

EMCC campaign promotes civil discourse

'I Am Human' student initiative works to curb use of offensive language on campus

by Glenn Gullickson
staff writer

A project launched last year at Estrella Mountain Community College to curb offensive language is gaining attention for working to change behavior on campus.

The "I Am Human" campaign encouraging civil discourse was the result of an incident on campus that directed offensive language toward the LGBT community and women.

"It's helping people understand that it's not OK to be bullied," Ri'Ann Holmes said of the campaign that she helped to create on the Avondale campus.

The effort, which includes posters, a website, video and presentations, has collected awards and garnered interest from other campuses.

It all started in spring 2015, when a student success event on campus featured a display inviting students to write their hopes for the future by completing the phrase "When I graduate, I will ..."

Holmes, 21, who identifies herself as an ally to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community, wrote that she hoped to advocate for transgender individuals.

The statement was defaced with an anti-gay slur, which upset Holmes' friend, a closeted gay student, when she discovered it.

"That made me want to take this further," Holmes said. "I saw someone in pain. If she didn't break down in front of me, this may never have happened."

When sociology faculty member Olga Tsoudis was alerted to the offensive alteration, she also found derogatory language directed toward women written among the entries on the board.

"That's not inclusion, that's not what this campus is about," Holmes said.

Holmes said she asked Tsoudis for help and they met with the campus Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance, a club that Tsoudis advises, and "I Am Human" was hit upon as the name for the awareness campaign.

"It kind of fit," Holmes said, because the campaign addresses every type of discrimination that people could identify with, including race, gender, sexual orientation, ageism and immigration status.

Michael Bartley, coordinator of marketing for EMCC, was among staff and administrators who became involved and helped develop campaign material.

"We let the students drive the show," he said. "They were driven not to let this opportunity slide by. They came up with the concept."

Students who have been subjected to offensive

language are featured on the campaign's posters that are used as campus-wide bulletin board postings that serve as a reminder to think before speaking.

Bartley said the posters were designed to be frank and confrontational by using some of the derogatory terms (many of which cannot be used in a newspaper).

There's also a website featuring a video with about a dozen students and faculty members talking about how language can be hurtful.

Holmes said the goal is not to become politically correct language police.

"I don't want to filter anyone," she said. "It's about being aware of what you say. What you say reflects back on you."

Members of the faculty have been encouraged to use the lessons in their classrooms, and campus counselors discuss the issues with students, Tsoudis said.

It's also being used in workshops offered to incoming students, Bartley said.

"Students come here to be safe, to be better citizens ... when you're confronted by horrible language, it can twist your values," he said.

Tsoudis said the campaign has become part of the campus culture and fits with the college's values of respect, integrity and diversity.

"I think it really impacted the students," she said.

Holmes, who graduated in May and works part-time at EMCC's academic affairs office, said she is pleased with how the campaign has developed.

"It just keeps getting bigger," she said.

Bartley said it's hoped that the campaign will grow past its first year to become a "continual force" on campus.

He noted that the issue goes beyond college settings.

"It's a problem that exists everywhere. We see it on the news every day," he said.

Bartley said the campaign has been the subject of about 20 workshops, including a presentation at a national convention for community college educators in Chicago.

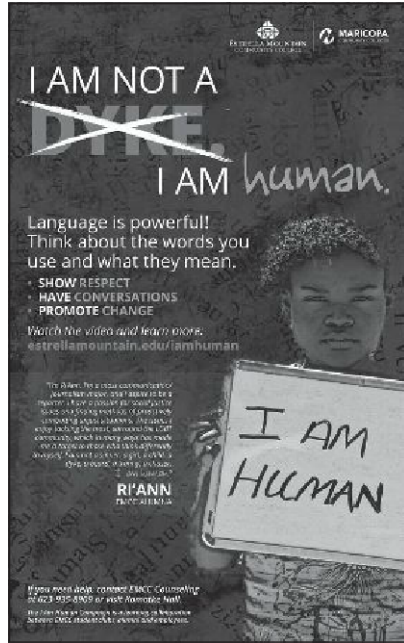
"We've gotten wonderful feedback," he said.

The effort has been recognized by the 11-campus Maricopa Community College system with awards for innovation and diversity, and Tsoudis said other schools have sought information about using the concept.

Beyond improving the discourse on campus, Tsoudis said the campaign has demonstrated to students that their ideas for improvements can become reality.

"It was good for the students to see that they can promote change," she said.

For information about the "I Am Human" campaign,



Submitted photo

RI'ANN HOLMES, an Estrella Mountain Community College student, is featured on a poster for the "I Am Human" campaign at the Avondale campus. Holmes helped launch the project last year after a statement she wrote on a campus display was defaced with an anti-gay slur.

visit www.estrellamountain.edu/iamhuman.

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EMCC awarded \$2.6 million federal grant

Funding over 5 years targeted toward Hispanic students

by Glenn Gullickson
staff writer

Hispanic students at Estrella Mountain Community College will benefit from programs created from a \$2.6 million federal grant the school will receive over the next five years.

The Placement, Pathways and Prevention grant funding will provide the Avondale-based college with \$524,437 for the first budget year beginning Oct. 1.

The funds will be used for programs that help Hispanic students and others complete courses and increase graduation rates, according to Rene Willekens, EMCC's dean of institutional research, who was involved in writing the grant application.

Willekens said last year's fall enrollment of 9,303 students included 4,477 Hispanics, or 48 percent of the student body, far more than the 25 percent needed for a college to qualify to apply for the grant.

The Hispanic students represent a growing portion of the student body, up from 33.8 percent 10 years ago, he said.

Willekens attributed the trend to an increasingly diverse population in the area served by the college.

But it's a group that needs help to achieve academic success, according to Rey Rivera, EMCC's vice president of learning.

Rivera noted that 77 percent of EMCC's Hispanic students are the first in their families to attend college, which means they lack examples of successful college students in their family to emulate.

"When you're first generation, all this is brand new," Rivera said.

Such students are helped by assigning advisers and mentors and directing them to a college success class, he said.

Rivera said 61 percent of students need one or more developmental education class in subjects such as reading, English

and math to prepare students for college classes.

To reduce that number, the grant will help fund "boot camps" and online resources so students can review background knowledge needed for a college class, he said.

Willekens said it's hoped the programs will help increase the two-year college's graduation rates.

He said 16 percent of first-time, full-time Hispanic students graduate within three years.

Of particular concern is the graduation rate for male Hispanic students, at 12 percent, Willekens said.

"Performance of male students is a national challenge as females tend to do better academically in college," he said.

The grant also provides up to \$200,000 for a scholarship endowment with the requirement that the college raise matching funds, Willekens said.

The administrators noted that all students have similar challenges and the programs the grant will fund have the potential of helping everyone attending EMCC, since anyone will be able to take advantage of them.

They said it's the third time EMCC has

been awarded the grant funded by the Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program and administered by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Post-secondary Education.

A five-year \$2.2 million grant awarded in 2001 was focused on STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education.

A \$2.8 million grant awarded in 2008 was used to help the school become a learning college and increase student engagement.

Willekens said EMCC has had increasing competition for the grant funds since more colleges are attracting enrollment from the Hispanic community.

Estrella Mountain Community College serves more than 14,000 students annually as one of 11 colleges in the Maricopa Community College system.

Glenn Gullickson can be reached at ggullickson@westvalleyview.com.

"When you're first generation, all this is brand new."

— Rey Rivera
EMCC vice president of learning



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