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Celebrating and Building Our Successes, One Brick at a Time: Lessons Learned From Firsts at a 21st Century Predominantly White University

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Abstract

This session captures opportunities, challenges, and celebrations in the recruitment, retention, and induction of persons of color throughout the higher education spectrum. Doctoral students, junior and senior faculty will share first person accounts of their journey. Each of the individuals represents a specific first in their discipline, program, or department.

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Two of the most important adult decisions that one makes during a lifetime involves choices related to: (1) if and where one wishes to pursue and complete a postsecondary degree (at all levels) and, (2) where one chooses to work after the completion of the degree. For persons of color in higher education, although the choices are greater and more diverse than ever, often the decisions made directly or indirectly affect both the university and community, at large. In almost all academic disciplines, the completion of a terminal degree by a person of color and the hiring of a Ph. D., who is a person of color for a position at an institution, may represent a *first* for that program, that discipline, that department, that college, or in a few cases, that university.

In the state of Florida, as in the case of many southern states, historically, opportunities to attend or to be employed at predominantly white institutions have not always been

present. Upon completion of a terminal degree (usually at an Eastern University), recipients would often seek employment at one of the several predominantly Black institutions in the state. It was also common practice for individuals wishing to seek an advance degree (if the program was not offered at one of the historically Black institutions), the state again would support the candidate monetarily at another institution outside of the state until the degree was successfully completed (prior to the 1960s).

The University of Central Florida, whose main campus is in Orlando, FL, is by all accounts, a relatively new 21st Century university. Chartered in 1963, with the enrolling of its first class of students in 1968, the university represents one of the fastest growing universities in the state university system (University of Central Florida, Office of Institutional Research, 2002). Of the 36,000 students currently enrolled, demographic profile indicates that 70% of the students self-identify as white, while 10% self-identify as Hispanic, and less than 8% self-identify as African American.

The university has a full-time teaching faculty of slightly less than 1000, with slightly less than 8% self-identifying as African-American. In the history of the university, only one African American female has achieved the rank of Professor; two African American males have achieved the rank of Professor-all three within the last two years.

Because of its explosive growth, it has the unique opportunity to create its own history and traditions. Coupled with the retirement of faculty throughout the university and the need for more faculty throughout the university and especially in the College of Education, it has become glaringly significant in the tremendous need for faculty and students of color at all levels.

The *first hand* accounts rendered by individuals in this story are not new. But the newness of the institution present a unique opportunity for its faculty, staff, and students to assist in shaping its history. In this presentation, presenters look at the whole of the higher education experience through their lenses. Several themes that will be raised relate to: (1) the manner in which they are perceived at their institutions, (2) their perceptions of campus cultural climate, (3) the need for mentorships at all levels, (4) overcoming the isolation, (5) creative ways in staying connected to the community at large; (6) their efforts toward establishing culturally relevant research agendas; (7) lessons learned; and, (8) opportunities to *celebrate our successes!* Further, it is the intent that this presentation may serve as a useful tool for individuals seeking to begin or continue conversations related to diversity on predominantly white campuses throughout the spectrum.

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Presenters

Martha Scott Lue is a professor in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of Central Florida. She is the first African-American woman in the history of the university to achieve that rank. She is the author of numerous articles, and has recently published a textbook, *A Survey of Communication Disorders for the Classroom Teacher* (Allyn & Bacon). A former speech-language pathologist, she has devoted much of her more recent work to the study of domestic diversity, overrepresentation of students of color in special education programs, and the need for more students of color to enter the teaching profession.

Gwendolyn M. Ellison achieved both her undergraduate and graduate degrees from a predominantly white university. She is currently employed as a teacher of students with exceptionalities at a local high school.

Cheryl Green is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work. She was the first faculty of color hired in that department. She has served as an Assistant Dean, a Clinical Experiences Supervisor, and undergraduate Advisor. The University recently cited her as outstanding teacher in the College of Health and Public Affairs. Her research interest includes families and communities of color.

Roslyn Howard is a Cultural Anthropologist in the College of Arts and Sciences. She is the first hired of any race or ethnic group in that position. Her research interest includes the relationship between language and culture. This is her second year at the University.

Monika W. Shealey and **Jamia Thomas-Richmond** are doctoral students in the exceptional education teaching program in the College of Education. Both have served as public school teachers of students with disabilities. Upon successfully completing the

Ph.D., they will become the first African-American scholars to complete the degree in this discipline at our university.