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Cedarville Professor Studies Thriving in Students of Color in Doctoral Dissertation

CEDARVILLE, OHIO -- Cedarville University's [Rebecca Kuhn](#) has completed an eight-year journey to receive her Ph.D., shining a light on thriving students of color and demonstrating the value of higher education at any age.

Kuhn, coordinator of academic engagement and assistant professor of developmental education, earned her Ph.D. in higher education from Azusa Pacific University.

"Each of my six-month semesters began and ended with a week of class in person," said Kuhn. "Because of the distance learning/face-to-face hybrid format, I was able to continue my work at Cedarville and care for my aging parents, while still benefiting from the richness of in-person learning with my cohort and professors."

Kuhn chose to focus on students of color in higher education because of the stagnant graduation rates of African-American, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, Native American, and multi-racial students in particular for the past 50 years. According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), these students of color graduate college at the average rate of 49%, 15 points behind white students. Kuhn sought to determine what made a difference for students of color who were thriving and well on their way to completing their education in her dissertation titled "Beating the Odds: Counternarratives of Thriving Students of Color at Dominantly White Faith-Based Institutions."

"Even with all the interventions and programs initiated in higher education in the past 5 decades, these graduation rates have not increased," said Kuhn. "Rather than looking at what prevents students of color from completing degrees, it is vital to speak to students of color who are successful and thriving in higher education, to highlight their positive stories and listen to their perspective because so much research has been deficit oriented."

"The motivation for this eight-year endeavor originated in experiences I had as an MK (missionary kid) as my parents worked with Native Americans, as well as my exposure to families living in poverty and African American children from an urban setting. As an adult, I spent seven years in cross-cultural ministry in the Philippines and have worked with high-risk students in higher education for more than 25 years. Each of these life experiences contributed to my desire to make a difference in higher education by exploring what it takes for students of color to be successful in college."

The process in obtaining her degree included seeking ethical approval for her topic from the Institutional Review Board, interviewing 10 students of color on how they thrive, identifying themes from their responses and writing and editing her dissertation.

“I understand what it means to persist in the learning process when life is difficult and demanding,” added Kuhn. “I empathize with my students who encounter challenges and am better prepared to work with them in ways that help them thrive.”

As she completed her degree, Kuhn integrated ideas she was learning in her program into strategies for Cedarville’s academic enrichment center, [the Cove](#), helping all students thrive while becoming more attentive to students of color.

“So much of what I was doing at the Cove started changing as I went through my program,” Kuhn noted. “It’s not just the finish that made the difference, it’s the process influencing others along the way.”

The most prominent finding from her research was that students of color are more likely to thrive in college when their institution creates an environment that is welcoming to every student who is admitted, a place that feels like home to them. Home is where students feel like full-fledged members of the family, loved unconditionally, develop healthy relationships, come to understand who they are, encouraged to persist through challenge and difficulty, and inspired to become true followers of Christ.

Kuhn was the oldest member of her cohort when she started in 2014. The decision to seek a doctoral degree at her age may surprise some, but as a learner at heart, it became highly purposeful.

“I went to college in the 70s, when women were encouraged to pursue more traditional degrees in elementary or secondary education or nursing,” said Kuhn. “Earning an undergraduate degree was exciting, but pursuing a Ph.D. wasn’t even on my radar at that time. To have this opportunity now is amazing.”

Kuhn’s students would often encourage her throughout the project, asking when they could call her “Dr.” and expressing interest in her research topic.

“It made a difference in their lives that I hadn’t even considered,” said Kuhn. “I was delighted to share this milestone in my life with my students and introduce them to possibilities beyond their undergraduate program.”

Ultimately, Kuhn saw this Ph.D. program as an opportunity to continue learning and serving others by helping all college students thrive, particularly students of color at faith-based institutions.

Located in southwest Ohio, Cedarville University is an accredited, Christ-centered, Baptist institution with an enrollment of 4,715 undergraduate, graduate, and online students in more than 150 areas of study. Founded in 1887, Cedarville is one of the largest private universities in Ohio, recognized nationally for its authentic Christian community, rigorous academic programs, strong graduation and retention rates, accredited professional and health science offerings, and high student engagement ranking. For more information about the University, visit cedarville.edu.

Written by Alex Boesch

Photo captions:

1- Rebecca Kuhn earned her Ph.D. in higher education from Azusa Pacific University in July 2022