

Features 4: The School of New Learning

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By Stephen A. Hall

Thoroughly engaged by a thrilling lecture highlighting African centered philosophy, first year School for New Learning (SNL) student and current School for New Learning Student Association (SNLSA) president, Karla Houston, could barely believe her ears, much less where her choice had brought her. A decision, which was driven as much by regret as it was practical necessity, ushered her into the hallowed halls of academia. And now, here she was enthralled by a captivating lecture by the college's Associate Professor and the director of the Tanganza Project, a satellite school in Kenya, East Africa, Derise Tolliver Atta, Ph.D. Although older than the traditional college-aged student, as are most of SNL's student body (an admissions rule requiring that students be at least 24 years of age ensures this difference), Houston is completely enjoying her university experience.

SNL, one of DePaul University's 10 colleges, housed at the Loop campus, is unique in that, according to the school's dean, Marisa Alicea, Ph.D., "This is a college more about learning as opposed to teaching." SNL places a high premium on learning; however, learning should not just be understood in the traditional way. Alicea, as reflected in the school's philosophy, does not believe that learning simply takes place in the classroom, but also outside of the classroom, at work, while raising a family, and while negotiating through the various challenges and experiences of life. It is this unorthodox educational philosophy that contributes to the School's success, as evidenced by the numerous awards its garnered and the international influence it yields with schools in Kenya, Ireland, South Africa and previously in Hong Kong.

SNL was founded in 1972 and for nearly 4 decades has remained true to its mission: granting access to the adult student. Adults, with their various responsibilities, are often juggling full time jobs, rearing families, all while attending classes to better their lives. SNL, through a competence system, tests what students have learned. For those that may question the rigor of this type of academic model, Alicea proudly retorts, "Students consistently tell me how difficult the course of study is." With a slight smile, she asserts, "If you can demonstrate competence, then we will award you a degree."

Houston, having found an academic voice, a school family, and a newly adopted determination to not only complete her baccalaureate degree in project management but a master's degree in project management as well, is extremely interested in having DePaul,

at large, understand and accept the relevance of SNL. As an African American and a woman—two identities that have been historically marginalized--, she is excited about being part of a college that has a relatively large, diverse student population and faculty.

Although a stellar college, SNL is not comfortable “resting on its laurels.” Under the leadership of Alicea, for the past 8 months, the school has embarked on a daunting data-gathering mission, which is informing some strategic changes currently underway. Focus groups, fielding employers and students, were designed to mine information relevant to students’ success in this changing economic environment. SNL has always been student focused, but as times change and as the student landscape morphs, these types of innovative actions will further adapt in order help to clarify what students desire and what potential employers seek in an employee.

For more information www.snل.depaul.edu