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Women's leadership conference empowers many

BY LISA EGBRECHT | JUNE 10, 2010 7:30 AM

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University of Iowa senior Natalie Berto huddled with her fellow participants, or in this case "colleagues," to make a few last-minute adjustments to their presentation.

Three legislators were waiting to hear their pitch for enacting a raise in the payroll tax that would be used to help offset student-loan debt.

Of course, Berto is a UI senior, her colleagues were people she only met this past week, and the legislators were just another three guests at the third-annual Iowa National Education for Women's Leadership series held at the University of Iowa.

Berto joined three dozen college women at the six-day program, created by the Center for American Women and Politics in 2007, to develop into the next generation of women leaders.

"Research shows that women need more encouragement to take leadership roles instead of nurturing roles," said Diane Bystrom, a guest at the event and the director of the Carrie Chapman Catt Center for Women and Politics at Iowa State University.

"[Through the program], women from various walks of life are given tools to go on and become leaders in their chosen careers and their communities."

Through a series of meetings, speakers, and workshops similar to Berto's payroll-tax pitch, attendees were confronted with some discouraging realities.

Of the 100 representatives in the Iowa Legislature, only 37 are women. There are only six woman governors in the country, and Iowa is just one of four states to have never sent a woman to Congress.

"You have to be fighting the norm," said the event's keynote speaker, Northern New Mexico College President Nancy "Rusty" Barcelo. "If the new norm looks like the old norm, then what have we accomplished and who will change the system?"

UI sophomore Conner Spinks told Barcelo that because she is black and a woman, she is continually questioning why she would want to seek a leadership role in society.

"It's important that you're aware of it," Barcelo said. "Don't try to change attitudes, but stay strong, because it does pay off."

Beyond a week of impressive speakers such as Barcelo, one UI senior said she was most impressed by her fellow participants.

"All the participants were very intelligent women who were into activism and held mature conversations," the student, Jill Kacere, said. "I felt that it was a very comfortable and safe environment already on the second day."

Kacere, who heard about the program through word of mouth, said the program inspired her.

"This whole thing has been very powerful, especially the idea of women working together for the same cause," she said.

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