



Nicki Washington, Ph.D., Johnson C. Smith University- c/o 2000, Computer Science



Name : Nicki Washington, Ph.D.

Your HBCU : Johnson C. Smith University

Graduation Year : 2000

Major : Computer Science

1. Where are you from? Who introduced you to HBCUs?*

I was very fortunate to be born and raised in Durham, NC. My parents were both JCSU alumni, and my paternal grandmother was a graduate of SCSU. My parents' friends (who were engineers, attorneys, educators, researchers, and entrepreneurs) were all graduates of HBCUs (NC A&T, NCCU, SCSU, JCSU, Shaw, Morehouse, and Spelman). I literally grew up on NCCU's campus and attended games and other events on their campus as well as Shaw, St. Aug, NC A&T, WSSU, and JCSU for as long as I can remember.



2. Why did you choose an HBCU over a pwi?*

I only applied to HBCUs in my senior year of high school. I saw how my parents and their friends interacted with each other decades after graduating. Homecomings and CIAA (among other get-togethers) have been my parents' ritual since I was four years old. I knew I wanted to be somewhere where I didn't have to fight to be seen, respected, or encouraged by faculty and peers. I'd done enough of that in high school. While some of my favorite teachers were disappointed I didn't choose to apply to "good" schools like Brown, Harvard, or Duke, I'd long been shown by example that HBCUs were producing some of the smartest and most successful Black women and men I knew.

3. What is the story of your "experience" at Your HBCU given its heralded status as a stellar and prestigious institution?*

My experience was amazing. My parents warned me after high-school graduation that college would be the best four years of my life, and they were right! I met some of my closest friends, formed amazing relationships with professors and mentors, and was able to grow both academically, professionally, and personally.

4. "First time" experiences at your HBCU?*

None really.

5. Who are the professors that have impacted your life in and out of the classroom? How

did they do that?*

Everyone from the president to the faculty and staff in the cafeteria and mailroom were genuinely vested in my success. Specifically, Dr. Dorothy Cowser Yancy (former President) was responsible for not only my decision to attend JCSU, but four years later my decision to pursue a Ph.D. Had it not been for her nominating me for the David and Lucille Packard Fellowship, I wouldn't be Dr. Washington today. Second, and just as important, Dr. Naguib Attia was responsible for convincing me to change my major from marketing to computer science after seeing my performance in his programming course. His brother, the late Dr. Magdy Attia, was my biggest cheerleader since 1996, and constantly supported me like a proud father. His impact on so many students is still felt, even after his passing. These people and my experience were the reasons I chose to begin my career in academia at an HBCU (Howard University 2006-2015). I never had a Black CS professor in my major as an undergraduate. However, I was fortunate enough to have computer scientists role models who looked like me growing up (my mom, godfather, and their friends). I knew my childhood was more of an exception than the rule, so I wanted to ensure that students could see themselves in me when they stepped foot on Howard's campus, especially in a field where less than 1% of all graduates are Black women.

**6. When and how did you discover your passion in life?**

I discovered my passion in graduate school, when I realized how unique my experience as a Black woman in CS was. Since then, my work and research has been focused on increasing the number of Black students in CS (especially women and girls). For this reason, I speak to groups and students on the importance of diversity in CS and how to increase the participation of Black students. I also recently authored "Unapologetically Dope: Lessons for Black Women and Girls on Surviving and Thriving in the Tech Field" (<https://amzn.to/2ykXxHR>).