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Ann Aubry
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Illinois Wesleyan Professor Studying Black Female Entrepreneurs

April 4, 2005

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - Sammie Robinson, assistant professor of business administration at Illinois Wesleyan University, is joining colleagues at two other universities to study the experiences of black female entrepreneurs.

Funded in part by a grant from the Kauffman Foundation, the study will look at economic and sociological influences on successful entrepreneurs, seeking to identify common themes. The professors are interviewing black women business owners from several U.S. cities where black business growth is particularly strong, including New York, Chicago, Atlanta, District of Columbia/Baltimore, Houston and Kansas City. Robinson described their methodology as interpretive, drawing findings from what the women reveal rather than operating with preconceived ideas.

"We identified a definite gap in the literature," Robinson said. "When African-American women do appear in the entrepreneurship literature, it's in an attempt to explain why we are not successful as entrepreneurs. One of the things we're discovering is that we define success differently." She noted that a business may have value beyond profit alone, such as providing jobs within the African-American community.

"When women are in business, they are in business to make a profit, but that's not the be-all and end-all. They want to feel that they make a difference. It's very much about relationships and building a network. African-American women speak (about) the spirituality of this; it's almost as if their business is a calling. One woman who sells shoes told us, 'It's about the s-o-u-l, not the s-o-l-e, of the shoes that I sell. The shoes are the vehicle to reach people.' This is a woman who is selling very expensive, Italian leather shoes." In this case, the woman had decided to follow her passion for footwear after realizing shoes were her means of personal expression within the "cookie-cutter" uniform of the corporate world.

Many of the women interviewed left corporate jobs to strike out on their own, and now run multi-million dollar operations. Few obtained financing in the traditional way.

"We meet them around a table and the women will share. We hear some very heartwarming stories. We hear stories of perseverance and triumph in the face of difficult circumstances," Robinson said. "We have been very gratified. The women are so open, they are so pleased to see this research."

The study seeks to discover why black women own a larger percentage of black-owned businesses than white women do of white-owned businesses. In addition to benefiting entrepreneurs, Robinson expects the research will enrich her teaching, particularly a course devoted to "Women in Business."

"I'll be able to show my students another view of the African-American experience. I want them to see the possibilities. I want them to learn, before I did, that life doesn't begin and end with a corporate job."

Robinson is collaborating with Laquita Blockson at the University of Northern Iowa and Jeffrey Robinson (no relation) at New York University's Stern School of Business. The three recently discussed their research at the Simmons College School of Management in Boston, and are scheduled to speak at the Eastern Academy of Management in Cape Town, South Africa, in June.

To speak with Robinson about her research, contact Ann Aubry or Jeff Hanna at (309) 556-3181.



Sammie Robinson