



Welcome from Dr. Soraya M. Coley, Our Network's Presidential Sponsor

Mentorship profoundly impacts lives. In the words of author and entrepreneur [Janice Omadeke](#), “Mentors not only guide us through the complexities of our careers but also illuminate paths we might never have found on our own.”

One of the mentors who had a profound impact on me was Dr. Jewel Plummer Cobb, a trailblazing cancer researcher, accomplished university administrator and

the first Black female university president west of the Mississippi.

I met her at California State University, Fullerton where I worked as department chair, joining her in serving on president advisory committees, and as part of several campus-wide initiatives. One day, as we walked alone, she stopped us to say, “With your tenacity, commitment, and resolve, someday you will be a university president.”

Her steadfast belief in my potential fortified me through my personal and professional challenges and underscores the transformative power mentorship has in our lives.

Reflecting on our 2023-2024 gatherings — from the illuminating sessions of October’s “Help Her Thrive: Leadership Strategies for Women’s Success” Annual Conference to the empowering discussions unfolded in our “Navigating Career with Power and Resilience” lunch and learn — I am reminded of the power of our community to provide support and inspire growth. The power we have to unite and uplift each other as we shape higher education for the better as allies and mentors.

Let us remain steadfast in championing women as leaders at all levels in our organizations and communities. Let us be persistent in cultivating a culture of care, inclusion and belonging within higher education. And let us recommit to these aspirations today and every day in our words and actions.

***“Let us remain steadfast in championing women as
leaders at all levels in our organizations and
communities.”***

– Dr. Soraya M. Coley



"A good leader inspires people to have confidence in the leader, a great leader inspires people to have confidence in themselves." ~ Eleanor Roosevelt



Welcome from State Chair, Dr. Olukemi Sawyerr

You are welcome to [ACE Women's Network of Southern California](#) (ACE WNSC) spring 2024 newsletter. My name is Olukemi Sawyerr. I am the state chair for the ACE WNSC. I currently serve as the associate vice president for Academic Innovation and professor of strategy and entrepreneurship in the College of Business Administration at Cal Poly Pomona.

[American Council on Education](#) (ACE) is the largest advocacy organization for institutions of higher education with a membership of over 1700 colleges and universities, and related associations. ACE WNSC is part of a [national system of networks](#) with the goal of advancing and supporting women in higher education.

We have had a very fruitful year, thanks to your commitment and engagement. Our spring event was hosted on the beautiful campus of Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa, CA. There were 122 participants. Our distinguished panel explored the topic of [Navigating Career with Power and Resilience](#). The panel included: Dr. Soraya M. Coley, President of California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, and Presidential Sponsor of the ACE WNSC; Dr. Angelica Suarez, President of Orange Coast College; and Dr. Andreea M. Serban, Vice Chancellor of Educational Services and Technology, Coast Community College District. We are incredibly grateful to these women of distinction who were authentic, vulnerable, and willing to share their leadership experiences. Participants saw multiple perspectives and multiple paths to leadership. My takeaways from the event were that the leadership journey is challenging, but we have the resilience to succeed on this journey; we should surround ourselves with people who believe in us ; and to pay it forward by mentoring and supporting other women to advance in their careers. Many thanks go to the event planning and programming committee: Dr. Bharti Sharma, committee chair, Dr. Teshia Roby, Ms. Helen Yniguez, and Ms. Theresa Navar-Rodriguez. Many thanks also go to Dr. Tara Giblin, who hosted us on the OCC campus. Our fall 2024 event will be hosted on the Cal Poly Pomona campus on Friday, October 11, 2024. We look forward to seeing you there.

The nomination committee completed our first election since formalizing the organization. The new board members are Dr. Teshia Roby, Advisory Board Chair (IR Cal Poly Pomona); Ms. Ebony Williams, Recorder (IR University of La Verne); Dr. Menna Bizuneh, member at large (IR Pitzer College); and Dr. Shokoufeh Mirzaei, member at large (Cal Poly Pomona). We will elect two new members at large and the Treasurer next year. Please consider running for a position on the [board of directors](#) to continue to advance the goals of raising women into academic leadership positions. We have four committees that support the work of the organization in addition to the [Advisory Council](#) of Institutional Representatives

(IRs). The committees are Event Planning and Programming, Marketing, Nomination, and Membership. Please consider joining one of the committees to continue the great work that ACE WNSC is doing. To sign-up for committee membership, please indicate your interest on the [contact form](#) on the organization's website. The [bylaws](#) were reviewed by a task force as stipulated after its adoption last year. The new bylaws will be uploaded to our new website once finalized.

The IRs, the Board of Directors, and members of the committees will participate in our first summer retreat virtually. The goal of the retreat is to facilitate communication among the various units and to ensure the continued success of the Network.

President Soraya Coley, President of Cal Poly Pomona, has served as our [presidential sponsor](#) since 2019. We thank her for her continued leadership and financial, human, and moral support. The Advisory Council of IRs, under the leadership of Dr. Menna Bizuneh, continues to be the backbone of the WNSC. The board of directors' commitment and leadership of the Network continue to support the advancement of women in higher education.

Thank you for your participation and engagement with the Network.

Events

Spring 2024 | Professional Development Events

Lunch & Learn Event at Orange Coast College



Women from higher education institutions across Southern California gathered for the ACE Women's Network of Southern California Spring Conference and Luncheon at Orange Coast College (OCC) on Friday, May 3, 2024.

The event titled "Navigating Career with Power and Resilience," featured several esteemed speakers including President of Orange Coast College, Dr. Angelica Loera Suarez; Vice Chancellor of Educational Services & Technology for Coast Community College District, Dr. Andreea M. Serban; and President of Cal Poly Pomona, Dr. Soraya M. Coley.

The event, cohosted by ACE Women's Network SoCal and OCC, allowed conference participants to hear from distinguished higher education leaders as they shared their stories of their skills, determination, and perseverance. Additionally, panelists with attendees their key insights and takeaways on what it takes to succeed in challenging environments and as women in higher education.

The event also offered participants the chance to meet other colleagues in higher education as guests networked and gathered over lunch. It was another successful event, and the network looks forward to hosting more opportunities for its members in the new academic year.

Featured

**ACE Women's Network SoCal Board
Member Highlight: Dr. Bharti Sharma**
*Associate Professor & Faculty Fellow
for University Assessment
Department of Biological Sciences
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona*

Foundations of Leadership: Early Trials
Growing up I always knew that taking on responsibilities and persevering through challenges were within my reach. This belief was put to the test when I was just 21 and in the middle of my master's program, as I faced the sudden loss of my father. The weight of my family's future—supporting a grieving mother and two younger siblings while managing our poultry farm—landed squarely on my shoulders. Despite these daunting responsibilities, I refused to let this moment of hardship derail my studies or our family business. I not only kept our operations running smoothly but also excelled academically, topping my class, earning a gold



medal, and later earning a PhD. This chapter of my life taught me the depth of my own strength and resilience, allowing me to emerge as a leader who could handle any challenge thrown my way. As I stabilized my family's situation, I was ready to face new challenges beyond the family business, continually breaking barriers in a male-dominated field and proving that my early experiences had crafted a formidable leader.

Harvard and Harmony: Achieving Excellence and Balance

Carrying the discipline and resilience honed from my early leadership experiences into my academic career, I embarked on a new chapter of challenges and achievements when I moved to the United States in 2007. At Harvard University, I secured an exciting research position in plant evolutionary and developmental genetics even before I had defended my thesis. Under the mentorship of Dr. Elena Kramer, I delved into innovative research that not only advanced my field but also deeply satisfied my academic curiosity. This period of intense scholarly activity coincided with personal growth as I welcomed my daughter Anya in 2012. Managing the demands of a high-caliber research environment while embracing motherhood taught me the true meaning of balance and support. I remained committed to my research until my due date, and after a brief maternity leave of 11 weeks, I returned with renewed vigor, thanks to the incredible support from my advisor and lab mates. This experience reinforced a valuable lesson: with determination and the right support, the possibilities for women are boundless. My time at Harvard was not just about professional growth—it shaped me into a leader who thrives on challenge and champions the potential of disciplined pursuit.

Advocating for Equity: Leadership in Diversity

As I transitioned into my tenure-track position in 2014, I was not just setting the tone for my academic career but also deepening my commitment to gender and racial equity. Working with a diverse student body highlighted the significant disparities in achievement that still exist in our education system. Driven by the philosophy that quality education should be accessible to everyone, I have been proactive in closing this gap, ensuring that my research team reflects a broad spectrum of backgrounds and perspectives. My dedication to fostering an inclusive academic environment led me to take on leadership roles within the STEM Women Faculty Association and later, the ACE Women's Network of Southern California. Through these platforms, I have worked diligently to help develop strategic plans and governance structures that enhance professional development opportunities for women in higher education, serving more than 800 women across Southern California. In my department, I chair the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) committee and have been appointed as the Provost Fellow for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (2022-2023). These roles have not only allowed me to champion DEI initiatives but also to lead from where I am, utilizing my position to influence and implement meaningful change. The last decade has reinforced a critical lesson: leadership is about using one's privilege to uplift those who are underprivileged, and with integrity and resilience, it is possible to make a significant impact.

Strategic Impact: Transformative Leadership

This year, I have taken on the role of faculty fellow for university assessment, collaborating with all seven colleges to develop a fair and high-quality assessment system that is considerate of both faculty and student perspectives.

Tackling complex problems and devising practical solutions energizes me, as it leverages my skills in strategic leadership and my passion for making a tangible impact. Throughout these experiences, I have remained unabashedly ambitious, always striving to break not just glass ceilings but also the more

formidable concrete barriers associated with gender and racial inequities. My career reflects my belief in leading from where I am, using every position I hold to effect positive change and inspire others. As I look to the future, I am excited about the possibilities that lie ahead. I don't know exactly what my next chapter holds, but I am confident in my ability to continue making a significant impact. With a track record of resilience, compassion, and integrity, I am committed to advancing an inclusive higher education system where everyone can thrive. The journey continues, and I am eager to see where it leads, always ready to give my all and serve with the unwavering commitment to excellence that has defined my path so far.

Network Updates & Upcoming Opportunities



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