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## Gator Launch: Developing a Minority Career-Mentoring Program

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# **Gator Launch: Developing a Minority Career-Mentoring Program**

## **Abstract**

*Retaining minority students on college campuses is an important factor for maintaining the rich diversity of a university student body. This session will provide a look at the development of a career-mentoring program for minority college students to enhance retention and career success beyond graduation.*

## **Shanaz Ali Sawyer, M.S.**

Assistant Director for Diversity Programs, Career Resource Center, University of Florida

## **Lisa Severy, Ed.S.**

LMHC, Assistant Director for Graduate Programs, Career Resource Center, University of Florida

Retaining students is an important factor in maintaining the rich diversity of a university student body. While research indicates students who are exposed to a career mentoring program will have a valuable experience, college campuses across the nation show low utilization of such campus services, particularly by minorities. In fact, a 1989 NCDA survey by Brown et al., demonstrated that African Americans reported needing the most assistance with making career decisions. The purpose of this survey was to gather information about the perception of minorities regarding various aspects of their career planning, utilization of occupational information and work-life. According to Murry, 1993, "African American and Latino/Hispanic students need examples of success stories so they are able to conceptualize the success of their educational and occupational goals." While existing minority-mentoring programs on university campuses focus on academic and personal development, none could be found that has a focus solely on career development. Thus, the mission of a minority career-mentoring program is to facilitate enhancement of the career development process of minority students via mentoring relationships with working professionals in similar fields of interest.

Through the definition of career goals, a strong mentoring relationship and exposure to the world of work, such a program aims to increase minority student retention in academic programs for continued career success beyond graduation. This process is twofold: first, a mentoring relationship is facilitated between students in the program matched with working professionals in similar professional fields of interest. Participating students have frequent, proactive contact with their mentor as well as exposure to the workplace environment. Mentors are also required to apply and their function includes providing practical career development and personal assistance to their mentees. The mentor serves as role model in the student's field of interest and must commit to frequent meetings with their student to help develop realistic career goals and expectations. Second, the students are supported in their career development through regular seminars with career services staff to explore interests, personality, skills, values, lifestyle preferences as well as career-decision making strategies in vocational, academic and job selection. The goal is to help the students close the gap between academia and the

world of work by developing knowledge of the career decision-making process, learning how to develop and maintain relationships with professionals, accessing practical knowledge of their fields of interest, becoming familiar with issues specific to minorities in the work place and ultimately developing a healthy confidence regarding their career decision-making. Both students and mentors are required to document their meetings and experiences in the program.

Since only those students ready to commit to the requirements will experience the benefits of this program, the application process is quite involved. Students must demonstrate a clear desire and maturity to begin an extensive career exploration and use of career resource center services; be willing to form a relationship with a professional; show frustration with their future career opportunities or show that their academic performance may be enhanced by a clearer goal for the future and interaction with a professional role model.

Participants in this presentation may expect to learn about various facets of the program, including:

- A history and theoretical basis for this program development with respect to retention of minority students.
- Criteria for selection of students and mentors.
- Recruitment of students and mentors.
- Guidelines for student and mentor involvement in the program.
- Career-development seminar curriculum.
- Program activities.
- Benefits to the students in the program.
- Follow-up procedures and program evaluations to assess retention.

## References

Brown, D., Minor, C. W., Jepsen, D.A., (1989) NCDA Survey Results: The Opinions of Minorities About Preparing for Work: Report of the Second NCDA National Survey. "Career Development Quarterly," 40, Spring 1991.

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## Presenters

**Shanaz A. Sawyer, M.S.**, is the Assistant Director for Diversity Programs in the Career Resource Center at the University of Florida. She received her Masters degree in Mental Health counseling from Nova Southeastern University in 1996 and is currently pursuing a doctorate in Counselor Education at the University of Florida. Her areas of study and work include minority career issues, international student career issues and counselor education. In addition to providing career counseling for students, she teaches courses in career planning and job search strategies. In her position, Shanaz developed a minority career-mentoring program called Gator Launch, which kicked off in the Spring of 2001. She also co-organized the Cultural Diversity Reception at two major career fairs each year for employers and diverse student groups. In 2000 Shanaz was awarded University of Florida Presidential Recognition for her contribution as a graduate student and the

University of Florida Career Resource Center Multicultural Award. Shanaz is a member of the American Counseling Association (ACA), the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), the National Career Development Association (NCDA) and the American Mental Health Counselor Association (AMHCA). Shanaz is a Registered Mental Health Counselor Intern in the State of Florida.

**Lisa Severy, Ed.S., NCC, LMHC** has been a Career Counselor at the University of Florida for the past five years. In that time she has served as the Assistant Director for Diversity Programs and the Assistant Director for Graduate Services. She is an advisor for Mortar Board National Senior Honor Society and a mentor for the Reitz Scholar Program. As one of the CRE's professional counselors, Lisa provides individual counseling, group counseling and workshops for UP's diverse student population. Lisa has degrees from Indiana University and the University of Florida. She is a National Certified Counselor and a Licensed Mental Health Counselor in Florida. She is a member of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the American Counseling Association (ACA) as well as the National Career Development Association (NCDA). In 1998 she received the Outstanding Practitioner and Supervisor of the year from Chi Sigma Iota, International Counseling and Academic Honorary, awarded at the ACA National Conference in San Diego. In 2001, Lisa and her colleagues Shanaz Sawyer and Carlos Hernandez were awarded the NACE Award for Excellence in Educational Programming. Lisa has presented numerous programs at national professional conferences on topics ranging from the University of Florida's Cultural Diversity Reception to Peer Career Counseling to Postmodern Career Developing and Narrative Career Counseling.