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From “Little Professor” to My Strongest Advocate

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About the Author



Richard Currie, Ph.D., is one of the newest additions to the faculty of the School of Hospitality Administration (SHA) at Boston University. As an East Coast native, Richard grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina and later moved to the Saint Louis area, where he majored in Psychology and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Missouri–Saint Louis. While completing his undergraduate studies, Richard was heavily involved in research and grew attracted to the ever-evolving field of Industrial and Organizational (I/O) Psychology. This passion for research and deep interest in the application of psychology in organizational contexts led him to the

University of Central Florida in Orlando, Florida, where Richard earned both his Master of Science and Ph.D. in I/O Psychology. [Linkedin](#)

From “Little Professor” to My Strongest Advocate



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With both parents holding professional careers that required both of them to be at work around nine o'clock each workday morning, my older sister and I were driven to the local public elementary school near our home in the northwest corner of Raleigh, North Carolina early each morning during the school year. After having received a hug, a kiss, and some form of daily encouragement from whichever parent drove us to school (usually my mother), my sister and I would grab breakfast, play board games with other early-arrival students, or simply find a spot in the cafeteria to chat with our friends before the rest of the school arrived. It was during this time each day that the cafeteria custodian, Mrs. Woodley (an alias to preserve her anonymity) – a robust, Black woman who spent nearly her entire adult life as a school custodian for the Wake County Public School System – had the opportunity each day to observe how I interacted with staff and fellow students. I fail to recall at which point she switched from calling me by my name and instead opting to use the nickname “Little Professor.” Needless to say, it was a small gesture that remained with me over the years.

I am not sure what Mrs. Woodley saw in me each morning in the school cafeteria that enabled her to make such a crystal-clear prediction which would manifest decades later.

From my perspective, my life was rather routine and followed the “typical” pattern in line with others around me. I excelled during my time at Jeffrey’s Grove Elementary School both academically as well as in extracurricular activities (particularly chorus). Despite never struggling academically, each of my teachers quickly discovered my chatty disposition – an attribute that has remained relatively consistent to this day – which would frequently land me in “time out” or with student conduct forms to be brought home and acknowledged by my parents. After transitioning to Charles F. Carroll Middle School, I continued to do well both academically and socially and maintained membership in several music ensembles including chorus, concert band, and jazz band.

The summer after completing my final year at Carroll Middle School, my father’s decision to change organizations as an R&D pharmaceutical scientist resulted in my family moving from North Carolina to the suburbs of St. Louis, Missouri. Leaving behind what I, as a fourteen-year-old, considered a thriving social life in Raleigh to begin high school in a place where one of the most popular after-school pastime was to drive to the nearest QuikTrip (a semi-elevated version of a 7Eleven) for fountain drinks that seemed to never have the correct ratio of syrup to carbonated water left me feeling bored and lonely. Nonetheless, I remained focused on excelling academically. After joining the choir (I was in the band for only the first year of high school), I quickly found a community of students with similar interests that appreciated each other’s strengths, passions, and aspirations. From this point onward, I was no longer bored or lonely. Despite how much of my time at Francis Howell High School was centered around choir (i.e., local and state competitions and performances, school concerts, student a cappella groups, serving as a section leader and mentor), it was my choice to take a class in psychology during the end of my junior year that would prove to be one of the most consequential decisions during my time in high school.

If I am being entirely transparent, I have absolutely no recollection of what I learned in this class or which psychologists, theories or concepts resonated with me the most. What I remember most about this class, however, is the confidence it gave me in pursuing a college degree in psychology. I applied to a handful of colleges and universities, almost all of which were located in Missouri or Illinois (likely out of my fear of being too far away from home). Ultimately, it was a generous music scholarship that I was awarded from Missouri Baptist University – no doubt earned in large part by my back-to-back appearances in Missouri’s All-State choir (a first at my high school with a well-reputed choral program) – that led me to begin my pursuit of higher education there.

To maintain my music scholarship (by far the largest scholarship that I received), I declared Psychology as my major and elected for a minor in choral music. However, after only one semester of living on campus despite being only 30 minutes away from home, I dropped the minor in choral music, lost the accompanying scholarship, and moved home and commuted to school for the next semester. Unfortunately, I did not feel that Missouri Baptist University was a good fit for me. After two semesters there, I transferred to the local community college, St. Charles Community College where I could have completed my first and second years of college free of charge as a result of completing a student mentorship and community service program during my time in high school. Despite having wasted thousands of dollars at a private university that left me largely dissatisfied, I swallowed my pride and spent the next year and a half completing an associate's degree while still maintaining a major in Psychology.

Throughout these first couple years of college, I had practically no clue of what I intended to do with an undergraduate degree in Psychology. I recall times when I considered becoming a marriage and family counselor, forensic psychologist or school psychologist. I even considered pursuing a law degree upon completing my undergraduate studies. It was not until transferring to the University of Missouri–St. Louis - a public four-year institution with a master's and doctoral program in Industrial/Organizational (I/O) Psychology – that I was reminded of this field of Psychology and began to strongly entertain the possibility of pursuing a career in this area. I considered all possible opportunities to gather as much information as I could about I/O Psychology. I arranged office hours meetings with graduate teaching assistants that were students in the I/O Psychology program, took an introductory course on I/O Psychology, and volunteered as an undergraduate research assistant for multiple faculty researchers and graduate students affiliated with the I/O Psychology program, all while working as an Assistant Store Manager for a retail clothing store. All of these opportunities gave me clarity on what the field of I/O Psychology is, the differences between masters and doctoral degrees (Psy.D. or Ph.D.) in I/O Psychology, and which career options are available to those with graduate degrees in this field. Not only did I decide to pursue a Ph.D. in I/O Psychology, but these genuine connections with faculty and their graduate advisees, as well as my research involvement and experiences, made me a competitive candidate for admission to I/O Psychology graduate programs.

By this point in my life, I had grown more comfortable with stepping further away from home and applied to schools in both Missouri and Illinois as well as schools much farther away in states such as Ohio, Texas, and Florida. While I was invited to attend most of the schools to which I applied (including the program at the University of

Missouri St. Louis), I chose to attend the school that was furthest from home – the University of Central Florida (UCF) in Orlando.

By far one of the best decisions of my life, I quickly excelled during my time at UCF. I would be remiss to imply that my time at UCF was without its challenges. During the five years I spent there, I was the only Black male in the I/O Psychology Ph.D. program. At times, my directness led people to use adjectives such as “combative” or “confrontational” to describe how I handled interpersonal conflict – both of which left me wondering if the same adjectives would have been chosen to describe the same behavior of others with a different skin complexion. Nonetheless, I never shied away from voicing concerns to faculty and being my own strongest advocate. Despite always being the only Black guy in the room, I was nominated by my peers to be the President of our student organization for each of my five years in the program.

Throughout my time as a graduate student, I conducted research on a broad range of topics, ultimately arriving at an interest in employee social stressors, such as the role of competitive work environments, social comparisons, and workplace nosiness on employee attitudinal (e.g., job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover intentions) and behavioral outcomes (e.g., knowledge sharing and hiding, social undermining, performance). Given my innate inquisitiveness and zeal for teaching and mentorship, I was particularly drawn to an academic career that would allow me to satisfy my passion for conducting research of interest to me as well as teaching and energizing students to identify and relentlessly pursue their career and personal goals. While I never intended or expected my first academic appointment to be in a hospitality school, I am not at all surprised given my passion for providing fulfilling guest experiences, having worked several part-time jobs in the hospitality and related service industries during much of my time as an undergraduate student.

Reflecting on my life up until this point, I do not believe my life has been markedly different from many of those around me of various racioethnic backgrounds. While at times, I faced challenges that may not have existed (or would have occurred to a lesser degree), if I were to be of a lighter skin complexion. I believe that my commitment to being my own strongest advocate got me to where I am today.

I would strongly caution everyone, especially those who historically have been disadvantaged, underrepresented, marginalized or undervalued, to resist the urge to conform to counterproductive norms. Instead, elect to stand up for yourself and be your own strongest advocate because if even you do not stand up for yourself, who else will?

Upon earning my Ph.D. from UCF, one of my fellow Black students left me with the following congratulatory statement and words of encouragement:

“You are the manifestation of Black excellence and one of the most hardworking and dedicated people I know [...] I have no doubt you will continue to accomplish great things.”

With every bit of humility and sincerity, I still have not a clue what Mrs. Woodley saw in that “Little Professor” all those years ago, but for some reason, others continue to see it to this day. For my fellow persons of color, fight the urge to “prove yourselves” and simply try your hardest. Remain committed to anything that brings you success. After all, why couldn’t it be you?