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Talk aims to mend dialogue on race

■ A conference helps teach educators how to treat race honestly and without learned stereotypes

By Serena Markstrom
 Oregon Daily Emerald

In a proactive effort to address increasing diversity in the United States, the college of education launched Wednesday the initial forum of what will soon become the Institute for Leadership and Diversity Issues in Education.

In the two-day conference that began in the Gerlinger Lounge, more than 100 administrators, superintendents and teachers from around the state tackled issues of race and how to incorporate it into classrooms.

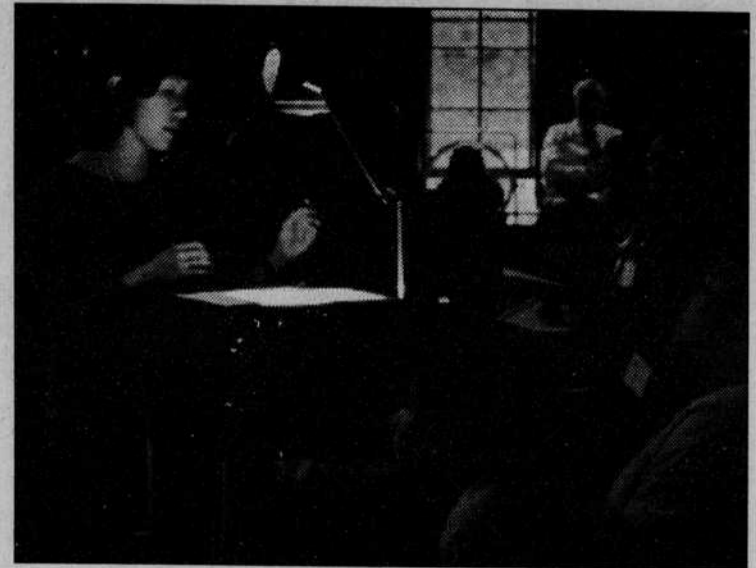
Mia Tuan, a University sociology professor who guided the keynote address, presented the question "Why is it difficult to talk about race?"

Tuan began her presentation with facts. By the year 2050, she said, the United States will only be about 50 percent white. One of the first places this demographic change will be felt in educational settings.

"Big cities are leading the way, but Oregon is no exception," Tuan said.

The fastest growing minority group in Oregon is Latino/as. By the year 2012, high school classrooms will be 19 percent Latino/a and 70 percent white, down from 89 percent in 1996, according to statistics from the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

Stating that reckoning with and discussing race is a lifelong process, Tuan said she hoped the conference would open a dialog. "There's no silver bullet,"



Mia Tuan, a University sociology professor, speaks during the initial forum of what will soon become the Institute for Leadership and Diversity Issues in Education.

Tuan said of being able to effectively talk about race and racism. Tuan showed part of the film "Skin Deep," which is a documentary about college students from diverse backgrounds talking honestly about race.

Thursday's participants began to work on being open with race in Kesho Scott's interactive workshop. Scott, a professor of American studies at Grinnell College in Iowa, has been giving diversity workshops for 16 years.

Sitting was not an option as Scott kept participants moving with role-playing demonstrations, jogging in place and sitting backwards in chairs.

Throughout the three-hour workshop, Scott also had participants lean to the left to illustrate the sense of discomfort necessary in relearning how to think about race, society and each person's role in it.

The purpose of the conference

was to aid educators in serving their communities by not teaching some of the "isms" they learned. When adults are uncomfortable because of their lack of multicultural experience, Scott said, children know.

"Isms" that divide and isolate people are based on misinformation and can cause distortion in how people see their own lives and the lives of others, Scott said. She added that "isms" are societal constructions, and each person internalizes the "isms" that operate against him or her.

The philosophy behind beginning this discussion now, event director Phil McCullum said, is to set up a state-wide network of educators to share ideas and contribute to each other's progress.

"Oregon is really on the front end," McCullum said. "Usually you have a workshop like this after you have [an isolated] problem."

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