Byrd-Johnson listens to questions from students

Answering questions from students across Kansas became a prime mission for a top U.S. Department of Education (DOE) leader known as a "TRIO legend." Linda Byrd-Johnson, Ph.D. was an inspiring messenger at the first town hall meeting held in conjunction with the 2014 National TRIO Day at Wichita State University.

Byrd-Johnson spoke before more than 200 people who attended the 10:30 am Feb. 13 event at the Wichita State Eugene M. Hughes Metropolitan Complex. Employed by the DOE for nearly 36 years in various capacities, Byrd-Johnson was solely interested in hearing from students and "that I don't disappoint" them by the presentation.

Her appearance was engineered by Deltha Q. Colvin, associate vice president for Campus Life and University Relations, who described Byrd-Johnson as an honoree, who has distinguished herself with the university for more than 30 years. . . . a legend in the TRIO community."

Byrd-Johnson currently serves as the senior director, Student Service Area, Office of Postsecondary Education, where she is responsible for directing, planning and managing the Federal TRIO Programs, the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS), GEAR UP, College Access Challenge Grant, Jacob Javits, and the Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need (GAANN) programs.

The hallmark of TRIO/GEAR UP and Disability Services office at Wichita State University is the educational opportunities, such as Byrd-Johnson’s visit, offered to everyone who comes in contact with them. Wade Robinson, vice president of Campus Life and University Relations, expressed his strong support for the mission of these programs, and Corinne Nilsen, the director of the state-wide Kansas Kids @ GEAR UP program anchored the meeting.

It is to Byrd-Johnson’s credit that she readily broke the ice with the students through her sense of humor, and a keen ear to their concerns and questions. She never let go the focus on students and reiterated her position and function as an amicable, but qualified spokesperson.

Questions asked spanned an entire spectrum from the professional one’s such as “what is the nature of your job,” to the personal ones such as “what do you do in your free time.” And as Byrd-Johnson had promised, she answered every ques-

(Continued on page 3)
tion, and if she did not know the answer to a particular question, she jokingly said “I will make it up.” The organizers were glad that there were no questions that would put that skill of Bryd-Johnson to use.

Byrd-Johnson’s answers were crisp, focused, but detailed. She used a language that the audience could understand. For instance, when asked about the nature of her job, she described it as conducting competitions for grants, and helping the organizations to implement the services that the organizations had planned to implement. Technical questions such as the effect of sequestration, funding issues, and the impact of TRIO programs such as the Upward Bound programs, were answered with a deft balance of facts and a non-political approach. She did indicate that she wanted “to retire on my own terms,” and the town hall meeting did prove her resolve.

One of the approaches that helped Byrd-Johnson to connect with the audience is by frequently challenging them to think and process their thoughts. For instance, when asked a question to explain the nature of Talent Search program, Byrd-Johnson actually made the student realize the difference between more intense programs such as classic Upward Bound and the “light-touch” Talent Search program.

Byrd-Johnson’s answers revealed to the students that she shared with them similar stories of a humble beginning with her “baby-sitting days” to a focus on education and completing a Ph.D. even when working a full-time job. True to the nature of TRIO/GEAR UP programs, she upheld the notion that change and inspiration flows upward from those whom we serve. She claimed the students whom the programs serve as her source of inspiration, and challenged the audience to be good role models.

In a funny interaction with a student, after some initial play on words, Byrd-Johnson asked the student: “Do I have a friend now?”

---

**National TRIO Day 2014 Town Hall Meeting Evaluation**

- Town Hall effectively organized: 45 (Strongly Agree), 53.6 (Agree), 44.4 (Neutral), 45 (Strongly Agree), 39.1 (Disagree)
- Sufficient time for questions: 37.1 (Strongly Agree), 23.2 (Agree), 33.8 (Neutral), 38.4 (Disagree), 29.1 (Strongly Agree)
- Town Hall highlighted TRIO impact: 44.4 (Agree), 45 (Strongly Agree), 39.1 (Disagree)
- Town Hall added value to understanding of TRIO: 37.1 (Strongly Agree), 29.1 (Disagree)