 2.2 percent are Hispanic. Minority students will find themselves in big lecture classes with just a few students who look like them.

"When the school year comes, it's going to be a whole different ball game," said A.J. Medley-Griffin, a Groups student who is African-American.

Wiggins lectured the black and Hispanic men, then had them meet in small groups with potential role models: black men who went on to academic and professional success.

Roderick Wheeler, a former Groups student who earned a master's degree in public affairs from IU, told the men to take responsibility for each other.

"If he's asleep in class, wake that brother up," he said.

Given the statistics, Wheeler told the students, they already beat the odds by finishing high school and getting admitted to college.

"You passed the hurdle," he said. "You moved on."

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