Good morning. I am Dr. Ronnie Wooten, a tenured Associate Professor of Music, and conductor of the Wind Ensemble in the School of Music at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb. I am pleased to be here today and even more pleased to see that the Illinois Board of Higher Education is holding these hearings relative to issues of increasing the number of under-represented persons in faculty positions in colleges and universities.

Please forgive me for speaking from my own particular biases which includes those of musician and an African-American male, among others. I believe that almost any discipline or person from any other under-represented group could be substituted in every instance where I say "music" or "African-American", and that the statement of facts, incidents, and experiences would still be valid.

I would also add, that if any of the board members have not had a chance to read the report entitled "Retaining and Promoting Women and Minority Faculty Members: Problems and Possibilities", which was published by the University of Wisconsin System, I recommend it as a source which might provide some food for thought in the discussion of these critical issues.

Availability of Faculty

As I have indicated previously, my chosen profession is music. I have a bachelor's degree in music education, and spent several years teaching grades 6-12 in the public schools of North Carolina. I hold masters's and doctoral degrees in instrumental conducting from Michigan State University and an Artist’s Diploma in conducting and literature form the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada. At no time during any of my professional training did I have a professor from an under-represented group as an instructor. The number of African-American males who hold the same graduate degrees that I do is extremely small. I can recall reading statistics for the year that I completed my doctorate which revealed that nationwide, approximately five persons from under-represented groups received the doctorate in conducting.

Music is an art form that is found in every culture on earth and therefore lends itself as a natural medium for promoting and encouraging diversity, inclusion and multiculturalism. While other disciplines might not be so obvious in the potential of achieving these same goals, given a moment for consideration, I am certain that opportunities would soon become apparent, no matter what the discipline. In spite of the ease with which music can positively impact these areas, it continues to be one of the most biased disciplines in the academy. With that being said, how are the other disciplines faring?

When I consider the state of Illinois relative to my discipline, there are no persons from under-represented groups who serve as heads of graduate programs. As a matter of fact, the number of persons at the college level who even teach in this area of area of expertise is probably less than ten, possibly even five or less. Other states have statistics that are quite similar. When was the last time that you watched a person of color lead a symphony orchestra on television or in any
public concert that you attended? In the area of conducting, in order to have a viable pool of persons who qualify for these positions whether they be in academe or the private sector, there must be a viable pool of students pursuing graduate degrees in the discipline.

At NIU the School of Music has graduated one (1) African-American student in music education in the nine years that I have been a member of the faculty. Others have come, at the undergraduate level, only to withdraw after a year or so for a variety of reasons that contrary to popular belief, often have little to do with grades or finances. We have had slightly more success with graduate students who come to us as more mature individuals with more experience in academia, however I do emphasize the word “slightly”. When I arrived in DeKalb, there were approximately two Black undergraduate students in the department and no graduate students. I brought three students with me from my previous position in Florida: two who were originally from Cuba and one from Nicaragua. They have all since graduated from NIU; one has received a masters degree from the New England Conservatory in Boston, another from the University of Michigan and the last one is finishing at the University of Miami. These students came to Illinois because of my efforts at convincing them and their families that it was a good move for them in the pursuit of their careers. This was especially difficult because they were already part of a very strong support group in Miami, and here I was trying to remove them from their comfort zone. I am pleased to report that the numbers of under-represented students in music is now slightly better, and again, I emphasize the word “slightly”. This is mainly because of the efforts of myself and another African-American colleague who joined the faculty the same year that I did. We are both committed to changing these statistics, but it serves I think, to demonstrate why faculty from under-represented groups are necessary to effect any type of real change in this area. I would like to add that we do get students from other countries and cultures, I was referring more specifically to students who are from my ethnic group.

I am sharing this information to say that:

1) Minority faculty who are in decision-making positions that admit students into graduate and undergraduate programs are necessary.

2) Non-traditional means of attracting potential students must be pursued. There needs to be intentional efforts by universities and the departments and other units within them to continuously address these issues. Efforts need to be made starting at the undergraduate level or perhaps even sooner, to target students who have the skills and potential to succeed in graduate programs. Articulation initiatives and partnerships similar to those which already exist between community colleges and four-year institutions in Illinois must be initiated and maintained.

The Hiring Process

Again, I have many personal stories that I could share regarding my interviewing experiences in higher education, some positive and many others that were not positive.
I have experience first-hand that lets me know that no matter what the hiring policies for a particular college or university state about equal opportunity and access, that the process which gives the appearance of being equitable is often anything but equitable. A quick example from my own discipline occurs during the submission of application materials. I can submit the required resume, vita, and letters of recommendation in a manner that my gender and ethnicity are not readily apparent to the reader. In conducting, I am also required to submit an audio recording of performances under my direction as well as videotape of the same. Submission of the videotape ensures that this information is longer confidential and could potentially lead to bias in the process. When I look around the profession all across the country, I know that there are people like myself (a handful) who are applying for these positions, who usually do not even make the interview stage. I am personally aware of instances where people who were hired had much less professional training and experience than I, who were granted interviews and eventually tenure-track positions.

Most job announcements articulate the high standards and credentials that the applicant is expected to hold as a potential faculty member. Often, once these persons are hired, the very credentials and standards which were required for employment and considered assets, suddenly become liabilities and cause for concern among peers.

Potential candidates need to have opportunities to interact with current faculty from the under-represented groups during the interview process. In my situation at NIU, once I decided to apply for the position I contacted a person the School of Music whom I had met three years prior at a conference on Black Music in New Orleans. This person was not on the search committee; however, he demanded (I found out later) to be included in the process (lunch, dinner, etc) during the time that I was on campus. I met no other Black faculty or administrators during the interview. Having someone to answer basic questions such as “Were can I get my hair cut?” have to be considered when hiring faculty in settings where they are severely under-represented.

Retention of Diverse Faculty

Three years ago a group of Black faculty members at NIU began having a series of meetings to discuss issues relevant to our employment at the university. Following is a partial listing of concerns expressed by those of us who attended these meetings:

1) Being continually excluded from department programs or having one’s name left off of department publicity materials (claiming it was an oversight)

2) Being continually excluded from merit raises.

3) No useful communication from department chairs or personnel committees regarding the tenure and promotion process.

4) Lack of support for scholarship focusing on African Americans or other cultural studies
5) Physical isolation of the faculty member's office, then accusing the person of being withdrawn and non-collegial

6) Lack of support or understanding from administration when disrespected by majority students, faculty and staff. This is of particular concern at the department chair level where most of the real day-to-day incidents occur.

7) Overloading of faculty member with excessive service and or teaching responsibilities and then complaining about the person's lack of punctuality or timely response to e-mail or other communications.

8) No real indication that department chairs and other administrators are really interested in retaining diverse faculty members.

9) Very few administrators or persons in major decision-making positions from underrepresented groups at all levels of the university and none (or very few) persons who are being mentored in a manner that would allow them to move into such positions if the opportunity were to become available.

10) Criticism for the inclusion of materials in the curriculum which represent diverse perspectives, even though the promotion of critical thinking skills is said to be a desired outcome of instruction.

As I mentioned previously, these are experiences by Black faculty at NIU, which lead me to ask the question “What are other minority faculty members experiencing at NIU?” What are other faculty experiencing at other universities and colleges? The answer is: “the same thing”. These incidents are degrading, demoralizing and offensive. They are also ongoing, which leads to a high degree of frustration, stress, and discouragement, all of which are reasons why many institutions cannot retain faculty from under-represented groups. Research shows that women leave academia in higher numbers than men, and that women of color constitute the largest segment of that particular group, followed by men of color. Contrary to popular belief, under-represented persons do not always leave jobs because they did not like the weather, or because the money was not very good. As a matter of fact throwing money (particularly in salary) at the problem has little positive impact if the person is not given any support for programs or initiatives in which he or she is involved, and constantly receives indications from colleagues that his/her work is not needed or valued in the department.

Finally, the relationship between existence and invisibility—acceptance and rejection is quite perplexing when one examines the lives of scholars from under-represented populations in the academy. Ralph Ellison, in his thought-provoking work, “The Invisible Man”, captures quite vividly the pain and disenchantment that renders myself and others like me “invisible” particularly in predominantly white institutions. I hope that the comments that I and others make here today, which are often related to our lived experiences, observations and conversations, will help to move the discussion of these issues forward. I hear similar concerns from colleagues in other
Illinois universities as well as other institutions across the country—same issues.....different names—different places.

Demographics and statistics have been telling us for years that the world and certainly our institutions of higher education are being populated more and more by persons from non-European backgrounds and women who often question the dominant cultural style and that we must be ready to embrace this eventuality. The Illinois Board of Higher Education, through this study, has an opportunity to make a difference that will manifest itself in a positive manner throughout the higher education system in this state, and perhaps serve as a guide to other states that may be pursuing similar issues.

I thank the members of the Board for your presence and consideration here today. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss more specific solutions to these issues with members of the Board and others. Please feel free to call upon me at anytime to assist your efforts in this critical area.

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