January 13, 2011

Chancellor's Award Selection Committee:

I strongly recommend Dr. Robin Hughes for the Diversity Scholars Award. I have known her for approximately 8 years and find her scholarship innovative, provocative, and first-rate. Robin is one of the leading race-equity scholars in the study of Higher Education. Robin brings meaningful critical perspectives to her research, mentoring, and teaching. Her professional practice aligns with and advances the Diversity vision and initiatives of Indiana University-Indianapolis. I have witnessed her commitment to Diversity first hand through guest lecturing and co-teaching and we have co-authored several research articles on racial equity in higher education. Her work as a co-Principal Investigator of the Lumina Foundation funded African American Male Equity Project serves as another high profile example of her focus on diversity related issues that transcend campus based issues.

Between 2006 and 2008 I had the pleasure to serve as a guest speaker in two of her student affairs courses (U546: Diverse Students on the College Campus, and U544: Introduction to Student Affairs) at Indiana University-Indianapolis. In addition, she and I co-taught a social foundations course at IUPUI in the summer of 2007. Across each of these experiences, I had the opportunity to witness her commitment to diversity, passion for teaching and empowering students, and her polished and engaged pedagogical skills. She deeply cares about what her students learn and how they understand what they learn. Robin applies highly interactive engagement to raise the level of critical thinking of her students. I found that she used her mastery of subject matter, humor, and an open style of communication to invite students into the type of active engagement most university faculty would envy. I work at Miami University were high quality teaching and a commitment to diversity is taken very seriously. In my opinion, Robin is an excellent scholar-educator who takes seriously the classroom experience of each student while maintaining rigorous high standards.

Further, her class assignments push students to become activist scholars. For instance, during the U546 Diverse Students class, she required that they create projects that would make a difference or affect something tangible in their current educational context. Students selected what Robin referred to as, "real" projects that would influence campus policy or college students' experiences directly. The U546 students created websites to inform 21st century scholars, Poetry Jams, documentaries, and film series. These highly praxis oriented activities will not only prepare students to become culturally competent leaders in student affairs, but the assignments make sense in real world settings and contexts. Ultimately, this type of approach encourages students to engage both inside and outside the classroom.

Robin is the type of scholar who challenges and supports her students to go beyond surface issues and wrestle with not only the reading material but also the meaning making process that leads to critical thinking and ways of integrating and applying those tools and knowledge to best advance the work students hope to perform. For example, during the graduate level social foundations course we co-taught, several students, who worked as K-12 teachers in Indianapolis

Public Schools, struggled to reconcile the racial disparities of the types of middle and high school students routinely disciplined and suspended with notions of how all students are treated the same across all school settings.

These teachers were reluctant to recognize the obvious issues of race, gender, and social class involved in the disproportional negative treatment of black male students in their schools. To get them to explore their thinking, Robin broke the class down into small groups to discuss specific examples of the instances of the middle and high school students who were labeled as "trouble makers," or "difficult." This process allowed the graduate students to hear each other and share the particular dynamics from their professional settings without the pressure of proving one point or the other. Robin then shared statewide and national data on the suspension and expulsion rates disaggregated by race, gender, and school districts. The student teachers were surprised to see the patterns of black students suffering punishment at rates disproportionate to their populations in the schools. They learned how the data patterns mirrored the arguments made by the scholars in the readings that caused some of the original denial. Robin ended the class by asking everyone to reflect on their respective work place experiences and consider the role that power, privilege, and place played in the type of students referred to special education services versus gifted and talented opportunities.

The following week, those same graduate students shared how the process of reading, discussion, and reflection allowed them to advance their critical thinking on the subject. They realized that numerous students of color are indeed less likely to receive the benefit of the doubt when acting in similar ways to white students, and how quick the students of color receive referrals for discipline or special education, while other students might receive counseling, or had their behavior mediated by parent intervention or teacher forgiveness. The graduate students argued for the importance that all teachers become more conscious of these issues, continue to look beneath the surface of classroom behavioral issues and raise questions about which kids get labeled one way or another in their schools. Even in this one example, it demonstrated Robin's ability to help her students understand data, personal perspectives, concepts of diversity, and work though difficult concepts such as systemic inequity to reach new ideas on professional praxis.

Robin continues to serve as a strong role model for me and captures the joy of engaged learning that is at the heart of the university enterprise. I endorse and recommend Robin for the Diversity Scholar Award because she is an outstanding scholar, an excellent teacher, and a committed professional educator dedicated to advancing the inclusive mission of Indiana University-Indianapolis.

Sincerely,

Mark S. Giles, Ph.D.
Miami University