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Building an Interdisciplinary Academic Center: Opportunities and Illusions

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Building an Interdisciplinary Academic Center: Opportunities and Illusions

Abstract

This presentation will discuss the personal opportunities available to people of color to build university-wide interdisciplinary centers and the obstacles inherent in doing so. Professor Smith will discuss the opportunities and obstacles involved in working with faculty members, department chairs, and deans to accomplish an interdisciplinary mission.

Pamela J. Smith

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As the inaugural Executive Director of an interdisciplinary, university-wide center, I am certain I have also had experiences that many of my Black colleagues lack. I have had ready access to four deans and the opportunity to interact with faculty members from four academic departments, as well as many others. On the surface, this would appear to be an excellent success, with a Black woman running a new and important Center. While I received the appointment as Executive Director with pride and hope, this hope was eroded fairly quickly and consistently. I realized fairly quickly by many direct and indirect words, that my institution was not quite ready for an African-American female to run such a center, especially if doing so involved working with four dean and uncertain faculty members. As the job description was written, I had no real authority. I was also treated with utter disregard by many of the deans. Despite numerous written and oral requests for support, support was rarely given. Despite a very successful symposium in 2002, my efforts were not recognized or appreciated. Proposals were ignored. Important infrastructure documents were forgotten. Budgets were sent numerous times to deans who would forget to read them. Meetings were scheduled, with the knowledge and agreement of all deans, but then missed by deans or, even worse, other things were scheduled in their place. Any efforts to actually run a center were met with apathy.

As a result, I resigned on June 10, 2003 (effective December 31, 2003), after less than two years on the job. Through this talk, I will assess the real opportunity that is presented to build interdisciplinary centers and perhaps a test for people of color to use to ascertain whether they are presented with a true opportunity or an illusion of an opportunity. Being able to ascertain true opportunity from an illusion of opportunity is important because many people of color, especially Black faculty members, complain about a failure to support, a failure to mentor, and a failure to incorporate them into their environment. ..all of which are crucial in order to build and run an interdisciplinary center.

Pamela J. Smith is an Associate Professor of Law (with tenure) at the University of Missouri-Columbia School of Law. She is also the Executive Director of the University of Missouri-Columbia Center for Digital Globe (CDiG). She teaches Software Law, Cyberspace Law, Patent Law, and the Digital Divide. In 1998, Professor Smith became a 1998 Visiting Law Fellow at St. Hilda's College of Oxford University, spending the trinity term of 1998 in Oxford. In 1998 she

was also selected as a Visiting Fellow at Durham University (England). In 2000, Professor Smith was selected as a Fulbright Lecturer. She was hosted by Renmin (People's) University of China in Beijing, China. At Renmin University's School of Law, she taught Chinese students U.S. Intellectual Property Law, Patent Law, Software Law, and Cyberspace Law. During this same period of time, Professor Smith taught Chinese lawyers and judges Tort Law, Software Law and Cyberspace Law, as part of Temple University's joint international LLM program with China University. In the Fall of 2001, she joined the law faculty of the University of Missouri-Columbia as part of an interdisciplinary E-commerce Initiative. She became the CDiG Executive Director in January 2001.