



Acceptance of the AIR Sidney Suslow Scholar Award

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Dear AIR Colleagues and Friends,

I accept the AIR Sidney Suslow Scholar Award with deep appreciation and humility. I was surprised and moved when I received an email about the award (rather than a call on the dusty relic of a phone that sits in my seldom-used office in this pandemic). This award is deeply meaningful to me because I go about my work (like many others), addressing higher education research issues, promoting equity and inclusion, and teaching future educators but am mostly unaware if anyone is “listening,” reading, or taking note. First, I am grateful to learn that there are folks in higher education doing just that and perhaps even making use of my work. I am especially pleased that many of these are institutional researchers assisting campus leaders in important decisions where it counts most in terms of organizational change and diverse student success. I suppose I am also surprised because I recall well-known scholars in higher education received this award--and well, am I really the first scholar of color? At UCLA, Bob Pace and Sandy Astin (my former advisor) had won the award when I was a graduate student and postdoc. Three colleagues at the University of Michigan (Marvin Peterson, Joan Stark, and Steve Desjardins) won the award, where I began my career as an assistant professor. I thought only icons in the field received this award, but perhaps enough years have passed (30 fast years to be exact). This award says that I am now far enough along in my career to be considered iconic (or a relic), and I know I have a few fans at conferences. I am grateful to those fans and friends who nominated me for this award.

Without a doubt, the Association and its Annual Forums played a critical role in not only my research and professional development but also many of my students—at least four of whom went from the doctorate or postdoc in higher education to successful institutional research careers. When I first arrived at the University of Michigan, it was customary for several of the faculty to take their research teams to AIR, and so I began to do the same and it became an annual event. The main reason, believe it or not, had much to do with timing of the AIR forum. Unlike other higher education conferences, proposals for presentation at the Annual Forum were due just after the academic term began, which meant that I could incorporate new doctoral students into the process of developing a proposal for a research project with the goal of producing a paper by the annual conference in June. This is how many of my 51 doctoral graduates began their studies, submitting AIR proposals and conducting research on a fixed deadline. Students initially felt overwhelmed by this “AIR baptism” into research but excited, and advanced doctoral students took joy in watching the initiation of novices. A second important timing factor was that the 45-minute presentation format was ideal for members of the team to each play a role in presenting the paper, including advanced doctoral, first year, and even undergraduate research assistants. After practicing in our hotel room and delivering the actual presentation, we could celebrate our accomplishments in a nice location each year. For many students of color, it was the first time they had presented at a national conference and traveled out of the state. An added benefit, up until a

decade ago, was when *Research in Higher Education* published the Forum Issue: We could submit our paper at the conference and receive blind peer reviews in a short time frame. That was due to John Smart's acumen and efficiency as editor of the journal. We found ourselves in the pages of a journal not long after presentation of the study, an advantage not only for me as an assistant professor but also for 17 of my former students who are now recognized scholars in higher education. At least 10 of my research teams' publications began as Forum presentations, with AIR members as our first audience.

Another added benefit of the Forum was that I was introduced to European AIR (EAIR) and had memorable encounters with scholars from abroad who came to my AIR sessions in U.S. cities. This led to international travel and invitations to present at the University of Barcelona (Spain) to advise in starting student data collection, and an invitation to the International Mixed Methods conference in Leeds (UK) that determined a pivotal direction in transitioning from survey research to case studies of institutions, which I conduct today.

In transitioning from Michigan to UCLA, as Director of the Higher Education Research Institute, my membership in AIR served that role well, as IR offices were central contacts for survey operations. When I first arrived at UCLA, the AIR Forum was not yet a tradition but I like to think that I made it so. In over a decade of my work as Director of HERI (2004-2015), I encouraged staff to attend AIR and continued to take my research teams to annual meetings with new data collections and projects. This increased UCLA attendance at AIR and established an expectation in the higher education program that all students would engage in research and present at a national conference early in their doctoral career. I credit my learning at AIR in my work now as Special Advisor to the UCLA Chancellor on becoming a Hispanic-Serving Institution, which makes great use of institutional data to lay the groundwork for developing a laser focus on closing equity gaps on the campus. AIR and the Forum had an impact on me, and in turn, allowed me to have an impact on others. I am grateful to have had this opportunity to share my story and my students' research success that is linked with AIR and the Annual Forum. Thank you for this award. It is a recognition of our mutual learning and impact on each other, as well as our role in advancing scholarship in the field of higher education.

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