

April 4, 2008

All groups must reach across racial divides, researcher says

By Will Brown

DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

Last year Florida State University professor Janice McCabe presented a study examining race and how undergraduate friendships form. With segregation prohibited and other legislation outlawing discrimination, McCabe concluded that friendship — and how undergraduates select their friends — is unconscious but also leaves the possibility for covert racism.

She studied a university in the Midwest where 85 percent of students were white, 4 percent black and 2 percent Latino. Tallahassee's two universities may be more diverse than what McCabe studied, but there are parallels.

"It seems like our society puts it to blacks and Latinos to reach out to the majority culture," McCabe said. "That, I think, is misguided. I think it's also up to whites to reach across those racial divides."

Sociologists like McCabe discuss individual and institutionalized racism. They note that it's easier for people to spot individual racists, but not the greater institutionalized racism that social scientists are able to observe.

McCabe said an important aspect regarding cross-cultural relations is creating a positive learning environment where people are able to talk about race without finger pointing. She said the Mayor's Summit on Race, Culture and Human Relations later this month would be such a setting.

"Dialogues are important because stereotypes are a way people make sense of the world," McCabe said. "Without knowing people or specifics, we react to them as if they were a stereotype. Once students had more opportunities to interact with students who were different than them, they often saw the commonalities that united them. But, the differences are easier to spot than the commonalities."