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## KONBIT: A Model for Bringing Campus and Community Together to Serve an Immigrant Population

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# KONBIT: A Model for Bringing Campus and Community Together to Serve an Immigrant Population

## Abstract

*Immigrant social work students and alumni bring a special interest in sensitizing the university community to the problems and needs of their group. KONBIT (gathering) is the Haitian way of calling people together to discuss an issue. This presentation describes the process and outcome of such a gathering.*

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Professional schools of social work bear a special responsibility to teach students to serve immigrant communities that are oppressed and in need. Additionally, schools of social work seek to train practitioners who represent those communities and who can return to provide the services needed to assist in the development of healthy individuals, families and groups within the community.

To recruit, train and retain such students, schools of social work must seek ways to help the larger university to understand the community from which these students come. Additionally it should allow these students to gain important experience through professional development as a part of the school's on-going responsibility to students and community.

Although social work's image is one of multiculturalism and inclusion, over three-quarters of the profession remains white (Gilberman & Schervish, 1997). Black students, both native and foreign-born indicate the importance of professional development in both recruitment and retention (Bowie & Hancock, 2000; Oliver & Brown, 1988). One school of social work at a small Catholic university located in a multi-ethnic metropolitan area of five million persons has sought to increase its responsibility to serve one immigrant community by increasing the number of recruited and retained students from that community.

Since the middle 1970s, the population of immigrants from Haiti has increased with large communities located in several eastern and southern American cities (Laguerre, 1998). Haitian culture is unfamiliar to many non-Haitians and these immigrants have found difficulty in the process of assimilation and acculturation. Cultural aspects such as language (Haitian *Kreyol*), color, history, customs and traditions all serve to exacerbate these difficulties. Providing a vehicle for sensitizing non-Haitians to Haitian culture assists both immigrant students, professionals and non-Haitians in the improvement of service to the community.

This presentation will describe the process and outcome of the development of a

*KONBIT* which in *Kreyol*) means" a gathering." A group of Haitian and Haitian-American students and alumni, together with faculty from the School of Social Work, developed and delivered a day-long, professional development, cultural immersion conference that served to enlighten the university community, enhance understanding between this immigrant group and other groups in the university. Also the activity served to enhance the visibility and professional development of the students and alumni, thus serving to increase the probability of retention and graduation of Haitian professional social workers who will further serve their community.

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## Presenters

**Walter J. Pierce** is a tenured Associate Professor of Social Work at Barry University School of Social Work. He teaches social welfare policy and social work practice methods courses. Professor Pierce is a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer having served in Colombia. His research interests are in ethnic- sensitive social work practice. He has published groundbreaking articles on practice with Haitian families.

**Sharon Singleton-Bowie** is a tenured Associate Professor of Social Work School of Social Work. She teaches human behavior and social work practice methods courses. Professor Singleton-Bowie is a tireless researcher with publications on mental health research and is currently working on a study of the use of the black church in adoption practice.

**B.J. Bryson** is an Associate Professor of Social Work at Barry University School of Social Work. Professor Bryson teaches research, social work practice methods, as well as, elective courses in domestic violence and HIV-AIDS. Her research interests are in black feminism and multicultural social work practice.