

Negotiating the Path: The NCSSSMST Pre-Conference Symposium — A Milestone on Our Journey

By Letita Mason, North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics

Editor's Note: This is the third installment of Negotiating the Path, coordinated by Letita Mason. The Fall 2010 issue of The NCSSSMST Journal will be dedicated to diversity and inclusion. Ideas for the fall issue and for future columns, contributions, and feedback may be sent to her at masonl@ncssm.edu.

The 2010 NCSSSMST Pre-Conference Symposium in Nashville, *Diversity: Negotiating the Path*, was the culmination of initiatives begun two years ago by the Diversity Committee of the NCSSSMST Board. Inspired by the ground-breaking campaigns of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, members recognized within each candidate a symbolic example of what we ultimately hope to achieve: a nation that is strengthened and globally competitive because we are closing the achievement gap that disproportionately impacts women and minority youth. The Symposium marked a significant milestone toward achieving that vision.

The focus of the Symposium was on ensuring that Consortium members remain at the forefront of increasing diversity in STEM fields. Building on sessions from past conferences, the committee wanted to increase opportunities for member school professionals to interact.

Framing the Discussion

Dr. Joseph Whittaker, Dean of Computer, Mathematical and Natural Sciences at Morgan State University in Baltimore, and President-elect of the Sigma Xi Scientific Research Society, keyed the Symposium.

Morgan State University, an HBCU with a pool of highly talented minority students, is partnering with Johns Hopkins University to ensure that a pipeline of under-represented students is prepared for graduate study. Whittaker's work on behalf of African-American males has led to an increase in the number of MSU students accepted into the Johns Hopkins medical school.

Dr. Whittaker outlined his approach for developing partnerships that bring about greater inclusion and diversity in STEM career programs. "There are no minorities in the applicant pool" is used as a default argument to justify lack of student diversity, he said. He offered the following in response to the resignation many educators express related to diversity initiatives.

- Programs are unlikely to admit and graduate minority students unless a proactive stance is taken.
- Do SAT's & GRE's accurately predict minority student success or do they simply fall in line with traditional guidelines for enrollment that translate into traditional populations being enrolled?
- Programs need to match admissions criteria with the credentials needed for success.
- Programs have to recruit where there are significant pools of minority students.

Dismantling & Deconstructing

According to Dr. Forrest Toms, Professor of Leadership Studies at North Carolina A&T University and President/CEO of Training Research Development, Inc., reframing the discussion around shared community and national interests helps redirect conversations in ways that support increased diversity, inclusion, and equity. Negotiating the path toward diversity and inclusion can be a trail littered with minefields that must be delicately dismantled.

We bring our own cultural and contextual mores to the task of diversity training. Exploring and understanding our individual points of reference help foster an environment of acceptance, awareness,



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and understanding, thereby yielding greater cooperation among stakeholders.

Toms provided a framework for approaching diversity issues that results in productive and sustainable outcomes. Diversity workshops are best undertaken with participants having identified their personal belief system, ideas and ideals, assumptions, actions, and values.

From Intention to Action

Dr. Al Church is Principal and CEO of the Academy for Math, Engineering & Science (AMES) in Salt Lake City, which serves nine diverse school districts and a charter school.

AMES employs admissions criteria targeted at increasing the number of underserved ethnic minority and female students pursuing course work, advanced study, and possible STEM careers. It is an active member of the Utah and national Mathematics Engineering Science Achievement (MESA) network, a curriculum partnership that provides leadership, vision, and advocacy so that all students have educational opportunities designed to meet their potential and achieve competency.

Church discussed the leadership role in changing power dynamics, described the challenges leaders face when championing change, and the positive benefits reaped when change works.

Recruitment, Retention and Research

Dr. George Hill is Professor of Microbiology and Immunology and Associate Dean for Diversity in Medical Education at the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine. Hill has a strong record of creating opportunity and access in STEM education as chair of the National Science Foundation Committee for Equal Opportunity in Science and Engineering and has been recognized as a Giant in Science by Quality Education for Minorities.

Hill asserts the importance of looking beyond traditional measures for recruitment and retention. He works in partnership with two local Nashville HBCU's, Fisk University and Meharry Medical College, to cultivate the talent of minority students.



From left to right: Will Perkins, Dr. George C. Hill, Dr. Al Church, Dr. Joseph A. Whittaker, Dr. Forrest Toms, and Tanya Vickers.

Will Perkins, Director of the Center for Precollege Programs at the Missouri University of Science and Technology, emphasized the role that precollege programs play in providing sustainable educational enrichment for under-represented students. Perkins proposed that inclusion of targeted populations in STEM-related programs helps students develop a curiosity about the world around them.

Tanya Vickers, Research Coordinator at AMES, demonstrated fun and engaging ways to peak student interest in research. By encouraging students to consider concepts within their realm of experience, Vickers crafts research projects from seemingly random student interests such as baseball, swimming, and differences in hearing among males and females.

Congratulations

The committee was inspired in its work when Plenary Session keynote speaker Jennifer Harper-Taylor, then Vice-President of the Siemens Foundation, was announced as their new President and CEO. Congratulations Ms. Harper-Taylor for your exemplary leadership in promoting research, scholarship, and diversity within STEM fields. We also salute the Siemens Foundation for demonstrating visionary leadership in breaking down barriers to diversity and inclusion.