A new summer writing program at the University of Illinois at Chicago will mentor African-American adolescent girls while giving researchers insights into the resources, practices, and spaces needed to improve literacy outcomes in schools.

The first African American Adolescent Female Summer Literacy Institute will meet Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons from June 29 through July 29 at the UIC College of Education.

Fifteen students ages 11 through 17 were selected from 135 applicants from 24 Chicago-area schools after a review of their writing samples on subjects like bonding among African-American girls, challenging stereotypes and media images, speaking up for themselves, and setting a good example.

The students will be assigned a reading list of 14 books by or about African-American women, including novels, short stories, poetry, autobiographies, self-help and children's books. Among the authors they will study are Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange and Sister Souljah.

The students will also read lyrics from popular music and scripts from television and movies such as "Precious," "The Color Purple," and "Imitation of Life."

Chicago-area African-American women writers will visit the class each week as role models and mentors.

"The goal is to create a safe, culturally relevant, collaborative writing environment that can help us understand how they make and apply meaning to various forms of literacy," said Lynette Danley, UIC visiting assistant professor of curriculum and instruction.

"We chose central themes of identity and culture, resiliency, advocacy and activism, and solidarity as a result of our research into how and why African-American girls and women have written historically," Danley said.

Danley organized the program with education doctoral student Gholdy Muhammed after considering her own experience as a Chicago Public Schools student.

"Returning after 20 years, I have found that many black girls are experiencing many of the challenges that I did," she said. "It’s important for us to know what elements outside of school impact their academic performance."

Students will be assessed at the beginning of the workshop and again at its conclusion through focus groups and individual interviews. They will write at each session and will critique each others' work, learn syntax, and study "mentor texts," or outstanding examples of an individual genre, style or theme.
The UIC Reading Clinic plans to offer the workshop annually, Danley said.

UIC ranks among the nation's leading research universities and is Chicago's largest university with 26,000 students, 12,000 faculty and staff, 15 colleges and the state's major public medical center. A hallmark of the campus is the Great Cities Commitment, through which UIC faculty, students and staff engage with community, corporate, foundation and government partners in hundreds of programs to improve the quality of life in metropolitan areas around the world.

For more information about UIC, please visit www.uic.edu.

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