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Women Physicists of Color Achieving at the Intersection of Race and Gender

K. RENEE HORTON, University of Alabama

As minority women physicists, we stand at the intersection of race and gender. We are physicists to be sure, but we are also women of Native, African and Hispanic descent. We are colleagues, mothers, sisters, and wives, as are our white counterparts, but our experiences cannot be distilled to only gender or race. As Prudence Carter and Scott Page remind us, women of color emerge from the interaction between race and gender.¹ This distinction is important since most researchers who study American women's participation in science focus exclusively on the participation of white American women. Of those who acknowledge the existence of non-white women, most do so by disclaiming the exclusion of women of color because the numbers are so small or the experiences are different from white American women. There are some important differences however. While American women are 15 percent of all scientists and engineers, black American women are 60 percent of all black scientists and engineers. Yet less than 3 black women and 3 Hispanic women earn PhDs each year, out of about 1100. As Rachel Ivie and Kim Nies Ray point out, "Minority women especially represent a great, untapped resource that could be drawn on to increase the size of the scientific workforce in the U.S."² Donna Nelson's study of diversity in science and engineering faculties further finds that there are no female black or Native American full professors.³ In physics, there are no black women professors and no Native American women professors at all. Despite such a bleak picture, there is hope. Of the 18 departments that award at least 40 percent of bachelor's degrees to women, 7 are Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Black women are earning degrees from HBCUs at rates above equity, and many singles and firsts at predominantly white institutions continue to persevere despite the obstacles.

¹Prudence Carter. 2005. Intersectional Matters and Meanings: Ethnicity, Gender, and Resistance to "Acting White." Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Montreal: AERA; Scott Page. 2004. The Logic of Diversity. Private Communication.

²Rachel Ivie and Kim Nies Ray. 2005. Women in Physics and Astronomy, 2005. AIP Publication R-430.02. College Park, MD: American Institute of Physics.

³Donna J. Nelson. 2005. A National Analysis of Diversity in Science and Engineering Faculties at Research Universities. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma.