

Royel Johnson:

Before we jump into today's episode, it's important that we acknowledge that this conversation was recorded on the land of the Tongva and Chumash peoples, panelists joined us from colonized lands throughout North America. We recognize the Tongva, Chumash, and all indigenous nations, tribes, and peoples for being historical and continual caretakers of these lands.

Felecia Commodore:

In 3, 2, 1.

Royel Johnson:

Greetings, ASHE family and welcome back to season three of the ASHE Presidential Podcast. As Sha'Carri Richardson said, I'm not back, we're better. And this year our theme is, "I Am A Scholar". I'm your co-host, Dr. Royel Johnson, Associate Professor of Higher Education and Social Work at the University of Southern California. I also direct the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates at the USC Race and Equity Center. And shout out to the Rossier School of Education and Dean Pedro Noguera for being a sponsor of the podcast this year. I have the privilege of working with my dear friend who needs no introduction, but I'm happy to do so. Dr. Felecia Commodore.

Felecia Commodore:

Hi everyone. I'm your other co-host, Dr. Felecia Commodore, Associate Professor at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Also, a very loyal member of the CleanTalk Fan Club. So we are back for another season of the ASHE Presidential Podcast. Did you miss us? Because we missed you all. Whether you believe that or not. We really did miss you all. And there has been so much that has happened since we were last together. Some great things and some things that have challenged us as individuals, a society and a field of study. And as we prepare to gather together once again in Minneapolis as an association and a community, we will not only wrestle with the various issues and happenings in higher education in the world, but we will also contemplate and pontificate on what it means to be a higher education scholar in times such as these.

As such, this year's podcast will more deeply explore this year's theme: "I Am A Scholar". And what better way to kick off that conversation than with the current ASHE President, Dr. Jeni Hart, who will tell us more about this year's theme, what has been going on with the association, her vision for ASHE and her own story of realizing her scholarly identity. It's going to be a great, great and insightful conversation. So let's not wait any longer and get to it.

Royel Johnson:

So join us in welcoming our special guest. Dr. Jeni Hart who is the Dean of the Graduate School and Vice Provost of Graduate Studies. Welcome Jeni.

Jeni Hart:

Oh, thank you for having me.

Royel Johnson:

Thank you for joining us and what a great opportunity to launch season three of the podcast. Thank you for bringing us back. So we typically kick off each episode with an icebreaker. Last year, in the last two years we've done this or that. We're going to switch it up.

Felecia Commodore:

Just a little bit.

Royel Johnson:

A little bit this year. So we have a question for you that we want you to consider.

Felecia Commodore:

That's sweet. We are calling this questions that need answers.

Royel Johnson:

Yes. QTNA. So first, what three things would you do if you were invisible?

Jeni Hart:

Oh, that's a fascinating question. If I were invisible, I would like to be a fly on the wall kind of listening to, and this is showing my politics, but listening to Kamala Harris begin to think about her strategies. I love listening to her, and I think there's so much there that we unfortunately can't hear because we're not invisible and not a fly on the wall. So I would love to hear more from her because I think she has a lot to contribute.

Royel Johnson:

Love that. Love that.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, I like that too. Although I don't know that I want hear it because I might hear something I don't want to hear.

Jeni Hart:

There is that risk, right?

Felecia Commodore:

I be like, oh no, let me get out of here.

Royel Johnson:

Yes. And you're responsible for what you know. So the more you don't know, sometimes the better.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Jeni Hart:

That's true.

Felecia Commodore:

Okay, well, I have another question. What was your dream job as a kid?

Jeni Hart:

Okay, I wanted to be a waitress.

Royel Johnson:

Really?

Felecia Commodore:

I didn't see that one coming.

Royel Johnson:

Okay.

Jeni Hart:

No, I bet she did. I remember when I was little, my mother would ask me that question and I would say, well, my aspiration was to be a waitress, and she said she wanted to be a belly dancer. So that kind of tells you the nature of our conversation. We weren't quite grounded. Now, I would say as I progressed, my dream job was to be the ambassador to France.

Royel Johnson:

Interesting. Do you speak French? Parlez-vous français?

Jeni Hart:

Sais un peu.

Royel Johnson:

Oh! Okay.

Felecia Commodore:

I speak Spanish. I don't know what y'all...

Royel Johnson:

That's about as far as it goes for me. I do my Duolingo.

Jeni Hart:

Yeah, it used to be something I had more command over, my undergraduate degrees in foreign service, so I really was planning for that in a real way.

Royel Johnson:

Yes, we saw the undergrad degree.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, we were both like, wait.

Royel Johnson:

We were intrigued by that, was it Georgetown?

Jeni Hart:

Yeah.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. We loved the DMV area too.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. Shout out to the DMV. Well, I'm just thinking you and your mom could have probably done really well in Vegas, like a waitress, a belly dancer.

Royel Johnson:

Been dynamic duo.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, it would've been great. But now that we know a little bit more about you Jeni, let's learn more about you as our ASHE President. This has been quite a year for both higher education and for ASHE, and I imagine many higher education scholars from every corner of the field have been contemplating where the field is, where it's heading, and what role do they or will they play in the future of higher education. So as an administrator, faculty, association leader and scholar, we're sure you have many insights and perspectives that we can't wait to hear about. So let's get the party going with our first question.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. So first, tell us a little bit about yourself. You have all these amazing big titles right now at Missouri. Tell us a little bit about what you're doing and then we want to hear a little bit about this theme, "I Am A Scholar", and where it came from.

Jeni Hart:

So as you introduced me, I'm the dean of the graduate school and Vice Provost for Graduate Studies here at Mizzou. And in my role, my responsibility first and foremost is to advocate for graduate students, their success and also the success and advocacy of our postdocs in our community. And in many respects as a scholar who studied academic work writ large, but more specifically, faculty, graduate students and postdocs are kind of a natural fit for me from a scholarly perspective because I'm interested in this socialization of faculty and how faculty become faculty. And of course, that's not where all of our graduate students and postdocs are going. But it really gave me, I think, insight into thinking about how I can run a graduate school and how I can work with faculty around campus to provide an infrastructure that really reduces barriers for graduate students to be successful and postdocs to be successful.

Royel Johnson:

How long have you been in this role?

Jeni Hart:

So it depends on when you start counting.

Royel Johnson:

Got it.

Jeni Hart:

Like all good higher ed organizations, when a new leader comes in, they make change.

Royel Johnson:

Of course.

Jeni Hart:

And when I moved into the graduate school, we were actually in office of graduate studies, and so I had this ridiculous title that I frankly can probably not even remember, but it was like Associate Vice Chancellor of blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But I was basically doing the job I'm doing now as Dean. And so when the graduate school was reinstated at the university, I moved into the formal role of Dean. So it's either five or seven years depending on when you'd like to start counting.

Royel Johnson:

Got it. Got it. And this theme, "I am a Scholar". Tell us a little bit about where that came from.

Jeni Hart:

I can tell you from my origin story where it came from. And I would also say that I probably thought about that more immediately because I'm in the grad space, because I think about things like what our graduate students are contributing to knowledge production and how frankly I work with some folks who don't recognize those important contributions and use graduate students in ways that are inappropriate and don't give them credit for what they're contributing. So I think I see them as scholars, they're becoming and they're being scholars.

And for me, it really came from, personally came from my experience as an early career scholar. My first job as a faculty member was at Southeast Missouri State, and I remember going to ASHE, and this was the first year after I graduated from my PhD. And while I was a PhD student, I was at the University of Arizona and people knew who Gary Rhodes was and who Sheila Slaughter was, some of the folks that I had the opportunity to work closely with. So I was perceived as somebody who had good pedigree. Then I moved into my role at Southeast Missouri State, and I went to ASHE and I would introduce myself and people didn't have time for me.

Clearly, I wasn't a good enough scholar to be in the community of folks who were working at large resource universities primarily, for example. And then I moved to a large research university one year later, and the interactions I had with folks at that time was very different. And there was nothing that changed for me other than geography and an institution that was much more highly resourced. And so that experience has really stuck with me a long 20 years. And so it really made me want to think about how do we create a space for everyone in our community to embrace their scholarly selves and what they contribute to the field of higher education.

Felecia Commodore:

You know, Jeni, I really resonated with that story as someone who started out, I mean now they're R1, but they were a R2, somewhat of a regional comprehensive, but technically a R2 institution myself. And I remember when I first started working there, I would hear people in the field say things like, oh, that's a great stepping stone school.

Royel Johnson:

Great place to start.

Felecia Commodore:

And I used to feel so some kind of way because I really liked it there, but also I found the students were great. They were really, really smart. And I remember saying to someone like, why don't those students deserve really amazing faculty and scholars who were trained really well? Also, why should we consider those students stepping stones? I felt it was so disrespectful to people who were really committed to those institutions and the really, really great students who were there doing really great work. And so I was really excited when I heard this theme that you would take on that conversation that I think we know happen. Those experiences that happen, but nobody kind of talks about it. Nobody acknowledges. We do do this kind of pecking order stratification thing and place value on people and who they are as scholars based on all kinds of things that have nothing to do with their scholarship.

Royel Johnson:

As if it means something. You know, Interesting, I started at Penn State, and it was clear to me that people made meaning of that in a particular way around my... There was a privilege associated with starting at a very visible school, but that had no bearing on me as a scholar. I was no different than any of my peers who started at any of the institutions. But I think what happens unfortunately is that people starts feeling special and then they behave in ways that suggest that there is this hierarchy. And that perpetuates those same sort of injustices and inequities.

Felecia Commodore:

Then we socialize our students to do the same thing, which is unhealthy. So in that vein, the theme, "I Am A Scholar", it really challenges the ASHE community, the higher ed community, to rethink not only our individual identities as scholars, but also who belongs quote unquote in the scholarly community. Could you elaborate on how you hope the theme will prompt reflection on the inclusivity and equity of the scholarly community?

Jeni Hart:

Yeah. Well, Royel, going back to what you were just saying, there's this sense of privilege and elitism that I don't know is baked in, in some ways, that makes folks feel like they don't belong. And I think about, for example, our scholars of color who are culturally taxed, who also are often perceived as not doing important work, especially if they're studying people of color, minoritized folk in any way, and they absolutely have a space at ASHE and they need to have a space at ASHE that's so important. And so in some ways, I hope that this theme also signals to folks that no matter your identity, we want you to come in and be in a space that everyone should be able to belong. And that we are confronting those stratifications and other things that make folks feel like their work isn't as important or who they are isn't as important because we're a better community when we're all together. We're a better community when we can learn from one another. And if we are saying, if we're sending messages that somebody doesn't belong, that is bad for the community.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. I mean, we miss out from the contributions and the rich diversity that does comprise our community when folks don't have equitable opportunities to engage their benefits to diversity, we know this, right? It's been long documented.

Jeni Hart:

If only the government knew that.

Felecia Commodore:

Oh, thank you.

Royel Johnson:

The government knew that.

Felecia Commodore:

And I think also, not just diversity as far as identity, but also diversity in perspectives of research. And that just, it's not just faculty who do research, who are experts. We have practitioners, we have funders who are really important, I think, policy folks because they hear the conversations we don't hear in the ivory tower, right? And to make sure our work is actually relevant to the people we're trying to help, administrators, students, community organizers, all of these folks are experts and bring a perspective of knowledge to the conversation. And I think reframing how we see and how we define what a scholar is and including all those people, makes us do better work and more impactful work.

Royel Johnson:

I was just telling someone the other day when I was a new assistant professor at Penn State, I remember sitting down with a senior scholar in my department who wanted to quote unquote mentor me, although I had sufficient mentorship and training. And one, he approached that conversation as if I was empty and needed, he didn't see the assets that I brought as a new faculty member. And what he told me was that because I was just starting down the path of the work on young people in foster care and their pathways to college, and he said, you don't really want to be the foster care scholar. I think you really need to broaden your work and do something that people can wrap their minds around that it's going to lock you in.

Felecia Commodore:

Wrap their minds around-

Royel Johnson:

Ain't that interesting?

Felecia Commodore:

We all watch Danny. We know, like, I'm just-

Royel Johnson:

Well, I'm glad I stuck with what I was doing. I have a new book coming out, *From Foster Care to College*, this month. But it's just interesting that people become the arbiter of what a scholar is, and they become arbiter of what kind of work is legitimized in the academy. And so for folks who are listening to this episode and who are confronting those same sorts of naysayers and folks. Don't listen, don't listen. Keep pursuing the questions, the methods that you know are so important, and let the field catch up to you.

Felecia Commodore:

That's what Beyonce told Chloe and Halle, that make the music that you want to make, and people will catch up.

Royel Johnson:

And people will catch up.

Felecia Commodore:

I don't know, people are catching up with Chloe, but I'm going to stick with it because I think, I mean, wow, they couldn't wrap their heads around-

Royel Johnson:

Couldn't wrap around it. Yeah. Anyway, gonna get off my soapbox. Jeni, this is the third year of the podcast, and we're excited that you asked us to come back and do it. Maybe talk to us a little bit why you see the podcast as important and your sort of presidential term this year.

Jeni Hart:

Well, first of all, the podcast I think is scholarship, right? I hope that the folks who are listening are like, yeah, I'm getting something out of this. I'm going to use this in my class or in how I think about something else in my own line of inquiry. So I think there's a lot here. I think we need to celebrate the fact that there is knowledge generation and creation that's happening in a variety of different spaces and places, and podcasts are one of those. There's a session at the conference on podcasts, a scholarship.

Felecia Commodore:

Yes. Very excited about that session.

Jeni Hart:

Yeah, I think it's really important. And so in many respects, not only do I think podcasts are cool and a great form of media, but it also aligns with the theme. I feel like it would've been a huge misstep not to have invited you back for these kinds of conversations in light of what the theme is.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. Thank you. Yeah, we're happy to be back.

Felecia Commodore:

Yes, very happy. So I talked a little bit earlier about all that we've seen happening. I mean, this has been quite a year for higher education and really it's been quite a few years for higher education, and you are

one of our more seasoned higher education scholars. So I'm sure you've seen various iterations of the field and how it's evolved, or some might say de-evolved. How do you see the shifts in higher education impacting how we define scholarly identity?

Jeni Hart:

Well, certainly the neoliberal agenda has, I think, been something that has shaped scholarly identity in ways that frankly are problematic. It positions... I remember when I moved to the University of Missouri, and I think getting grants are important. However, the message was, you need to be bringing money in, and I don't care what your research agenda is, figure it out so that you can get something that's fundable. And so this kind of notion of we are independent contractors trying to save the university, and let's be honest, grants cost the universities more than they actually bring in, but it brings in prestige. And so that becomes important. The whole move. This affects, I think, our field a little bit, but there's probably fields like engineering where you can point to this more clearly, but the notion of tech transfer as commodity toward promotion and tenure, it's another example. And so there absolutely has been a shift to chase dollars, and it does perhaps change the trajectory of people's research agendas because of the messages they're getting about what is important and what's not important.

Royel Johnson:

And the reward structure has adopted such that folks are chasing metrics in a way. And I mean, we see it on social media. Folks are like, I need to get my views up on this article because it matters and some sort of context I need to apply to only federal grants. And so there's a complete switch in how folks are approaching their work because of this sort of neoliberal agenda. I was going to ask you. The social political context right now obviously has been difficult. We have concerted efforts that aim to really take us back 40 to 50 years. There are at least almost a dozen states that have banned how we think about DEI, how we engage it, the extent to which one can lean into training, what is the role and responsibility of a scholar of higher education in this moment? And I would ask of an association who is committed to higher ed in light of the attacks that aim to take us back.

Jeni Hart:

We need to be part of that conversation. We have the knowledge and expertise to contribute. I think back when Gratz and Grutter were decided a long time ago now, but how important the amicus briefs were from the scholars in our community, and this is true with other legislation as well. So I think we need to be part of the conversation. We need to figure out how what we do can inform the conversation. But it's a hostile climate. It's a big risk.

And so getting back to this conversation around metrics, for example, well, do I write another paper so I can get more citations? Or do I go out and fight for social justice because I have the evidence behind me to be able to make that case? And I understand that that is a tremendously risky thing to do. It's a tremendously risky thing for me to do as an administrator. I could lose my job. I'm tenured, but I could lose my job. So I have to think about those sorts of things. And early career scholars have to think about those sorts. And we all do now, right? We're seeing tenured faculty getting fired all the time now for saying things about social justice.

Royel Johnson:

The pro-Palestine conflict and the...

Felecia Commodore:

I think an element to, for good, and I don't like to say for bad and challenging, is that we have become more flat of a society because of technology and social media. And I often think about, I think pre-social media being a higher education scholar really was kind of limited to academia, maybe journals, and then places you were invited to. You could get platforms to speak, but you kind of had to be invited to those platforms. Or maybe you wrote an op-ed. And now I myself sit and I see these conversations about higher education happening in the public square without people who actually understand how higher education works. And I often ask myself, I think it's a struggle or a challenge like, when do I enter the conversation.

Because a part of me is like, no, no, no, like everyone, this is not how it works. But then it's also, you're kind of concerned to join a conversation that's like a strongman argument anyway. It's bad faith argument. There's nothing you're going to say in here that's going to actually persuade people to think different, and it's just almost a trap for you to end up some kind of hot take somewhere. But I think it's created social media, these conversations, these podcasts, these platforms have created a space where I think we have to think about when do we enter the conversation and not let our scholarship just be conversations among ourselves?

Because everyone's involved in the conversation now, just in a conversation the other day when talking about a school reorganizing, and it's like, oh, it's because the tuition's too high and oh, this and that, and they need to do that. And I'm like, hey guys, schools reorganize all the time. It's a thing that happens about every 10 years or so. There could be money problems, might not be money problems at all, but realizing, okay, this is creating a new opportunity for us, but also very new risks by going out in the public square and being kind of public scholar, bringing your scholarship into different-

Royel Johnson:

I mean, serious risk. Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

No, absolutely.

Royel Johnson:

We've seen it play out. And I was just going to shout out to Liliana Garces, you mentioned the amicus briefs, and she has been instrumental over the last few race-conscious admissions cases and organizing social science, social scientists and researchers, and more recently OiYan Poon in collaboration. So just want to shout out to them for taking the helm of...

Felecia Commodore:

I have sent many people to OiYan's post and-

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, and we're going to have her later in the season too, so we look forward to being in conversation with her as well.

Felecia Commodore:

We should read this, but yeah, so talking about evolution and growth and all of those things. ASHE will be celebrating its 50th conference in one year.

Royel Johnson:

Yes.

Jeni Hart:

Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

ASHE is over the hill and-

Royel Johnson:

Through the woods.

Felecia Commodore:

Living

Jeni Hart:

Is that the marker, because then I'm really old!

Felecia Commodore:

Living its life like it's golden. And so as we look ahead, how do you see ASHE evolving as a scholarly community? And also in thinking about this conversation we are having about inclusivity, how can we continue to dismantle exclusionary practices and ensure the future of higher education research is inclusive and transformative, particularly in our association?

Jeni Hart:

ASHE, that's such an important question, and I think that is a purpose. I mean, that should be the driving purpose of what we do, and we need to ensure that, I mean, it's essential. I hope that the theme also gets us to think about what are these scholarly spaces and how do we enter into them? I would hope that we move beyond, not beyond, in addition to podcasts, to other kinds of scholarly venues that we haven't even thought about yet, and that we can contribute to those and that they get value. I mean, I think that's ultimately what this boils down to.

If we are working in an academy that has a certain set of metrics, how do we get podcasts into the system so that it is seen and rewarded for its value? I think we as an association have to contribute to that conversation. And I hope that we'll continue to do so. We have to keep getting better. We make mistakes as individuals and as an association that we have to be accountable for. And we have to demonstrate beyond performative that we are trying to make better choices and trying to create spaces that are going to welcome all of those who want to be part of the conversation. You know what? It's going to be ongoing work. It's not like we're 50 and so now we're done. We're going to continue to come up-

Felecia Commodore:

Not even as people who work because social security is on the way out.

Royel Johnson:

Exactly. I guess as a follow-up for newcomers or even folks who have been involved in ASHE over the past number of years who are struggling to find their place and fit within the association, what would you say to them as president? What sort of encouraging message would you share with them?

Jeni Hart:

Well, first that I hope that there's a lot of opportunities that it doesn't have to be. I'm going to go all the paper sessions and hopefully feel included, because frankly, in some paper sessions, you're not going to feel included. The people who are included are, for the last five minutes, anyone who has a question, or the discussant and the folks who are delivering the papers, which of course is important, but is not necessarily the end all, be all of feeling like you're part of it.

Take advantage of the newcomer sessions, take advantage of precons. I think sometimes finding a smaller community within a larger community can be the way in to feel like you belong. I would hope that if folks don't feel like they fit, that they bring that to attention of board members, including myself, because we need to rethink it. We need to rethink what we're doing so that it doesn't feel exclusive. And I recognize that having this theme, and it's not, you know. Everybody - you get a car, you get a car, you get a car, you're a scholar, you're a scholar, you're a scholar. But that it is an entree into ongoing conversations about how we do better in helping people feel included and recognize, honestly, that as a more seasoned scholar, I have a responsibility to reach out to the folks who are new to the community and help them find their way.

We can't just expect everybody to be the extroverted former student affairs professional or current student affairs professional who can navigate these pathways and walk into any reception and feel like they're a part of it. That's just not the reality of it. And in fact, we know that faculty, by and large, are tremendously introverted. And so these spaces can be intimidating. So I think we also need to figure out ways that we as individual scholars are welcoming folks who are new to the association or who have been with the association, but don't feel like it's really their association, but they have to go because they have to present papers because that's what they need to do to get promoted and tenured.

Royel Johnson:

Absolutely. Someone who writes about belonging. People often sort of think about belonging as this sort of personal phenomenon, and it does sort of have implications for how we interact with people. But the other part is that it is institutional, and there are oftentimes delegitimizing structures that send messages explicitly, implicitly to folks about their place and fit within the community. And I think at 50 years, it's an inflection point in our association and our field's history. And I'm glad to hear that we're taking stock of how do we best serve our community, and how do we think about revision of policies, practices that may not have done the best in facilitating a more welcoming and inclusive community.

Felecia Commodore:

And I would add, I think, and as a person who considers ASHE their academic home and ASHE being a place for me as a scholar, as a grad student and a faculty member, a place where I could find community, where I may have struggled to find community where I was at, a place to get recharged and reconnected with folks when things were draining where I was located, and at times isolating. So I think it was, for me, a very important space. But I also have had instances at ASHE where I didn't always feel welcomed. We'll say that. And I think those moments can happen for folks, but what I appreciate is that there were seasoned scholars that I could go to, to talk to about those experiences, and those things were addressed.

I was also given tools and how to navigate it. And so being able to have community and people in that community to affirm what you're experiencing and also address, address and the ways things can happen that can harm people and make them feel devalued. And I think I've seen the association work very hard to try to do that and doesn't always get it right, but I think they're trying to get it right and more times get it right than they get it wrong. And I think that's really important. And that's one of the reasons I like this theme, because I think often we can see each other's scholarship as transactional, and people become valuable based on what they can do for us or what they can produce for us as opposed to who they are and what they contribute to the space and what they bring to the space.

Not in a transactional way, but in a knowledge building, community building way. And I feel like this theme challenges us as an association to say, I see valuing you beyond what you might can do for me. And I think that's really important. So in that vein, and talking about some of the challenges we've been going through as field, as a society in the past few years, how are you Jeni? How are you finding joy and balance or-

Royel Johnson:

Is balance even a thing?

Felecia Commodore:

I was about to say, harmony is what I like to say-

Jeni Hart:

Yeah, I like harmony.

Felecia Commodore:

Shout out to Dr. Takiyah Robinson who uses harmony instead of balance. How are you finding joy and harmony as a scholar and a leader during these times?

Jeni Hart:

Yeah, gosh. Well, I think a lot of that's relational. Having people that I can go to and reflect with and heal, that is so important. Certainly thinking about, well, people are still getting COVID, but COVID was really at its forefront and people were shutting down and those sorts of things. Having a community was essential to not completely shut down. And so for me, I think that has maintained a sense of import. Wow. This isn't necessarily scholarly per se, but during COVID, there's a group of five other women who I did my undergrad with, and we're talking close to 40 years ago now, and they/we lived on the same floor in the residence halls.

Felecia Commodore:

I love and know people like that too.

Jeni Hart:

And we started our weekly meetings during COVID where we would just get on Zoom and talk for two and a half hours every week. Well, we're still doing it.

Royel Johnson:

I love it.

Felecia Commodore:

Oh, that's so great.

Jeni Hart:

I look forward to Wednesday nights when I know I can talk with my people, the people who have grounded me, who have reminded me of a time in my life that was really important, and frankly, the foundation of why I would go into higher education anyway, that gave me a place of passion and fitting in and belongingness that I hope I can contribute to in whatever sphere of influence I have as an administrator, or if I am writing a paper or if I'm giving my presidential address or whatever that is, that I'm able to kind of reflect on that and how that allows me to be present.

Royel Johnson:

That's so beautiful.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. I love two things she said there, one, healing. I think we don't take that as serious as we need to, but many of us, I think need to invest in identifying places we need healing and actively engaging in that so that we can persevere as scholars and as just people in a wild world right now. But also community. Community is so important. And I think we get so many messages now and society that pushed us towards isolation and individualism. Everybody thinks they're an introvert now, apparently. And I'm like, I don't think you're an introvert. I think you need to go to therapy and get some healing. But it's just like this almost fetishization of being a lone wolf almost. And I think we need to step back and really think about the way in which with everything going on right now, it's really community is going to be the only thing that saves us.

Community is, and that goes for larger society, but I think also in higher ed, it is the rugged individualism that neoliberal kind of capitalism and neoliberal academic kind of enterprise has pushed us into that has fractured the field and fractured some of the spirit of higher education and scholarship. And I think, thinking about how can we lean back into community and push against this so we can continue to have real impact, especially for those who higher ed has excluded for so long. I think we need community to be able to have all the resources to really do that and push the field forward.

Royel Johnson:

Yes. I'm looking forward to being in community in just a few weeks in November in Minnesota for the second time.

Felecia Commodore:

I pray we get that good weather again.

Royel Johnson:

It was cold last year.

Felecia Commodore:

It was not cold.

Jeni Hart:

Not cold.

Felecia Commodore:

It was really good weather, Royel's always-

Jeni Hart:

California, you know that's why.

Felecia Commodore:

It's cold.

Royel Johnson:

I live in LA! But I'm from Chicago, But yeah, I don't wear coats like that anymore.

Felecia Commodore:

You haven't lived in Chicago for many years.

Royel Johnson:

It's been a while. It's been a while. What's something you think ASHE members would be surprised to know about you?

Jeni Hart:

I watch ridiculous television.

Royel Johnson:

Really?

Jeni Hart:

That is not in line with probably-

Royel Johnson:

Just scholarly identity.

Jeni Hart:

Yeah, no, exactly. That's exactly right. Yeah.

Royel Johnson:

Or it's exactly aligned.

Jeni Hart:

I'll watch Vanderpump Rules.

Royel Johnson:

Oh, nice. Okay. Yeah.

Jeni Hart:

My mother, when I was young and kind of a latchkey kid, was a watcher of Days of our Lives, and I invested in a Peacock subscription so I can continue to watch it.

Felecia Commodore:

I'm a Young and the Restless girl, so no judgment. Young and the Restless, Bold and the Beautiful, I watch them back and back. Love when they have crossovers, when just Bill and Forrester had a collaboration. Great time. So yeah, no judgment over here.

Royel Johnson:

Well, let me just say, Jeni, it has been wonderful to get to know you, not only through this episode, but also through our meetings leading up to the podcast. It's an honor to work and be of service under your leadership this year through the podcast. And we're so excited for what's in store in November. Any sort of previews, things that you want, folks should be mindful of leading up into the conference?

Jeni Hart:

Well, we are going to have an accessibility coordinator on site. So it's so important for our disabled members to feel like this is a welcoming space, and we're making progress in that direction. We're not done with that work. But I think this is a way we're continuing to make some forward momentum as an association. We have some amazing presidential sessions. The LCEC is bringing Save the Boards, which is, there is a woman who has gathered these boards that were put up during the time of George Floyd's murder and the violence and the destruction that happened around Minneapolis.

And people were boarding their buildings, creating safe spaces for themselves, and there was beautiful artwork that was part of that. And she saved many of those boards, and they'll be displayed, a portion of them will be displayed at the conference, which I think is so important to think about how art is scholarship and how what she has done in curating that is in line with the work that qualitative scholars do, and creating themes through what she has experienced in the community, and that she's a community activist, and that too is important. So I think there's going to be a lot of opportunities to have those kinds of conversations. I'm really excited that Joan Morgan will be joining us. Joan-

Felecia Commodore:

Yes. Very excited about that.

Jeni Hart:

Pointed the term hip hop feminism, and I think also a journalist. And again, I think that's another space that we need to think about as contributing to scholarship. So I'm super excited about that. I think there's just a lot of great things, and there will be puppies and kittens, so if you are not allergic, there's some time to snuggle with your puppies and kitten friends.

Royel Johnson:

I'm going to stay away from the cats, but they're allergic to the cats. But I'll have a puppy. I'll play with a puppy.

Felecia Commodore:

I probably will need to play with a puppy. I also stay away from cats, but that's just because they think they're better than humans.

Royel Johnson:

They do.

Jeni Hart:

Oh, they absolutely do.

Felecia Commodore:

I don't have time to be in a bad mood because the cat-

Royel Johnson:

Slapped you, because cats love slapping people.

Felecia Commodore:

Like Nobody told you to touch me. Why are you ruining my day?

Royel Johnson:

Well, before we go, I just want shout out to our ASHE office. Thank you to Jason for his incredible leadership and all the folks who are working tirelessly to bring to us an uncomplicated conference experience. I'm looking forward to being there. Any final words, Felecia?

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. I also want to shout out the ASHE staff because I've watched over the last couple of years since the ASHE staff has extended, all the wonderful ways they have really taken on. How can we make members feel more connected to the association, both throughout the year, but also at the conference. And just even fun things like the board with the questions every day, and your books and songs and just things that aren't so heavy in scholarship and publications and papers. Just making us human again and shout out to past President Joy Gaston Gayles, [inaudible 00:48:30] higher education.

Royel Johnson:

Yes, yes, yes.

Felecia Commodore:

And so I know they don't always get laud, but the ASHE staff has been really, really great. And also shout out to the donut bar that we had. I don't know why that made me so happy, but yay for donuts. But yeah, just really excited. And again, Jeni, I've been excited about this theme since it rolled out, and I hope that all of you listening, that you see yourself in this theme and know that we have a big umbrella and we want everyone to come underneath of it because that's the only way the field's going to grow and be better. And it also will make us better, not just better scholars, but better people. And that I think is the ultimate goal. So thank you. Thank you, Jeni, for joining us. I know you've had a very busy day, so we appreciate you taking the time to speak with us.

Jeni Hart:

It's been my honor and privilege to talk with you, and I want to thank you for the time and commitment you've put in to make this a reality. So thank you both for your service and your contributions to ASHE.

Royel Johnson:

No problem.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, we love it.

Royel Johnson:

Thank you so much to our guest, ASHE President Dr. Jeni Hart for joining us today and sharing so much about her journey in this year's conference theme.

Felecia Commodore:

At the end of each conversation, we like to engage in a segment called Scholar Soundtrack as we reflect on what musical selections rang in our minds as we think about the day's conversation. Today the song that came to mind was Who I Am by Jessica Andrews, because as our ASHE president reminded us, no matter where we work, how much we produce or what stage or space of the higher education landscape we find ourselves, we are all scholars because that is who we are. Likewise, our scholarly identities aren't all of who we are, and it's time we challenge the field and our association to be a space where our full selves should be embraced and celebrated. May we all remember to tell ourselves it's all a part of me, and that's who I am, and "I Am A Scholar".

Jessica Andrews - Music Interlude:

Because I know exactly who I am. I am Rosemary's granddaughter. The spitting image of my father. And when the day is done, my momma's still my biggest fan. Sometimes I'm clueless and I'm clumsy. But I've got friends that love me. And they know just where I stand. It's all a part of me. And that's who I am.

Felecia Commodore:

The conversations lined up are going to be thought provoking and inspiring, and we're just getting started, folks.

Royel Johnson:

Buckle up and get ready for the conversations to come. You don't want to miss this. Join us next week as we continue our conversations about the theme, "I Am A Scholar", with a group of outstanding early career scholars. April Horne, Nadeeka Karunaratne, Gaurav Harshe. Till next time, I'm Royel.

Felecia Commodore:

I'm Felecia.

Royel Johnson:

And remember.

Felecia Commodore:
You are a scholar.