

Colleges aim to welcome minority students

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) - Gizelle Clemens' first day at Trinity College was a busy one. There were ice-breakers, and introductions to other minority students, upperclass mentors and administrators. Then came a bus tour of Hartford's ethnic neighborhoods, pointing out places students can go for a braided haircut or Latino music or a Jamaican dinner.

Clemens hopes to make all kinds of friends at Trinity, but she knows from her experience as a student of Caribbean ancestry at a mostly White boarding school that there will be times when she will crave the comfort of familiar company.

"Sometimes you don't want to be asked questions," said Clemens, whose family comes from St. Lucia and who grew up in Newark, N.J. "You just want them to understand you."

Trinity goes out of its way to help freshmen from minority groups feel comfortable, inviting them to campus a few days early to try to foster a sense of community they can fall back on — if needed — throughout col-

lege. But Trinity, like many other schools, is walking a fine line: It wants to avoid encouraging the kind of separatism that often leads Black and Hispanic students to sit apart from others in the cafeteria.

"We don't want you to be comfortable in your new friendships to the point where you don't go out and bring new people into your circle," was the parting advice of Karla Spurlock-Evans, the school's dean of multicultural affairs, at an introductory lunch for Trinity's PRIDE — "Promoting Respect for Inclusive Diversity in Education" — program.

As colleges around the country welcome freshmen, many organize activities — like camping and community service trips — to help students start college with at least a small group of friends they can build on. But there is also reluctance to emphasize particular groups over the broader community.

Two years ago, Williams College in Massachusetts stopped bringing minorities and athletes to campus early.

There are still some orientation events for minorities, but all students go through much the same program, designed to introduce them to neighbors and to the broader class.

At 2,188-student Trinity, Spurlock-Evans says a program like PRIDE does not prevent that kind of campus-wide bonding later in the week. But she says it is essential to show minorities the support they have.

"If you don't grab them in the first five weeks, they're gone," she says. "There would be no one to integrate if we didn't support them."

Nationally, 63 percent of students at four-year colleges complete their degrees, but only 46 percent of Blacks and 47 percent of Latinos do, according to a recent report by The Education Trust, a Washington-based nonprofit organization. At Trinity those rates are considerably better — 76 percent for Black students and 83 percent for Hispanics, while the rate for all students is 88 percent.

Social segregation is an issue here. The most recent Princeton Review survey of

students at 357 colleges ranked Trinity at the top of a survey of schools where campus life features "Little Race/Class Interaction."

Spurlock-Evans, who has worked at several other colleges, calls the survey and its methodology nonsense. But showing a visitor around the school's cafeteria, she acknowledges there is still separation. While one section is no longer called by some "Little Africa," students from various non-White ethnic groups still tend to congregate there, just as White students congregate across the way.

"I know it's human nature," she says. "Sometimes when you get comfortable, there's not the need to range beyond."

Minorities, she says, have no choice but to mix with other races, while Whites can segregate if so inclined. Increasingly, PRIDE is trying to draw in White students in the programs and discussions it runs throughout the year. All students, regardless of race, are assigned a PRIDE adviser.

But program leaders ac-

knowledge involving White students has been hard. When classes were canceled for a campus-wide "Dialogue Day" last year, 1,500 students showed up. But PRIDE leaders acknowledge that many came only on orders from their teachers and that some resented the race-centered conversation. Many upperclass PRIDE-mentors participate because their own PRIDE mentors helped them through tough times.

Sophomore Gonzalo Estupinan skipped the program as a freshman, wanting to stretch out his summer. But when he arrived, he had difficulty making friends and trouble with his studies. A PRIDE mentor saw him struggling in the library one night, pulled him aside and helped him turn things around.

"He taught me time man-

agement and other stuff. It was just the fact that he reached out to me where other students let me fend for myself," he says. "I think a lot of the reason I had trouble was because I didn't come to PRIDE."

Haron Atkinson, a Black recent Trinity graduate and now a post-graduate fellow in the college's office of multicultural affairs, says he had many meaningful friendships with White students here. But sometimes — after a day of money woes or an awkward glance on the quad — he needed the company of people who understood what it felt like to stand out.

"There were plenty of days when I just had the crappiest day ever and I could just come in and decompress for five to seven," he says. "Some days, that was the only thing that got me through."

Issues

(Continued from Page 1)

While Bush strategically tried to project a strong domestic agenda during the Republican convention last week, Kerry, attempted to play up his Vietnam war hero status at the Democratic National Convention, trying to show his ability to lead in war time. But Cummings says he and Caucus members will recommend that he stick with his strong points.

"I've just asked him to lay out his urban agenda. Since many of us in the Congressional Black Caucus had a lot to do with formulating that agenda, I want him to talk about it. He's got to talk about education, he's got to talk about Pell grants, he's got to talk about prescription drugs," Cummings says. "And he's got to connect with people and let them know that he understands what they're going through and that he wants to help."

Cummings had not confirmed the exact day and time for the meeting by NNPA deadline. But Kerry spokeswoman Divana Dolliole says Kerry has consistently met with African-American leaders throughout his campaign and would be glad to meet with those that Cummings designates, if his Sept. 11 schedule permits. The Congressional Black Caucus was the first group that Kerry met with after his nomination was confirmed last June.

At the CBC dinner, which attracts more than 1,500 people, Kerry will be speaking in front of his first predominately Black audience since July's Democratic National Convention, where he avoided specific mention of his large Black constituency. This got Cummings' attention.

"I think there's still an effort to try to, and a lot of politicians try to appeal to the center and they think that if they make an appeal for the African-American vote, it may cause them not to get, say for example, the White male who is a moderate conservative. So, sure it concerns me," Cummings says. "But at the same time, I realize that the main thing here is that he's got to win. I do believe his heart is in the right place. And I believe that when he becomes president, then he'll do the right thing."

Kerry spokeswoman Divana Dolliole says he is already doing the right thing. "Rest assured, John Kerry and (Vice presidential candidate) John Edwards recognize the power of the African-American vote and throughout this campaign, both John Kerry and John Edwards will continue to aggressively pursue the trust and the respect and support of the entire

African-American community," Dolliole says.

There is much at stake for the Democrats.

This year will be the first presidential election since Election 2000, when more than 1 million votes were not counted or not cast at all.

Cummings says he has also asked Kerry to warn African-Americans about conspiracies to block their vote.

"I think it is very important that African-American people hear from him that there are forces that are doing everything in their power to prevent African-Americans from voting and having their votes counted," Cummings says. He noted that much of the CBC conference brain trusts and forums will also address voting problems and how voting affects public policy. "What we're doing is trying to hook it up with the whole significance of voting."

Though Cummings speaks often with Kerry as an advisor to his campaign, Cummings and eight other CBC members initially endorsed former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean over Kerry as their Democratic choice for president.

"He's measured up and I think he's done pretty well," says Cummings. "He's just got to be very clear that he needs the African-American vote and he needs to be clear on what his agenda is for the African-American communities."

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(Continued from Page 5)
water boy."

Most Black Republicans are not as outspoken and are labeled sellouts.

"They get labeled as Uncle Tom, as sellouts, as someone who doesn't want to be a part of the community anymore," says Elroy Sailor, former deputy chief of staff for former Congressman J. C. Watts of Oklahoma. "I'm a principled man and I'm a Republican because you need to have strong Black men (on both sides)."

Sailor, the son of the atypical couple from Detroit, Clarence and Rev. Deanna Sailor, says Black Republicans are often placed in a no-win situation.

"I can't expect (Congressman) Harold Ford to defend Sen. (Robert) Byrd because he used to be a Ku Klux Klan wizard no more than I can defend (Supreme Court Justice) Clarence Thomas because of some of his positions that may not be to the best interest of the Black community," says Sailor, who, unlike his parents, is married to a mate of the same political persuasion.

His wife, Angela, is a former director of African-American Outreach in the public liaison office of the Bush White House.

Elroy Sailor's mother says she receives more grief from non-relatives like friends and co-workers.

"They talk about me so bad. They nail me up to the cross. They say, 'Do you know what you are doing?'"

She has her own retort:

"If you don't have a business, make it your business to leave my business alone."

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