

Minority College Presidents Share Their Stories

by Arelis Hernandez, June 4, 2010

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. – Dr. Bob Suzuki was a content assistant professor of engineering at the University of Southern California in the late 1960s who wanted nothing more than tenure. But then all hell broke loose.

Suzuki found himself enveloped in the civil rights struggles of the era, organizing with local community groups and becoming a social activist himself.

It was then that Suzuki understood that the traditional professorial track would not satisfy his ambitions and the thirst for social activism he developed.

“I wasn’t doing research so I reached a point after four years that I needed to make a decision,” Suzuki said during a roundtable discussion of university presidents at the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education (NCORE). “I decided I couldn’t drop the social activism and it changed the course of my career.”

After having left California, Suzuki returned to his beloved state years later to become what he called “the accidental president” of California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, where he used his executive position as an instrument for equity and motivating other faculty of color to aspire to administrative ranks. He is now president emeritus of the Pomona, Calif.-based university.

Along with Suzuki, Drs. Sidney Ribeau of Howard University and Tomas Morales of the College of Staten Island, CUNY, shared insights with NCORE attendees about how they positioned themselves to become college presidents.

The road to the college presidency is long and arduous for people of color where underrepresentation is a fact and opportunities remain scarce, the panelists declared at the Thursday event.

In the more than 20 years the American Council of Education has tallied the data, there have been small increases in the number of minorities at the presidential level at U.S. higher education institutions.

While the number of women has doubled, the percentage of racial and ethnic minorities represented in the college presidency ranks increased from just 8 percent in 1986 to 14 percent in 2006.

“Once you get a doctorate it doesn’t qualify you immediately for leadership,” Ribeau said. “We need to be more intentional about how we prepare people.”

Recounting their stories, the panelists said their ascension often depended on being mentored by other people of color in high positions. Without the trustees of color on the California State University Board, Suzuki said, the support for his promotion would have been diminished.

Ribeau added that those who reach the executive level must make deliberate attempts to include talented candidates of color in daily governance. Both Ribeau and Morales were asked to participate on college presidents’ boards and committees as a middle manager that exposed them to the job,

Morales, who came from a nontraditional path to the presidency, said faculty and staff of color need to work twice as hard to accomplish their professional goals. As the executive director of an educational opportunity program early in his career, Morales became a student of educational administration, reading all the literature

and participating in higher education associations.

“I knew early on I wanted to become a university president,” Morales said. “Once I completed my doctorate, I did more teaching but I didn’t go the route of the untenured professor. I became involved in accreditation and was provided an entrée to presidents from different institutions.”

Strategic positioning enabled Morales to map out his trajectory to the executive level.

The panelists encouraged conference attendees to gain as much leadership experience managing different groups of people to prepare for their trek to senior-level management.

“I discovered my experience in community organizing was a valuable background for me,” Suzuki said. “University faculty are like volunteer social activists. You can’t order them around. You have to motivate them and inspire them. Don’t shortchange your experience in social activism.”

Increasingly, college and university executives spend the bulk of their time fundraising, regardless of the type of institutions, the panelists said. Experience and understanding of those responsibilities could propel a candidate to the top.

“One definition of a president is someone who lives in a nice house on campus and bets for a living,” Suzuki said jokingly.

Though he hardly spends a quiet evening at home anymore, Ribeau said he maintains his sanity by rationalizing the act of fundraising not as groveling for money but instead as sharing great ideas with other people — hopefully rich people.

Though he maintains he didn’t aspire to administration initially, Suzuki admittedly used his position to identify and promote talented people of color and making a case for diversity to the entire campus community.