

A time to grow and learn



O'Juan Edwards

College: Education

Program: Higher Education

Degree: Doctoral

Why FSU?

When I started my graduate school search, I knew I wanted to pursue a program that had a great reputation and faculty members who were respected in the field of Higher Education. I wanted to put my best foot forward into being accepted into one of the top programs in the country. I worked hard to make sure I did well on the GRE exam by taking it twice. I also emailed and spoke to at least one or two professors at each of the institutions I applied to because I wanted to see if there was a mutual fit regarding my research interests. I knew I would be spending a lot of time with the individual who would serve as my advisor. Since that was important to me, I did a little research on the faculty members whom I was interested in studying with by reading their resumes to assist me in having an engaging conversation over the phone. One of the last professors I reached out to was Dr. Tamara Bertrand Jones, Associate Professor/Interim Chair of Higher Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Florida State University. All I can say is after speaking with her on the phone I knew I had found someone who would be an excellent/supportive advisor and that put the icing on the cake.



Motivation to pursue a graduate degree

I completed my Masters of Arts degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration at Michigan State University (MSU). I knew I would pursue my Ph.D. at some point, however, I did not know at what point in my life I would actually do it. For example, the first job I landed after graduate school was a Resident Director position within the Department of Resident Life at the University of Maryland, College Park (UMD). I stayed in that role for five years. Next, I worked two years as a Manager in the Office of the Bursar at UMD. My last three years of working in the metro DC area I worked in the field of Human Resources as a Recruiter. Some of the places I visited to recruit new employees were colleges and universities. One day, I sent my mother a picture of me recruiting at a well-known university in Washington, D.C. My mom was impressed and told me I looked great and mighty happy. What stayed in my mind was the part about me being happy. Then I thought about it. I was happy because I was back on a college campus, not because I was recruiting employees. That is what started my whole thought process concerning what I would do if I were to go back into higher education. I always knew that once I went back to pursue a Ph.D., I would do meaningful research that made a difference in the lives of others.

Importance of your research and work

I will be researching "Chlamydia and other STD prevention such as PrEP amongst Black women in historically Black sororities at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs)." The reason why people should care about the work I am doing is because often HBCU administrator's do not have conversations with students about their sexual health or sexuality. This has caused major problems in the African American community. Therefore, I think it is important to address this concern while students are in college. For example, if Black women are not educated on STDs that do not show any symptoms like chlamydia, they could spread the disease to others and have long-term effects and difficulties within their body, such as not being able to conceive. In addition, I lived in the Washington, D.C. area for a decade. During my time there I learned that the HIV/AIDS virus is intensified in that part of the country. This is one of the main things that inspired me to do this work because not only is the HIV/AIDS virus intensified in our nation's capital, it is spreading rapidly throughout the Black community in the United States. Furthermore, it is important that Black women learn about preventative measures such as taking PrEP while they are in college. Then they will be well informed on making wise decisions concerning their sexual health by the time they graduate from institutions of higher learning.

Advice for anyone considering graduate school

Working on a PhD requires perseverance and determination. Once you are awarded your regalia, you will have a greater appreciation for your accomplishment and the lessons learned during the experience.

Accomplishments during graduate career

In the spring of 2020, I presented "how Black feminist thought addresses HIV/AIDS prevention for Black women" during the Fellows Society Virtual Research Sharing luncheon. In 2021 I did presentations at the Association for the Study of Higher Education Virtual Conference (ASHE) discussing "Theory so white: rethinking Black student development theories in higher education." During the Relevant Research Roundtable (R3) in the College of Education, I presented "Positionality: what is it...why it matters...how to address it." In 2021 I did a presentation entitled "Black and Latina women doctoral students mattering in higher education: a case study" at the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Virtual Conference.

I have served as a teaching assistant and mentor to students in the Bridge to Graduate School (EDF 4906) course within the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Center For Academic Retention & Enhancement (CARE) at Florida State University, helping countless students achieve their goal of getting into graduate school. I published a narrative in a book in 2021 entitled *Operationalizing culturally relevant leadership learning*. Additionally, I've written a book chapter on higher education and leadership released in 2022, "Making the world your classroom: Observation as a pedagogical tool for leadership learning." In the fall of 2021, I will be a guest lecturer at Oakland University discussing sexual wellness concerning Black undergraduate women in a course entitled Equitable Wellness for Diverse Populations in the School of Health Sciences. Also, in the fall of 2021, I will be serving as a panelist for the Black Male Leadership Course at Florida State University. In the fall of 2021, I am presenting with my advisor and research team on the Black Feminist Approach to Advising at the 46th annual association for the study of higher education (ASHE) conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Career aspirations

My career aspirations are to join the academy by becoming a tenured faculty member and an independent researcher at a research institution. As a faculty member, I plan to be influential and supportive to all students. I want to specialize in assisting students of color because I am aware of the different challenges and concerns they have to go through to pursue higher education. Since I have a shared lived experience as students of color, I feel like I would be a good fit for this particular role. I also plan on serving as a consultant to organizations like the National Institute of Health (NIH) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) concerning the sexual health, disease control, treatment and awareness for the African American community.