

Making A PLACE

UGA Professor Margie Lee relates some of her experiences with the tenure process.



Faculty members share experiences, offer advice in UGA's first annual Black Issues in Higher Education Conference

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PHOTOS BY PETER FREY

We have a space, but do we have a place at the University of Georgia or in higher education to tell our African-American stories and know that they are both affirmed and evaluated without judgment, a place of support?" asked Talmadge Guy in closing UGA's first annual Conference on Black Issues in Higher Education (BIHE). "Today, this conference has brought us together, and together we make a place."

A diverse audience of more than 100 UGA faculty and graduate students attended the February 3 conference which illustrated that the plight for equality in higher education here and across the country is far from over.

"Education is the oldest form of combating racism," said Norvella Carter, the Endowed Chair of Urban Education at Texas A&M University and one of two keynote speakers, "but there is still an unequal balance of blacks in higher education, whether you're talking about faculty or students."

In many Research I universities, black faculty account for just one percent of total faculty, and only a small number of that one percent are tenured, full professors, said Carter. In fall 2005, six percent of UGA's faculty were African American, and four percent were full professors, according to the 2005 UGA Fact Book.

Over the last several years, the university has worked to increase black enrollment, and the numbers are slowly improving. In 2005, UGA offered admission to 570 African Americans for the fall freshman class, a 36-percent increase over the previous year. However, black enrollment still represents a small percentage of the 33,000 students that attend UGA each year.

"This profession gives us opportunities that other professions don't," Carter reminded the audience of young UGA faculty and graduate students. "We have a responsibility to help transform lives and build dreams."

The conference was initiated by faculty members in UGA's College of Education (COE), which has been a campus leader on issues of diversity. In fact, black faculty account for 17.9 percent of full-time faculty

in the COE. Further, nearly half of COE black faculty are tenured and hold the rank of full or associate professor.

"Given the demographics of our state and our campus, it is important that we have this focus and this conversation," said Juanita Johnson-Bailey, professor and graduate coordinator of adult education and co-planner of the conference.

Many participants touted the value and importance of the conference.

"The interaction and networking with fellow African-American scholars and professors was very empowering and motivating," said Johnie Forsythe, a graduate student in mathematics education.

"Knowing that I am not alone in my struggles and my wariness about openly speaking out to the majority was eased after attending this conference," said Javon Wickliff, another COE graduate student. "I will continue to speak about these issues and fight the good fight."

Between keynote speakers, nine UGA faculty members from disciplines across campus served on panel discussions, sharing stories on obstacles they faced in higher education