Oral History Interview with Nicole Brown   
in her Urbana, IL home on May 19, 2017

Conducted by Meg Miner, Illinois Wesleyan University Archivist

Abstract: Dr. Nicole Brown, Class of 1999, recalls her days as a leader of the Black Student Union, lessons learned from the corporate world and goals as the Director of Multicultural Affairs. She further relates examples of IWU’s lack of progress on lasting change with regard to hiring and retaining Black faculty. In each portion of her IWU affiliations, Brown recalls the achievements and frustrations she experienced

00:00:18 Introduction, affiliation with IWU. Class of 1999, worked in corporate sector, former Director of Multicultural Affairs (2005-2009), Visiting Assistant Professor of Sociology (2016-2017). Also taught as an adjunct for one semester as a sabbatical replacement for Sociology and taught one class while in Student Affairs on leadership, possibly with a Business course classification.

00:04:02 On choosing IWU. How being a first generation college student and her boyfriend's acceptance affected her choice of IWU; also discusses her early upbringing and educational experiences.

00:08:07 Choosing a major and some classroom experiences. Reacting to racism by a professor in class, getting assistance from another professor, and a conversation with a recent Business Administration student on related experiences.

00:15:05 Limitations in curriculum as reflection of the faculty. Limitations are the result of homogenous faculty and reflect IWU's lack of commitment. Graduates are not being fully educated without truly diverse curriculum. Example of Women and Gender Studies students not knowing that a major contribution to feminist theory, intersectionality, came from Black feminists. How can the curriculum, in this historical moment, be considered legitimate without a single Black tenure line faculty member?

00:18:41 Observes advocacy for racially diverse students but not faculty colleagues. Recent emphasis on Black faculty as mentors for Black students misses the point of Black faculty’s value as knowledge producers who can contribute something to the curriculum and to elevate peers and influence students' perceptions in this era. The optics of diversity seem more important than the substance.

00:21:57 Making a connection with Kimberlee Crenshaw’s theory: if the frame doesn't fit, the facts don't matter. It is time to shift the frame and actively, aggressively advocate for Black faculty. Brown draws on examples through her 20+ years of affiliation with IWU to illustrate the differences between recognizing there’s a problem and doing something about it.

00:26:49 Argues against the idea that the institution understands the curriculum lacks legitimacy. Finds fault with the argument that Black faculty are not available and notes that even when the idea of hiring Black faculty is promoted, the topic turns to standards and quality of qualifications. Black IWU alumni are discovered for the *IWU Magazine* but not identified when it comes to potential for faculty.

00:32:18 What does IWU have to offer Black faculty? Commentary on resources for student recruitment as opposed to faculty. Reflects on issues of value and worth and that we pay consultants when people who do give opinions on changes are not heard.

00:37:00 Bringing the world to Wesleyan and Wesleyan to the world. We don’t bring racial issues into the world exposure for our students and asks if this could be purposeful, as in the way we want IWU to be. Student Affairs is the primary place on campus where Black people can be found—in the role of caregivers, helpers, and not viewed as knowledge creators.

00:41:52 How do we explain the lack of diversity at IWU today? If we assume we do genuinely want diversity, how do we explain where we are? This is the result of bright, intelligent problem solvers? Concludes that racial diversity is not seen as profitable and that IWU needs Black faculty specifically, not just diverse faculty. This is where evidence of anti-Blackness is explicit and closes the loop on profitability.

00:49:02 On switching the frame from money/resources to Black women and the course contributions she made during her year in a Visiting faculty position. Explains the Black feminist course she created, student reactions to it and how that is missing because IWU has no one else advocating for and bringing these themes into the curriculum.

00:54:31 Anti-Blackness initiative within IWU Annual Theme “Women’s Power, Women’s Justice," and her Black students' reactions to Course Cluster Closing event. Discusses her idea for the [Fall 2016] Anti-Blackness initiative within the annual theme “Women’s Power, Women’s Justice.” Brown saw this as a celebration as opposed to just acknowledging that anti-Blackness exists, and discusses the way she built community as a survival strategy in an environment where anti-Blackness exists. Brown recalls student reactions and reflects on how significant it was for Black women to be represented in other students' course presentations.

01:07:22 Racial identity development through extracurricular activities. Recalls Black Student Union (BSU) activities—her leadership role and the importance of the 30th Anniversary BSU Celebration they held. Describes how the recruitment of perspective students was planned and conducted by five women in BSU in order to increase numbers of Black students on campus, with numbers that went from 8 in her incoming class to 30 the following year.

01:21:19 Work study experiences. Negative experience in the mail room and then a positive one in the Dean of Students' Office. How her college experiences were the most memorable--how she found herself in a constant state of anger but that she bonded with people who valued her. This led most recently to the realization that what she thought was her love for the institution is actually a love for the individuals who loved, cared and nurtured her for herself. She quotes a line from a poem [titled "won't you celebrate with me" by Lucille Clifton] in summary of her experiences with IWU and other institutions: "something has tried to kill me and has failed."

01:29:35 Goals as Multicultural Affairs Director. This was her dream job – to be an advocate for students so that marginalized students could have the same college experience white students were having. Expresses disappointment in the lack of institutional progress and that students only see themselves through multiculturalism and not as people who can resist oppressive structures. Rather than placing blame on the students, this is a realization that they have not been taught they have power over their own experiences.

01:37:36 Trying to affect change within Student Affairs. Recalling encounters with veiled racism in meetings regarding students, specifically recalling one instance when a facility restriction was put in place as a result of a request by members of a Black fraternity that didn't have a house of their own. Brown also recalls the close connections she made with students and how they sustained her in advocating for them within a racist system.

01:51:06 Changing the Summer Enrichment Program (SEP). Recalls difficulties she had getting students on board with the changes she implemented in SEP and her plan to introduce structures for accountability, like ones she learned in a corporate environment. Brown moved it from a program based on remediation into a leadership program with goals, internships, performance reviews, and debates.

02:00:29 Factors leading to leaving Multicultural Affairs. The effect of having other Black women PhDs as examples and other reasons for continuing her education. Describes an earlier time when she took a risk in leaving the corporate world and how taking those risks led to greater rewards.

02:07:00 Skills gained from her corporate experience, implemented at IWU and used during her educational progression. How she questioned the claims others had about SEP and how she saw that trends in IWU's efforts to improve retention of Black students were more of a crisis response model and not a sustained effort. From her business experience, she learned to take a project management approach to other areas of her life: the SEP program as well as her graduate work.

02:12:03 Reflections on leaving IWU. She recalls over 20 years of hearing the rhetoric of racial diversity at IWU and concludes the lack of progress is willful. She brings in the example of her personal experience of being excluded from consideration for a tenure-track search. The value brought by having a racially diverse faculty is often cited but has not been demonstrated in the three IWU presidential eras Brown witnessed. She argues that institutions that emphasize the dollar amounts individuals represent are not places that will love and value individuals’ talents or other contributions.

02:20:57 Is academia the right place? What is the price you are willing to pay for access to students? Brown recalls students’ gratitude for her being the first Black faculty member they experienced and how that is a travesty in this era. Rejects the idea of the possibility of coming back to the same institution but asserts that the friends she made at IWU are lasting and that she continues to support them.

Interview ends at 02:24:46