

## **Tulane, McMain students find common ground**

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newwave@tulane.edu

This semester, a cohort of 10 Tulane University students had the chance to engage more critically with their adopted city and understand more clearly how their personal stories fit into the city's mosaic of social history ? all while going back to high school.



Tulane senior Philip Herman, left, and McMain junior Gernine Dorsey lead a group discussion at a class symposium. (Photo by Ryan Rivet)

The course, *Makers and Motivations: Culture and Organizing Histories in New Orleans*, which was co-taught by Tulane humanities fellow Catherine Michna, author and community organizer Kalamu Ya Salaam and veteran English teacher Jim Randels, integrated the students into a *Students at the Center* course at nearby Eleanor McMain Secondary School. Tulane and McMain students alike received the task of examining and articulating both their identity and how that identity fits into the context of New Orleans.

*Students at the Center* is an independent program within public schools that gives students tools to build knowledge based on the experiences they already have.

The course, which culminated on May 7 with an evening symposium and screening

of a student-made documentary video, featured appearances by such New Orleans cultural legacies as Free Southern Theater founder John O'Neal, freedom rider Doratha Smith-Simmons and Kumbuka African Drum Circle director Ausetta Amor Amenkum.

This class expanded on the traditional model of community service, requiring mutual understanding as a necessary and productive first step to community engagement. Tulane and McMain students were given the same projects, critiqued each other's work, and operated in a space of trust and equal footing that guided them in finding common ground.

Michna notes the students' widely differing backgrounds. “[They] were in a room together, and that in and of itself was a completely new experience for everyone in the room. They shared with each other, and the knowledge just got deeper and deeper.”

The course was sponsored by Tulane's New Orleans Center for the Gulf South.

*Cody Wild is a Tulane junior majoring in economics and Middle Eastern studies.*