

WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

news release

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Giant Step Teen Conference at Wayne State encourages unity, harmony and acceptance among diverse students

DETROIT — Michigan's longest-running teen conference continues at Wayne State University on Nov. 3, when more than 200 ninth and 10th graders gather from dozens of schools to get to know each other. The Giant Step Teen Conference, created in 1983, uses small, facilitated discussion groups to expose teens to other cultures, races and religions to bridge their differences. "This experience was a great learning process," one teen reported on her evaluation. "It gave me insight on other teens' lives and showed me I'm not that different."

The conference is free and open to teens throughout Southeast Michigan. Schools from Pontiac to Ann Arbor send students who are hand-picked by counselors. Giant Step recommends that counselors move beyond the obvious choices of class president and honor society members and consider the students who are having difficulty respecting peers with outward differences.

"We want to open student attitudes and ease tensions," said Peter Lichtenberg, director of the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute, which hosts Giant Step. "More than 5,000 students have taken part in Giant Step. Each student returns to their school and influences dozens of their peers. This is how genuine change and acceptance takes root."

This marks the 28th consecutive year for the conference. Students attend from every type of school: urban, suburban, public, private, charter, parochial, magnet and specialty high schools, and even home schools, for facilitated discussion on a range of topics from self image to bullying to sexuality. Each student is seated with seven students from other schools and diverse backgrounds. The discussions begin and the stereotypes fall away.

Ninety-six percent of students said Giant Step was a positive experience and recommended their school continue to participate; 86 percent planned to stay in touch with the people they met at the conference. A majority of last year's students said after the conference that they:

- Find it easier to get to know people who are different from them
- Prefer to live in a community of people different from them
- Are more likely to accept responsibility for their actions
- Feel that there is a lot they can do to help their community and country
- Prefer friends who have different interests and activities

The Giant Step Teen Conference takes place in the Wayne State Student Center Ballroom on Thursday, Nov. 3, from 9:15 a.m. to 1:45 p.m. For more information, visit <http://mpsi.wayne.edu/outreach/step-conference.php>.

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The Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child and Family Development promotes and improves the development, health and well-being of infants, children, youth and their families across the lifespan, through research, education and outreach.

Wayne State University is a premier urban research institution offering more than 400 academic programs through 13 schools and colleges to nearly 32,000 students.