

BENCHMARK LEADERSHIP INTERVIEW

Benchmark Social Justice Action Plan

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I have no Conflicts to Disclose

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I was honored to interview Dr. Cristi Jones who heads up the School Counselor Program at Faulkner University in Montgomery, Alabama. Dr. Jones has worked there for seven years. I asked Dr. Jones to share her general story about how she got to the leadership position she is in today. Dr. Jones served as a school counselor for approximately twenty years in a rural community here in Alabama. Dr. Jones said she enjoyed her work as a school counselor very much and never intended to leave that work. Dr. Jones said that she decided when she was completing her master's program that she knew then that she wanted to pursue a PhD but knew it would have to wait because of some life circumstances that led to her being a single mom and a full-time school counselor.

Later Dr. Jones was able to marry again to a husband who cares very much for her. Once they were able to payoff her student loans, her husband simply asked her if it was time to go back and do the PhD you have wanted to do and left it at that. He waited a little while and said it again. Dr. Jones reached out to one of her mentors from her master's program at Auburn University. This mentor encouraged Dr. Jones to apply which she did and was accepted and ultimately completed the PhD in Counselor Education and Supervision at Auburn University. Dr. Jones said she entered the program intending to do research to help her school counselor work and did not intend to pursue academia. Dr. Jones was approached by the director of the Counseling Program at Faulkner University and asked if she would join them and lead the School Counselor Program at Faulkner University. Dr. Jones was being pursued by two

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universities but decided to work with Faulkner University. It is obvious she has been an asset to Faulkner's counselor education programs.

Faulkner's counseling programs have been seeking CACREP accreditation for quite some time (seven years) and are hoping they see an end in sight. I asked Dr. Jones what it has been like to learn the CACREP guidelines for seeking accreditation? She said it has been some of the hardest work she has ever done and a pretty steep learning curve. Dr. Jones followed this up with how much she loves her work as a counselor educator. She pointed out that academia never really stops where in her school counselor work the day ended when school was out. Dr. Jones said, "some nights the laptop comes back out after my husband goes to sleep." I asked her if she regretted being at a school that did not have a focus on research because she had mentioned earlier her desire to do research to help small town schools like the one, she served as a school counselor at for so many years. Her response was that she hopes once they get past accreditation that there will be a greater focus of implementing a research expectation.

I asked Dr. Jones about her day-to-day and asked if there is a routine or is it random. Dr. Jones says it really varies from semester to semester where she may be teaching the same classes, but the nuances are different because the people she is teaching are different. Dr. Jones said she uses a social constructivist lens where she meets student where they are based on their individual life experiences. She said this is one of her favorite parts of her job to be working with and adapting to the various people she has worked with who are in pursuit of becoming a school counselor. Dr. Jones went on to say that one of the coolest things about the program is to see where someone is when they enter the program and to observe the difference (transformation) that has occurred when they complete the program. This led to her briefly mentioning the

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importance and satisfaction that can come from gatekeeping and seeing the people as they work through the remediation process. I asked if this had ever led to the dismissal of a student. She said a couple of times it has led to dismissal but often students who would likely need removal will quit the program over their refusal to complete their mediation plan.

I asked Dr. Jones for any advice, good or bad, she would give to someone who is on a similar career path as she has experienced. Dr. Jones first said while in your PhD program to be sure to save all your work because it could be a tragedy to lose it especially if your program has a portfolio requirement. I asked Dr. Jones her thoughts about after graduation and pursuing a job. Dr. Jones said this should all begin long before graduation. She said to be adding accomplishments to the curricular vita as you go so it will be building. Dr. Jones also said to go ahead and have a teaching philosophy, a leadership philosophy, and your research philosophy prepared for the application process and to know what you think about these things. Dr. Jones said the interview process for some academia jobs are multi-day and multi-level so you will need to be prepared to discuss these various aspects of your counselor education identity.

My final question to Dr. Jones was because Faulkner University is a Christian school that is affiliated with Churches of Christ. I asked her what she thinks about integrating Christian principles into the teaching process and in counseling generally. This did not seem to be a question she was expecting. I may be because of her years as a school counselor in a public school system and her academic degrees coming from a secular school, she does not integrate but says Dr. Heath Willingham (who is the director of the counseling program at Faulkner) does a good job of integrating Christian principles in the classes they have that are specifically focused on integrations. Dr. Jones went on to share that she tries to avoid sharing any personal

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information about herself with clients because of her concern of pushing personal beliefs by implication. I shared with her that I have a statement on my advertisements and in my intake forms regarding my Christian beliefs and ask if they would like Christian principles included in our time together or if they would prefer that I utilize counseling theory alone. Dr. Jones was not sure what she thought about my disclosure.

I shared that I can only imagine that in a school counseling role at a public school there would be a high expectation of not using an integration approach. Dr. Jones followed my comment with a caution about sharing values (integrations) even if teaching at private Christian school type settings. I was a little taken back by the apprehension that Dr. Jones shared regarding the use of integrating Christian principles in her private practice that meets in her church's building. Dr. Jones did share that she is willing to have one on one conversations with student about faith issues and would pray privately with student in need.

Overall, my conversation reminded me of how thankful I am for Liberty University's open integration approach and commitment to their overall values and foundational standards! I am very appreciative of Dr. Jones taking the time to meet with me and even offered an open door if I ever needed someone to talk to regarding my PhD work and specifically regarding the dissertation phase of the process. Dr. Jones showed her humanness when she said that by the time she had her existential crisis while pursuing her PhD, she had spent too much time and money to turn back. Dr. Jones said she understands how it can be overwhelming at times during the process of obtaining a PhD and would be glad to be a resource if she could help.